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## The Crisis in Metaphors: Climate Vocabularies in Adivasi Literatures

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*Adivasi Lives Matter*, a social media forum for young Adivasi thinkers, shared these four names listed above, following recent arrests of climate activists in India (“Young Adivasi”). The forum extended their solidarity and raised their voices against the detainment of Disha Ravi. It remembered and recognised the contributions of young Adivasi climate activists who have resisted industrial invasions and have been similarly arrested or incarcerated for demanding protection of their ecologies. Adivasi voices on climate action remain largely marginalised, while Adivasi communities have steered and sustained “this battle” for climate justice “for generations” (“Young Adivasi”) in the Indian context. The forum’s timely reminder adds vigour to a global Indigenous concern: that the current form of the climate crisis is largely anthropogenic, and to comprehend and repair the interface between humans and non-humans is paramount for a sustainable future, a point that has been consistently articulated by Indigenous thinkers. Métis scholar Zoe Todd claims precisely that the absence of Indigenous voices in framing the crisis, while being the most vulnerable to its impact, “elide[s] decades of Indigenous articulations and intellectual labour to render the climate a matter of common political concern” (Todd 13). Indigenous knowledge systems of the non-human that are based on the

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essential co-existence of humans and non-humans, with lived practices that acknowledge "all our relations", are overlooked. Akash Poyam, a Koitur (Gond) journalist and writer, articulates allied concerns for the absence of Adivasi voices in the Indian context. In an online panel discussion organized by Indigenous Studies Discussion Group (ISDG), he said, "Even though Adivasis are said to be in the frontline of the crisis, their voices are not there in the discourse. It is an upper-caste dominated environmentalist discourse" (Poyam, Soreng, et al.).

Questions raised by Poyam and *Adivasi Lives Matter* reveal the position of Adivasi voice in climate discourse which, as I consider in this paper, mirrors the precondition of Adivasi voice in the humanities. As the perpetual subaltern in postcolonial literary studies, Adivasis "[embody] the limits of representation as the limit horizon of modernity itself" (Varma "Representing" 103). Adivasi voices are still accessed either through the "imperial copy"<sup>1</sup> of ethnographical disciplines like folklore, or the subaltern in representational narratives.<sup>2</sup> This is while a thriving movement towards an Adivasi "self-governing literature" (Wright, "The Ancient Library")<sup>3</sup> has been ongoing since the early twentieth century. The archived speeches of Jaipal Singh Munda and the poetry of Sushila Samad are testaments to this history. The writings of Bandana Tete, Alice Ekka, Ramdayal Munda, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the poetry and songs of Jacinta Kerketta, Bhagban Majhi, Dambu Praska and Salu Majhi, among many others, and the thriving archives of *adivaani*, *Adivasi Resurgence* and *Adivasi Lives Matter*, voicing ongoing land dispossession and lived positions in contemporary India, command critical centring in the climate discourse as well as in postcolonial literary studies. This positioning cannot be limited to the area-specific context of South Asian studies alone. Adivasi voices challenge the global industrial complex, and their concerns echo those voiced by Indigenous communities in settler colonial contexts (mining giant Adani, for instance, impacts Indigenous communities in India and Australia). Indigenous critical theory from settler colonial contexts that complicates or rejects the

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postcolonial (Corr, 187-202; Tuck and Yang, 1-40) critically positions the centrality of land for Indigenous communities. Accordingly, it re-directs discourse to understand the Adivasi position within the postcolonial nation. It revisits Adivasi demands for sovereignty as separate from its appropriations within Indian nationalism and recognizes settler practices replicated by the Hindu nationalist state. Besides, foregrounding Adivasi voices in transnational Indigenous studies allows for a reading of “literary sovereignty” or “sovereignty of the imagination” in Adivasi literature alongside those ideas envisioned and theorized by Alexis Wright, Simon Ortiz, and Robert Warrior.<sup>4</sup> My use of the word “sovereignty” in this article is to evoke these essential linkages.

By method and readership, this paper addresses comparative literary studies. However, given the composite forms of Indigenous thought that interweave the literary and the historical, the paper is interdisciplinary, and hopes to present relevant questions across disciplinary boundaries. Thus, it is divided into three sections. First, I discuss the position of Adivasi voices in literary studies in relation to the wider problematic of the absence of Indigenous voices while framing the climate crisis and the Anthropocene.<sup>5</sup> Further, this section explores a literary methodology to recover early Indigenous response to the crisis. Rob Nixon echoes a call for a return to metaphors, thus: “Sometimes [metaphors are] just hibernating, only to stagger back to life, dazed and confused, blinking at the altered world that has roused them from their slumber” (“The Swiftiness”). I claim that Indigenous literatures hold early warnings of the climate crisis in metaphors we do not yet centre in climate discourse. The second section examines the climatic processes (meteorological and anthropogenic) that have radically altered the climate of eastern India. Although my focus is on the historical context of Odisha (eastern India), I draw from a wider range of resources, given that these processes, and their consequences, are not limited to the present-day borders of Odisha alone. Accordingly, this paper claims that early warnings of a “crisis” were registered in the

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recurrence of concerns around *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* (linguistically translated as water, forests, land) from the late nineteenth century onwards. *Jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* is a ubiquitous refrain in diverse Adivasi movements. These vocabularies work as a "common organizing concept" (Todd, 5-6) for Adivasi concerns because they evoke a common climatic history. Moreover, they encompass specific non-humans in the ecologies of *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* interconnected with Adivasi knowledge systems. The third section provides literary readings of Adivasi songs emerging from the particular geography of southern Odisha. Focusing on particular ecologies of Kashipur and Niyamgiri, I examine the songs of Kondh poet Bhagban Majhi (Kashipur), and late Dongria Kondh poet Dambu Praska (Niyamgiri). The two singers pay attention to local markers and traces in ecology to assess climate breakdown following industrial invasions by Utkal Alumina International Limited (UAIL), Aditya Birla, and Vedanta. I read how their literary metaphors serve as archives of interpretations of the climate crisis as already confronted in these geographies.

#### I. The Crisis in Metaphors

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh writes: "it was exactly the period in which human activity was changing the earth's atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centred on the human" (66). There was a general "turning away" from the "presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors" during the Industrial era, and in recent decades the concern has found a rejuvenation with an "interest in the nonhuman that has been burgeoning in the humanities", together with the rise of "object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, the new animism" (31). On this phenomenon in literary studies, Stephen Muecke writes in his review of Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, that "postmodernism has returned with a vengeance, bolstered with all the moral force of global ecological concerns" (Muecke, "Global Warming", np). While reading Ghosh, Todd, and

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Muecke's respective works, I gleaned two corresponding strands of thought: as in the history of philosophy that centred the human, this "renewal" of engagement with the non-human too is yet again overpowered by the position of its production – one predominantly representative of the global North, and particularly the Euro-American man. From this positionality, literary fascination with climate crisis and the non-human, can claim postmodern newness to the extent of having rationally discovered relevance of the concepts themselves, solely by the virtue of occupying the discourse position of the Euro-American centre. For communities, and their histories deemed "unthinkable" (referred to in the sense of Trouillot's "unthinkable history")<sup>6</sup>, literary studies has yet to centre Indigenous literary traditions as *literary* beyond the realms of anthropological proof. That Indigenous communities may have articulated early forms of the crisis still remains in the realm of the "unthinkable".

It is precisely a "crisis of the imagination" (Ghosh, 9) that has foreclosed a literary reading of Indigenous philosophies of the non-human and of Indigenous articulations (oral and written) that intimated the crisis. When Indigenous land, people, or artistic practises are referred, if at all, they create the "hypersubject" (Muecke, "Global Warming", np). Peripheral geographies and the oppressed on the peripheries of the enquiry are called upon to be reinstated as the representation of outerworldly crisis (reproducing visual constructions similar to colonial encounters of "contact"), but never to qualify their own concerns. In this context, Zoe Todd and Jen Rose Smith discuss the hypervisibility of the Arctic (Todd, 6; J.R. Smith, 158-162). Similarly, among distinct (and numerous) Adivasi land rights movements against mining ongoing in eastern India, it is chiefly the images of Dongria Kondh communities that are used to exoticise ecological margins. Moreover, for philosophies built on the metaphysics of a centre, a metropole or a symbolic universal space of human crisis, the crisis is often read as events, as the experience of the "uncanny" (Ghosh, 30)<sup>7</sup> or as marked instances defined by a state of significant visibility such as the melting of polar icescapes. This practise may

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unconsciously displace the seemingly insignificant particularities of "localised markers" in peripheral geographies as adequate evidence of the climate crisis.

Besides, marginalisation of Indigenous responses to the crisis depoliticises the fact that the climate crisis in the peripheries is the result of excesses of the Euro-American centre, not just historically but in contemporary global industrialism (Agarwal and Narain, "Global Warming", np). The way the Kondh songs that I discuss in this paper are linked to the United Kingdom, for instance, is that they sing against mineral extraction by Vedanta, a bauxite mining giant with its headquarters in London. The capital flow from the company's profits is felt predominantly in centres of capital and culture in the Global North, rather than outside the company walls in southern Odisha, where the Adivasi communities are displaced. Therefore, positioning these songs in literary studies is not simply to answer the question of why Indigenous literatures continue to occupy particular corridors in literary studies, a subject of continued engagement in decolonising syllabuses recently. Attending to the voices of resident communities in these geographies in our literary readings of the Anthropocene is to render the crisis in these geographies visible and disrupt the inequalities and centre-peripheral binary which global capital does not follow but insidiously maintains. Historicising the "locality in the Anthropocene", Vineeta Damodaran writes, "challenges planetary debates by earth scientists through a historical and political engagement with capitalism, democracy and resource extraction and to focus on communities in particular periods and places and specific places in the Global South" (96).<sup>8</sup> Her work in environmental history foregrounds the local and Indigenous in eastern India, specifically Jharkhand and Odisha. I emphasise Indigenous literary articulations as fundamental evidence of this history, given that an account of climate vocabularies cannot be assembled outside the realm of Indigenous literary traditions that serve as historical archives.

Literary methodology serves to uncover metaphors and other literary devices used to describe the crisis in regional languages and, more importantly, to help

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recover and restore Indigenous voices.<sup>9</sup>The absence of Indigenous imaginations of the crisis in contemporary discourse is rooted in the problem of the absence of Indigenous literary voices. Here, I will briefly discuss the particular absence of Adivasi literary voices. An access to imaginations and representations of Indigeneity or “Adivasihood” of the Global South in transnational discourse has been aided largely by subaltern studies and postcolonial theory. However, these methods have been dominated by caste-privileged scholars. Here, I similarly acknowledge my positionality as one, and hence I am cautious of my voice operating within this structure. While engaging with Adivasi voices from an institutional position in the United Kingdom, a first introduction to understand the position of subaltern voice is Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. Similarly, the first primer to “Adivasi literatures” are the representational narratives of Gopinath Mohanty and Mahashweta Devi. These texts are representative of the textual decolonisation of the dominant canon and decolonised syllabuses. In postcolonial studies, they occupy the positions of canonical literary and theoretical treatises. Both accounts are crucial to challenge the continued Eurocentrism of institutional discourse that I discussed earlier and do not in themselves form the primary problematic. The concern, however, is that Adivasi literatures are accessed, but from sources twice-removed from the original source. In transnational literary studies, these texts become exemplary to situating Adivasi concerns. In the process, they have marginalised Adivasi voices and positionalities. It further shifts focus from Adivasi agency for the (now) indispensable necessity to complicate the postcolonial Indian nation state, and its virulent Hindu nationalism, where the idea of the “Adivasi” is employed in maintaining the myth of the Hindu nation at the same time as Adivasi sovereignty is deemed as a threat to Hindu nationalism.

Subaltern Adivasi histories have been recovered to challenge the mainstream nationalist narrative. Still, literary history and criticism has often failed to read into the disquiet *within* Adivasi literary tradition and the complexities they voice through

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self-definitions not only in the "self-governing literatures" (Wright "The Ancient Library", np), but also in the interface of folklore collections and colonial archives. Though literary studies (global and national) can claim the sheer diversity of literatures across several Adivasi languages and literary forms, and scarcity of translations to access these literatures, it is in fact the continued marginalisation of Adivasi literatures as *literary* that precludes impetus to translation, transmission, and publication. Santhali writer and activist Bandana Tete critiques the Brahminical Hindi literary tradition that has dominated vernacular literary culture. She claims that not only has this literary tradition acted as the central voice in Indian "national" literatures but also exercised control on publications and publishing houses. She writes that "their" incompetence in finding Adivasi women's writing should not be an excuse (here, I translate and summarise) "to elide the very essential existence of women in the history of poetry writing" (Tete 7). Recovering Adivasi voices in literary reading, therefore, centres the "self-governing" Adivasi literary landscape where the subaltern no longer *remains* the subaltern but embodies sovereignty.

Recovering voice recovers vital evidence. Here, I return to my previous point about Indigenous voices on the crisis. Literary methodology can serve to unravel overlooked markers of crisis already felt in peripheral geographies. These imaginations present "localised markers" and the local impact on non-humans. They do not necessarily intimate an apocalyptic imagination of sudden colossal change, but rather direct attention to long-term changes in ecology which frequently go unarchived in dominant cultures of documentation. It directs us to question *what* is considered as legitimate evidence of the crisis? Heather Davis and Zoe Todd discuss the language of evidence in documenting anthropogenic impact. They discuss that evidence, especially the one measured and conceptualized in scientific disciplines, does not necessarily accommodate the possibilities of imagining evidence from material and embodied community histories. In order to theorise the Anthropocene from land-based philosophies, the writers provide

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methods to understand the particular place that the non-human occupies in Indigenous knowledge systems (Davis and Todd, 767).<sup>10</sup> On discussing personal narratives of seeing “a flash of a school of minnows” and memories of growing up beside the prairie lakes as “tracers” to the way they see ecological change, Todd argues that these “fleshy philosophies and fleshy bodies are precisely the stakes of the Anthropocene” (767). Documenting the “school of minnows” as the “tracer”, here, serves to connect the material and the epistemological. The writers communicate that not only has the Anthropocene aggravated “existing social inequalities and power structures”, but it has separated people from the land/material (here, minnows in the prairie lake) “with which they and their language, laws and knowledge systems are entwined”. The argument made here is not to pit the scientific and the social to serve as evidentiary for the climate crisis; making binaries of these categories is not a productive endeavour in either discipline. Rather, the argument is to reveal that the crisis has profound political and social repercussions within communities. The crisis is not impersonal and distant but is keenly felt and interpreted by different species – human and non-human. And these localised markers and personal memories of climate change likewise need documentation.

As Ghosh notes briefly in relation to people of the Sunderbans and Yukon, some communities in fact “never lost this awareness” of “non-human interlocuters” (63-64). How, then, to recuperate these imaginations which would serve as evidence to the crisis? An emerging glossary in contemporary English language has served to accommodate the climate breakdown, the “realization” of living in the epoch of the “Anthropocene”, and ways to comprehend the dissimilar magnitudes of historical and geological timescales. Likewise, Indigenous languages have imprinted in them the distinct registers of historical processes markedly felt as a “crisis”, in vocabularies that we do not yet centre in climate studies. Apart from the meteorological terms of analysis that are required to write climate history, it is

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imperative to foreground recurring terms and popular vocabularies that have served as means to communicate similar phenomena. Given that these vocabularies might not necessarily be historically archived, literary studies need to *trace* the occurrence of terms that have echoed increasing anthropogenic impact. Although it needs acknowledging that these connections may not occur as direct lines of causation, of exact historical co-relation between events and literary responses (in songs, oral narratives, or written literature). Historicising climate resistance vocabulary necessitates literary criticism to ponder on and *imagine* a potential map of literary traces from significant historical junctures to ascertain a consciousness that is often absent or erased given that these have been minority histories and voices. As has already been reasoned in the context of South Asia, Native American oral history, and Australian Indigenous literatures, among others, Indigenous ways of historiography and archiving memory span across literary genres (Skaria; Rao et al; Womack; Benterrak et al; Wright). While a significant scale of resources is available for history-writing and literary studies for dominant communities (given they have dominated ownership and access to knowledge as settler colonisers or caste hierarchies in India), Adivasi histories and vocabularies from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exist between the crevices of anthropological constructions, and erasures. This makes it all the more important for literary studies to create interpretative spaces. In these spaces, metaphors and repetitions of particular words can be imbued with meaning, to assemble a repository that restores gaps in the deliberations around the crisis.

Language, additionally, is crucial to comprehend the loss of the material that has occupied an other-than-human temporality. Cultivation of attention to perceive deep time in the minute details of the local is facilitated by the metaphorical function of language. Robin Wall Kimmerer, the Potawatomi plant scientist and writer, calls such a function a "grammar of animacy" (*Braiding* 48). She writes that, along with being a plant scientist, she is a poet: "the world speaks to me in

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metaphor" (29). She theorises that a "profound error in grammar" in scientific conceptions of the natural world (and consequentially of the climate crisis) is because of "a grave loss in translation from [N]ative languages" (48). To understand a bay, a non-human element of the landscape, she retrieves the word from its containment as a noun form in English. She explains that the Potawatomi word for a bay, *wiikwegamaa*, is a verb that assigns agency to the non-human feature of landscape: "To be a bay" is the bay making its presence known (55). The other elements around it, the water or "cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers" (55) variously interact with the bay as animate entities striking alignment through their specific channels of communication.<sup>11</sup> In the final section of this paper, I discuss the poetry of Bhagban Majhi and Dambu Praska, remembering this "grammar of animacy" (48). Together with providing a linguistic pathway to understand the deep time of non-human elements,<sup>12</sup> this "grammar" is committed to an understanding of political inequality.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous poetry provides rich sites that amalgamate a political critique of colonialism alongside cognitive tools to situate the non-human.

Through a literary reading, therefore, I frame *jal, jangal, jameen* as climate vocabularies, in the next section. The plural form of "vocabularies" used in this paper is to encompass the translations and transmutations of *jal, jangal, jameen* in several Adivasi and other vernaculars. Here, I will briefly raise the question about the choice of using "climate" in climate vocabularies and climate consciousness, as opposed to an ecological or environmental consciousness. Wider awareness about changing earth systems over geological time-scales and their impact on humans globally, is arguably recent. The global day-to-day acceptance of climate as a planetary system as opposed to regional weather regimes is also contemporary. The Anthropocene, similarly, is a recently coined (English) term to define an epoch where humans have influence at a geological scale. More than a definitive stance on when a climate consciousness of the current form of the crisis begins, I would like to maintain an open-ended one. This might allow a space for rethinking and robust

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gathering of vocabularies from a longer time-period that informs current understanding. As I discuss in the next section, work on climate history and extreme weather events was ongoing in research and scholarship much before it grew into common parlance. Indigenous populations were not just affected by local ecological phenomena, but by these events which we currently study as global climatic occurrences (ENSO). Moreover, while the use of "climate" in the humanities, more than ecological or environmental, refers to a recent and specific conglomeration of ideas on planetary phenomena, it remains one which is bound to an understanding in scholarship within the dominant English language.

To use the word climate is thus to acknowledge the many other iterations and interpretations of the term in Indigenous languages that are similar and may contribute to a broader social and historical understanding of the term and phenomenon as we use and know it today. Consider, for instance, Rachel Qitsualik's (Inuk, Scottish, Cree) and Keavy Martin's definition of *Sila*. In its varied use in Inuit languages, *Sila* encompasses a material understanding of climate as tangible phenomena. Here, climate is a combined influence of land, air, and sky and a community-held belief in its separate presence and animacy (Todd 5; Martin 4-5). Of a similar iteration, Inupiaq anthropologist Herbert Anungazuk called some of the "old ways of weather and ice predictions" as "*ilisimiksaavut*—'what we must know'" (Anungazuk, 101). In the context of Australian country, Nyigina elder Paddy Roe evokes the word *liyan* which approximates as an "intuition" or "life force of a place" that "enables people to feel their environment" (Roe, qtd. in Morissey and Healy 229). It is in this glossary, I choose to examine the occurrence of *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen*. Finally, the focus on the local is to question continued Eurocentrism in climate studies and to centre marginalised histories. However, an either/or between the local and the planetary is limiting to a deeper reflection on the crisis. It tends to streamline the complex understanding of both which Indigenous thinkers and artists have sought to express in their literatures. Thus, it is with care that these

vocabularies need to be read and situated. A simplified leaning to unearth the “precolonial” as the site for “alternative” knowledge as an *isolated* framework to study the crisis can do more harm to decolonial endeavours. Such a method often tends to exoticize rather than historicise key Indigenous understanding on the crisis. It frames it as a “return” to a past of Indigenous knowledge systems, rendering them stagnant as opposed to an evolving, continuous process of interacting intellectual histories. Climate vocabularies, therefore, are an invitation to seek the fine print of the crisis registered in literary metaphors; this reading can enrich our knowledge of the crisis as it unfolds today.

I re-iterate, here, the need to access Indigenous voices in archived literatures. This is emblematic of a larger problem while reading oral traditions, origin myths, and archived Indigenous literatures, which come to the researcher removed from their context and burdened with the constructions created in colonial/upper-caste translation or ethnographic work. However, this does not discourage readings of these texts. Adivasi literary archives open to a significant world of possibilities when read in conversation with other Indigenous writers and when studied with the methodologies formulated by Indigenous theorists. Creek historian Craig S. Womack critiques the ongoing “problem” of Native American texts (oral, performative, and written) characterized as “lost in translation” (64) as opposed to translations from other dominant cultures; this, he argues, postpones contextual and political analysis. Therefore, rather than a rejection of early twentieth-century archives of Adivasi songs and myths, transcribed and translated by colonial anthropologists and ethnographers, I read them as texts operating within the milieus of their historical encounters and responding to colonial methods of collections and archives. Being supported by methodologies of literary reading provided by Womack and Muecke among others helps recover Indigenous voice from the aporias around oral texts and translations built by structural categories in

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colonial ethnography. This allows for the text's reinstatement as political and presents possibilities for a "literary repatriation" (Unaipon xliii).

## II. *Jal, Jangal, Jameen* as Climate Vocabularies

The climate history of Odisha is largely anthropogenic. Mineral extraction of the last few decades has exacerbated the crisis on ecologies already fragile from a history of exploitation of *jal, jangal, jameen*.<sup>14</sup> Odisha—which in recent years is known as a cyclone-prone region—was infamously called *marudi anchala* or Land of Droughts. El Niño and the Southern Oscillation (ENSO) occurrences caused meteorological dry periods in the region. In addition, hydrological droughts<sup>15</sup> significantly increased from radical changes in land use during the nineteenth century, especially with the growth of commercialized agriculture and deforestation. The time-period in Odisha's history that is primarily remembered for its scarcity is also, ironically, a time when land use became largely agrarian to increase revenue. Prior to 1850, upper-caste communities from the plains of Sambalpur and Raipur started migrating for settled agriculture in the districts of Kalahandi, Bolangir, and Koraput (KBK) (Pati *Situating* 101-102), areas with the highest population of resident Adivasi communities in eastern India. Grain shortages, due to changes in the crop cycles (ibid), also began during this period, leading to resistance by Adivasi communities. The scarcities become acute in the 1860s. J. P Das, in his historical narrative *A Time Elsewhere* (2009), translated by Jatin Nayak, earlier published in Oriya as *Desa Kala Patra* (1992), describes the years leading up to 1866, the year of the deadly Odisha famine. This was a decade of paradoxes for the region. The reigning leaders and litterateurs like Madhusudan Das, Fakir Mohan Senapati, and Radhanath Ray eagerly awaited Odisha's first printing press. An independent press would establish the eminence of Oriya literature and, in turn, Oriya nationalism, rescuing it from the colonial impact of Bengal. At the same time, houses were steadily declaring grain scarcity. The famine ravaged. Market prices soared, grain was exported to the

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empire, stocked rice controlled by zamindars and colonial officers along with imported relief was stranded in ports and delayed reaching the famished (Das ch.2) The drought and the Great Famine of Odisha in 1866 killed a million people, nearly a third of the population of Odisha (Odisha division of Kolkatta presidency) at the time, leading to vast demographic and geographical change (Mohanty, 608).

Following this year, the famines of 1876-79 severely impacted east-Indian geographies, with a total of 50 million deaths across India (Grove, 144). This was a severity similar to the 48-55 million deaths between 1492 and 1610 because of disease and enslavement (Lewis and Maslin, 75) that is commonly considered as the beginning of the crisis for American Indigenous communities. The Odisha Famine of 1866 served as a warning to the famines that followed. Henry Blanford was appointed as imperial meteorological officer to the government of India on the recommendation of the 1866 Orissa Famine Commission to study the failure of monsoons and the persistence of droughts (Davis, 217). Climate studies on east-Indian geography were supported since agricultural failure directly impacted the empire. Richard Grove discusses this history: severe droughts and shortage of rainfall of the 1870s and 1890s have been determined to be a result of ENSO, extreme warm events that have a global climatic impact leading to similar drought conditions in South Asia, Australia, Southern Africa, the Caribbean, and Mexico (124). However, as he mentions, climate studies had already been conducted since the 1700s to record the periodicity of droughts and study the reason for long-term weather conditions. Colonial researchers like William Roxborough, who had been collecting data on tropical meteorology, had identified the relationship between climate change and recurrent famines as relating to colonial impact (even leading to afforestation efforts in the nineteenth century).

Global meteorological surveys and climate studies were, yet again, within a limited realm of knowledge controlled by the empire and dominant communities. It could be argued that the scientific conception of a world climate system and its

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effect to generate conditions of crisis did not yet exist as community knowledge (or it requires further search). However, the severity of drought and famine conditions as a result of these climatic events—and the exploitation of *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* to facilitate revenue-generation for the British empire—framed the climate vocabulary of eastern India. Anthropogenic impacts on these geographies (the *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* of Adivasi communities) had rendered them incapable to cushion the force of periodically occurring calamities. More than a singular "event", the year of 1866 and the following famines have been read as part of a "process" that was a direct continuation of land-loss to *zamindars* (landlords) and commercialized grain trade without adequate returns to the farmers (Mohanty 609).<sup>16</sup>

The easy accumulation of *jameen* (land) was aided by the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Changes in the use of *jameen* meant that Adivasi communities were assimilated into the caste system, serving under highly oppressive forms of bonded labour like *bethi* and *gothi*, systems in which existence was defined by a perpetual state of debt and enslavement to the landlord. A significant number of Adivasi communities migrated to forest tracts, given the increase in agricultural settlers on their land. However, the India Forest Act 1865, designed specifically to clear forests for railways, and later the Forest Act of 1878, heralded the "reserved" forests to increase timber production and to grow more cash crops such as jute and indigo. This act prohibited use of the *jangal* and curbed Adivasi agricultural practices such as *bewar*, *jhum*, or *podu chasa*, various forms of shifting cultivation practiced on forest slopes. The *jameen* and *jangal* (and *jal*), the non-humans that sustained Adivasi communities, were appropriated as resources. Furthermore, they were regimented to disallow interconnected living. The onset of fragility of east-Indian geographies was brought about by an accretion of control on *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen*. This lent itself to a lived sense of "crisis", owing to fractured ecologies and growing inequalities felt in the apocalyptic proportions of the century's famines which Mike Davis describes as "late Victorian Holocausts" that formed the "Third World" (see

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Davis). Having lost *jal, jangal, jameen*, the once-princely communities became destitute within half a century. When the colonial government imported “poorhouses”, Davis quotes a missionary document as saying, “Confinement was especially unbearable to the tribal people, like Gonds and Baigas, whom one missionary claimed, “would sooner die in their homes or their native jungle, than submit to the restraint of a government Poor House” (Davis, 147). He claims that such antipathy was less about confinement and more revealing of the diet the poor houses served: flour and salt. For Adivasi communities, these decades prefigured a dire future. Their essential organizing ecologies were not only colonized, unresponsive, and crumbling, but they had to depend on the apocalyptic measures of the colonizer for survival.

While these early instances of a seismic shift in eastern India may have found utterance archived in Adivasi oral traditions of the nineteenth century, we may have lost access to them in transmission. Moreover, apart from the climatic constants of famines and droughts, the micro-climates of eastern India were heavily altered with the beginning of mineral extraction that exacerbated ongoing concerns of land dispossession. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were increased invasions on eastern Indian landscape through mining for mica, slate, and chromite (Mishra “From Tribal to”, 30). We see articulations of mining activity in myths transcribed by Verrier Elwin in *Tribal Myths of Orissa* collected in the 1940s-50s, and we can assume that these songs had already been in circulation in popular memory before these decades.<sup>17</sup> One of the Bonda myths from Koraput reads:

There was no money in the old days. But after Mahaprabhu gave the kingdom of Simapatna to Sima Raja and Sima Rani, a government office was made to deal with everything [...] One day Mahaprabhu took Sima Rani to the Silver Mountain and showed her great heaps of silver. “That is silver”, he said [...] Then he took her to the Gold Mountain and showed

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her great heaps of gold [...] Then he took her to the Copper Mountain and showed her great heaps of copper. (Elwin *Tribal Myths*, 561)

The myth not only demonstrates land transactions, as Sima Raja and Sima Rani are "given" the kingdom, but also the entry of a third entity that carried out these transactions, "the government office". That a scanning of the landscape to determine sites for mining minerals was on-going is reflected in how Sima Rani is "shown" these riches of the land. She subsequently mints them into coins, signifying a transition from seeing mountains as living entities to seeing them as capital.<sup>18</sup> Such occurrences in mythical narratives coincide with increased mining in the region. Coal and iron ore exports steadily increased with the expansion of railways and industries in the 1880s. Tata and Sons and the Bengal Iron and Steel Manufacturing Company started sustained mineral extraction in 1905 (Pati *Adivasis*, 257). Samarendra Das and Felix Padel explore the history of bauxite in Odisha, a sedimentary rock that has become a site for struggle in recent movements, which I explore in the next section. They write about how the bauxite-rich hills of Kalahandi were documented as a resource by geological surveys carried out by T. L. Walker in early 1900, who named the rock Khondalite, after the resident Kondh community (Das and Padel, 58). Subsequent surveys continued through the twentieth century until the last decade, when liberalization of the economic policies of the 1990s allowed multinational companies access to mine the hills. The mining excesses of the last three decades further impaired an already fragile ecology, and form a significant period in the climate history of Odisha after the decade of 1866. Therefore, Bhagban Majhi and Dambu Praska's poetry, which I discuss in the next section, situate the present crisis as one with a longer history.

The radical impact on *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* had been noted as a significant climatic concern albeit in a language and scale that was localized. *Jal*, *jangal*, *jameen*, apart from evoking this common climatic history for diverse Adivasi communities, unify a common understanding of material ecology and provide a

holistic basis to “sacred”<sup>19</sup> philosophies present in Adivasi knowledge systems. A recent resolution was passed for Sarna to be accepted as a religious code which would include Adivasi religions similar to Sarna under its fold. It was claimed that the acceptance of Sarna as a separate religious group by the Indian government would also regulate “resource politics” (perhaps, in favour of the Adivasis). This rested on the claim that religious identity of Adivasis is founded on the natural resources of *jal, jangal, jameen* (Alam “Why the Sarna Code”, np). These intricate systems that combine a philosophy of ecological interdependence, religion, and literary tradition<sup>20</sup> have often evaded colonial classifications,<sup>21</sup> those classifications that presupposed Adivasi “primitivity” and intellectual inferiority. Perhaps for this reason, the archival transcriptions of anthropologists like Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hilvale, among others, carry the warnings of crisis, without further consideration of the predicament articulated by Adivasi communities. The loss of the *jangal* was registered as a “calamity” in a song transcribed by Elwin and Hilvale in the 1930s and 1940s:

Such a calamity had never been before!

Some he beats, some he catches by the ear,

Some he drives out of the village.

He robs us of our axes, he robs us of our jungle.

He beats the Gond; he drives the Baiga and Baigin from their jungle. (Elwin

*The Baiga*, 130)

Here, the “calamity” is described as unforeseen and of a form not encountered previously. The song proclaims that the hand of colonial power and human intrusion on the *jangal* practiced excesses that even surpassed the accustomed bearings and regularity of a natural “calamity”. Localised resistances to counter the increased control on *jal, jangal, jameen* were ongoing since the early nineteenth century. It was Birsa Munda’s movement, or *ulgulan* in Chottanagpur province in the 1890s, that provided an impetus for *jal, jangal, jameen* to become a “common organizing

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force" for Adivasi communities. Birsa specifically demanded the re-instatement of *Khuntkatti* system, which was based on collective ownership of land and forests by Adivasi communities. In his reading of Gond history, Akash Poyam claims that the slogan "*jal, jangal, jameen*" as a unified call for protection was later coined by a forgotten Gond Adivasi leader from Telangana, Komaram Bheem ("Gondwana", 131). Sharing "common cause" with Birsa Munda to resist against exacting taxes and oppression by landlords, Bheem used the call during the Gondwana movement against the Nizam government of Hyderabad to demand complete land and forest rights. Poyam contends that the vocabulary of *jal, jangal, jameen* was specific in its concern to establish Gond sovereignty and autonomy over *jal, jangal, jameen* ("Komaram Bheem"). Contemporary discourse on climate change and environmental conservation, therefore, cannot be studied separately from the long history of Adivasi movements for land rights and sovereignty. These contexts reveal Adivasi vocabularies that signal structural inequalities which makes them more vulnerable to the current crisis.

The crisis of the human, especially after the theorization of the Anthropocene in geology in 2000 in dominant Euro-American centres, has critical precursors in the peripheries. For Adivasi communities, the crisis of human and non-human existence was anticipated in the calls to protect *jal, jangal, jameen*. *Jal, jangal, jameen* rhymed and echoed to sustain material and epistemological continuity after the calamitous impact of resource exploitation during the nineteenth century. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to access further literary readings of archives and transcribed myths and songs, my intention is to revisit the recurrence of *jal, jangal, jameen* and read them as climate vocabularies. These vocabularies are recurrent because they archive a generational memory of lived crisis during climatic occurrences (such as droughts and famines) and anthropogenic impact on non-humans around which Adivasi philosophies are organized. The political consciousness of Adivasi movements on land rights that is deeply committed to the

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indispensability of protective measures for *jal, jangal, jameen* is indeed contemporary climate discourse prefigured. To this climate history and genealogy of resistance, the songs of Bhagban Majhi and Dambu Praska bear allegiance. Their invocations of the mountain, earthworm, and seeds present vital evidence of the enmeshed ecology of *jal, jangal, jameen* particular to their contexts in south Odisha.

### III. Of Mountains and Earthworms

Bhagban Majhi, a Kondh singer and leader from Kucheipadar village (Rayagada district in southern Odisha), was one of the leading voices of Kashipur resistance against bauxite mining by Utkal Alumina International Limited (UAIL), and later, Aditya Birla.<sup>22</sup> The movement began in the early 1990s and continued for over two decades, a momentum of resistance that was later carried forward by the Dongria Kondh community to oppose Vedanta in Niyamgiri. Despite a sustained struggle by the Kondh-Paraja community in villages around Kashipur, Aditya Birla acquired land and, in present day, the displaced Adivasi communities live in the peripheries of the factory walls.<sup>23</sup> Bhagban, as a teenager, along with Lima Majhi, composed a number of songs (in *kui* and *desia*, which was later adapted in Oriya and Hindi), that were widely transmitted to unite the communities. From those specifically composed for the movement, *Gaan Chadiba Nahin* (We Will Not Forsake This Land), was identified as a common anthem in several movements against mining and forced evictions in India. Having found utterance in a dominant language such as Hindi, with a popular video *Gaon Chodab Nahin* subsequently produced by K. P. Sasi, the song acquired pan-cultural presence. Apart from its rhyme that was predisposed to transmission across linguistic and regional borders, *Gaan Chadiba Nahin* remains one of the most subversive songs to be formulated as part of Adivasi literary song traditions in recent decades. Bhagban's political critique is embedded in Kondh-Paraja epistemology particular to south Odisha. His interpretation of *jal, jangal, jameen* which, in this song, is articulated as *dongar-jharan-jangal-paban* (mountains-

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waterfalls-forests-winds), connects it to the long history of Adivasi climate consciousness.

We will not yield,  
 we will not give up,  
 no, we will not forsake this mountain.

[...]

Our hills, our companions,  
 our growth, our progress.

We are the children of this earth.

With folded hands,  
 we bow down to our earth mother.

[...]

We are the people of this earth—  
 we are earthworms—  
 mountains—streams—forests—winds—

if we forsake this earth

how shall we endure?

Worlds shall collapse,  
 lives will crumble, when

the pathways drown,

how will we endure?

We will be nowhere

we will be no more—

there is no hereafter—

no, we will not forsake this land. (*Prakrutika*, 19)

My translation is from a *desia* (a pidgin variety of Oriya and Kui) transcription of the song archived in the Kashipur movement pamphlet, *Kashipur Ghosanapatra*, published by *Prakrutika Sampad Surakhya Parishad* (a local environmental

protection committee founded during the Kashipur movement). Here, Bhagban presents two fundamental ideas, *unnati* (progress/development) and *matrubhakti* (love for the mother). *Matrubhakti* for the mountain or *dongar* as the mother, as invoked in Bhagban's song, departs from invocations of the motherland/mother-earth in the context of Indian nationalism. Additionally, *matrubhakti* linguistically may have its roots in songs composed during the Gandhamardhan movement against Bharat Aluminum Company Limited (BALCO). In its philosophy, however, *Matrubhakti* digresses from the Hindu mythical motifs that became the driving force in Gandhamardhan. Here, the salutation of deference bows to non-human elements. *Matrubhakti* is ethical kinship with "all our relations".<sup>24</sup> *Matrubhakti* is for the earth mother, *Dharni penu*. Notably, because of this conception of mountains forming essential basis to all human–non-human life forms, they occur invariably as gods, or kings, as entities who are agential, in the religious beliefs prevalent in Kashipur as well as Niyamgiri. Through a general use of *dongar*, Bhagban alludes to Baplamali, Kutrumali, and Sijimali, the bauxite-rich ranges of south Odisha, which have formed "through the alternating rhythm of rain and sun continuing every year for about 40 million years, eroding layers of feldspar and other rocks" (Das and Padel, 32). Bhagban presents evidence of this elemental bind that sustains the ecology of eastern India: "*dongar-jharan-jangal-paban*" or "mountains-waterfalls-forests-winds" exist because of the mineral-rich mountains. The Kondh community is intricately bound to this ecology.

His song, consequently, offers the Kondh understanding of humans as *matira poka*, or *biripidika*—earthworms.<sup>25</sup> As part of the movement against mining, he demanded, "We ask one fundamental question: How can we survive if our lands are taken away from us? [...] We are earthworms. [...] What we need is stable development. We won't allow our billions of years old water and land to go to ruin just to pander to the greed of some officers" (qtd. in Das and Padel, 394-395). For Bhagban, notions of *unnati* or development are embedded in a cosmology that has

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decentred the human. For *dikus* (outsiders) of such a conception, his poetry conveys a radical understanding of progress that necessitates discerning the temporalities of the earthworm and the mountain. The "fleshy philosophy" of the earthworm opens a "pathway" to grasp the dissimilar magnitudes of temporal perceptions that the Anthropocene commands: the *dongar* of deep geological time, and the *dongar* as capital in the history of mineral extraction. Kondh conceptions of the human as *biripidka* or earthworm, the human as part of the elemental cosmology of the Kucheipadar landscape, enables a comprehension of mountains as autonomous annals of knowledge beyond their reductive quantification as "resource" for a nation's progress. To understand the extent of irredeemable loss of the *dongar* would require understanding its existence as separate from human history, with its own annals of millennia of slow formation and evolution.

*Unnati* and *matrubhakti* have essentially formed the ideological basis of the Hindu nationalist state's divisive enterprise and the nation state's invasion of Adivasi land for industrial progress. Bhagban's interpretation of these words thus becomes crucial. He frames climate action as the political responsibility of the present to resist complicit governments whilst having a deep-time consciousness of the mountains, a dual task that delineates human positionality in the Anthropocene. In his speeches and testimonies, *unnati* as imagined by the Indian state and mining companies for short-term profit that would deplete this "resource" within thirty to forty years, is juxtaposed with *unnati* rooted in a comprehension of the mountain that has a profound dimension. He asks, "Sir, what do you mean by development? Is it development to destroy these billions of years old mountains for the profit of a few officials?" (qtd. in Das and Padel, 10). He represents and communicates a Kondh humanism in his songs through his interpretation of development as one that honors the human's ethical relationship to land. "Humans as earthworms" in kinship with the mountains orients human perception and equally counsels on the fragility of these enmeshed interfaces. During our conversation in 2017, he presented this

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thought as a “fairly basic” idea which he had attempted to convince people of during the movement. Human impact on land is fueled by industries, and to oppose destruction of ecologies is a universal responsibility. He said, “People think this is for Adivasi’s self-interest. This resistance is against ‘loot’. The riches of the land that is being destroyed is not of the Adivasi’s alone. The environment, sky, this is not of the Adivasi’s alone. It belongs to the living, and the living suffer. The profits are for the company” (Majhi).

Bhagban’s political thought, beside a consciousness of “humans as earthworms”, poses further questions to our belated understanding. Is the binary by which we understand the Anthropocene in literary imagination, of geological and historical time, adequate to comprehend the lived temporalities of non-humans? For are not our metaphors for understanding the non-human again dependent on the scales of human measurements and the grammar of theory? What is the language in which to imagine scale and inhabit temporal dimensions as earthworms and living mountains? As in several Adivasi creation stories, the earthworms collected earth until it sufficed living beings. The *dongar* is a law-making entity as much as its creation and sustenance depends on the enterprise of the earthworms. And yet again, given the mutuality in their relationship, can the temporality of the mountain alongside the earthworm be imagined at all through progression or variations in scale? The *dongar* and *biripidka* claim sovereignty on temporality, equally on the forms of the annals they maintain. As a conduit to their claims, Bhagban Majhi’s political activism becomes critical. For young Kondh leaders of the movement, understanding the metrics used by the company was equally important to predict the “calamity” that mining would ensue. To thoroughly investigate the statistics proposed by the state and the company, the “tonnes of bauxite” as opposed to a living *dongar* was vital, so that Kondh ideas of progress could be proposed and reasoned. To examine the measures of employment and education that was promised by *unnati* was to ascertain whether the villages would be direct

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beneficiaries or marginalised again. The annals of the earthworms and the mountains had to be juxtaposed with metrics that stem from and accommodate human centrality and that are estimated to have higher "pragmatic" value. As we shall come across in the next section, the translation of Dambu Praska's song carries a similar duality: "a measuring has begun of *Leka houru*" (Praska, qtd. in Dash 2013). Praska, similarly, juxtaposes temporal scales of his origin epic and company metrics. The elders of the village, and singers like Bhagban Majhi, were consequently part of a philosophical struggle to grapple with the modes of adopted languages to convey Kondh epistemologies connected to the *dongar* and *biripidka*. This leads me to explore yet another "fleshy philosophy" of the earthworm in Dambu Praska's epic rendition.

#### IV. Of Mountains and Seeds

Listen, O elder, O brother,

the story I tell you:

this mountain is our ancestor, our Darmuraja.

This mountain is cucumbers, pumpkins, and all that was created.

Listen, O brother, our only story.

.....

The king summons the elder brother to the feast,

the middle ones with tattered clothes,

are asked to leave—

crossing mighty rivers, the middle ones are scattered

.....

A call resounds from village to village—

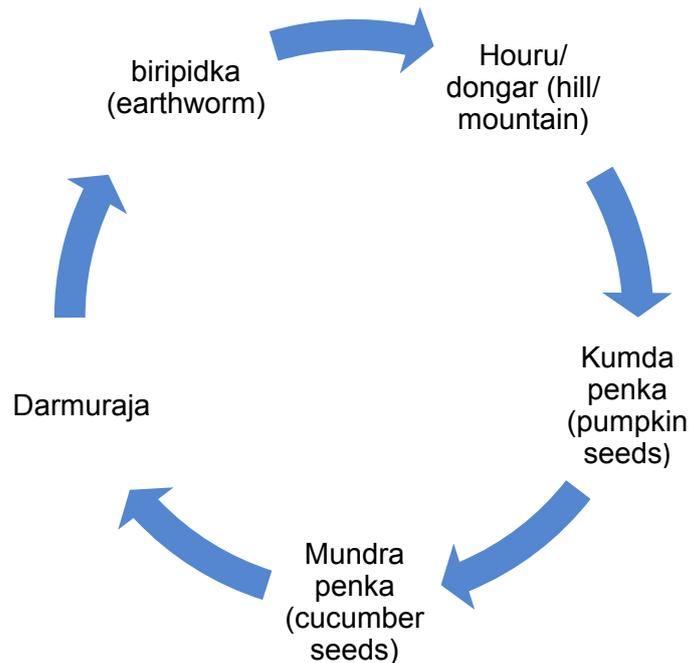
*assemble on the mountain—*

But we shall not leave.

There, lives Darmuraja... (Praska, qtd. in Dash 2013)<sup>26</sup>

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The late Dongria Kondh poet's song "The Lament of Niyamraja" is rooted in the Dongria Kondh oral epical tradition. As the *jani* (priest) of the community, he sings in a literary form of Kui. The singular long-form of this rendition is archived in the video documentary by Bhubaneswar-based filmmaker Surya Shankar Dash titled "Lament of Niyamraja".<sup>27</sup> Here, my English translation is based on a recent full-text translation by Arna Majhi (from Kui to Oriya) that has clarified the complex text of Praska and helped bring previously unconsidered aspects of the song to light.<sup>28</sup> The song was collected in the years leading up to the village council hearings held in Niyamgiri by the Supreme Court of India in 2013. India's apex court demanded legitimate reasons why the Dongria Kondh community opposed Vedanta's proposal to mine bauxite on their hills. One afternoon during the movement, Dash asked Dambu Praska that, if Praska was called by the state to a hearing, what would he render as a reply on behalf of his community? In reply to Dash's question, Dambu Praska sang "The Lament of Niyamraja", presenting evidence of legal ownership of the hills: the intimate knowledge of *penka* (seeds) which for him are "the stakes of the Anthropocene" (Davis and Todd, 767). Through metaphors in his poetry, he communicates legal conceptions embedded in *penka* or seeds of the pumpkin (*kumda penka*) and cucumber (*mundra penka*). In his song, the Dongria Kondh cosmology is represented as having its origins from non-human elements like the earth and its earthworms (*biripidka*), as well as the sky, who is called Darmuraja, the god who transmits this law and knowledge.



Darmuraja, also known as Dharmaraja or Niyamraja (King of Law), is believed to be an ancestor, an animate entity who holds a religious position and is resident on the hills of Niyamgiri. The name "Niyamgiri" itself suggests why it is essential to read this song through the philosophies of the non-human articulated in Dongria Kondh mythology. "Niyamgiri", as the name of the hill of Darmuraja, might have been a Sankritised import: *giri* means hill, *niyam* means law in Oriya and some other Indo-Aryan languages. It is unclear when the words may have entered Dongria Kondh vocabulary. It is worth pondering with some skepticism whether it is a recent import or a result of interactions with dominant traditions like Oriya, Telugu, and Hindi, among others, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or even earlier. Therefore, contrary to what is widely believed in non-Indigenous readings of Niyamgiri, that Niyamgiri is the "Mountain of Law", with "Niyamraja" or "Dharmaraja" presiding as the "King of Law", might be our error in translation or an idea in Dongria Kondh mythology that has grown out of linguistic adaptation. *Dharma* is a Sanskrit term for "just action" or "duty", whereas *Darmuraja* refers to the Dongria Kondh "ancestor", who decides the law of the community. The law that

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Dambu Praska sings about is distinctive and not related to “dharma” in Hindu traditions. In other words, Dambu Praska is potentially singing about the law embedded in the seeds of the pumpkin and the cucumber.

Praska braids the origin myth of the Dongria Kondhs with the narration of present-day call to a court hearing. He speaks through numerous voices in a tense arrangement that alternatively straddles the temporalities of the origin myth and the present day, where the mythical elder brother of Darmuraja, called to the king's court to decide on the proposed settlements of their community, overlaps with the Dongria Kondh villager called to a state hearing. Both, the brother and the villager, are asked the same riddle:

How many seeds in a pumpkin?

How many seeds in a cucumber?

How many shall sprout and how many are hollow? (Praska, qtd. in Dash 2013).

Dambu Praska's song performs a struggle to answer the riddle of seeds, an answer that would form communal evidence of belonging to their hills. At one point, Darmuraja sits beside him to offer answers through a secret understanding, an answer Dambu Praska does not reveal to us, the listeners. Praska's metaphorical use of the riddle of seeds forms the basis of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)<sup>29</sup> to judge those seeds (*nida penka*) which would yield a healthy crop, a local knowledge passed down through generations in the form of a riddle. Traditional knowledge of ownership is often guarded and closed to non-members of the community—Darmuraja, the King of Law, offers the knowledge to Praska and not the listener. That is why Dambu Praska sings that both acts, of sharing and denial of this “sacred” knowledge, threaten him. On the one hand, he cannot break his community's rules of intellectual property. On the other, withholding this proof of ownership would displace his community. At one point, the narrator in the song denies seeds that are offered to him in order to protect their hills. Here, the *penka*

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or the seeds become an allusion to non-Indigenous seed varieties that were introduced on Adivasi land promising a high yield, but which were essentially seed varieties that yield monocrops and are not suitable for cyclical sustainable production.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, similarly, writes of corn and essential Indigenous epistemology and history associated with varieties of the crop that has been deemed as "primitive" by colonial settlers. The industrial production of corn is "waste producing", she writes, far removed from the relationship between maize and human as planted and consumed within an "honor system": "[The] human and the plant are linked as co-creators; humans are midwives to this creation, not masters. The plant innovates and the people nurture and direct that creativity." ("Corn tastes better", np). When Dambu Praska similarly rejects the seeds that are offered to him in a "pouch", a non-Indigenous variety for a high yield, it is his way of maintaining the Dongria Kondh "honor system" for seeds indigenous to the hills. The hollow seeds (*hatun*) also suggest the history of settlements by colonial and upper-caste communities in southern Odisha since the nineteenth century, that I discussed earlier in this paper. It is Dongria Kondh women who are the "guardians of seeds" (Jena "Tribal Priestesses", np). Dongria Kondh priestesses conduct a ritual for the collection and protection of indigenous millet seed varieties that are in decline on the slopes of the hills. Travelling by foot to other villages, the women request seeds to be accumulated and sown for harvest. As reported on *Vikalp Sangam*, these travels reveal not only vanishing millet seed varieties but also the sheer diversity of indigenous seeds sown as opposed to monocropping: Dasara Kadraka, a *bejuni* (priestess) from Kadaraguma village, cites the existence of thirty millet seed varieties from the hill alone that are endangered ("Tribal Priestesses").

The poetic repetition of seeds, the apparently simplistic and straightforward listing of vegetables and grain, are evidentiary of sustainable practices embedded in complex knowledge systems. The question of the number of seeds in a

cucumber, the materials of pumpkins, fruits, and grains that Darmuraja provides, is the vital materiality that determines Dongria Kondh law and survival. This relationship that binds Niyamgiri's ecology to the Dongria Kondh community stands threatened in the Anthropocene. Consequently, invocations of vegetal produce of Niyamgiri were a recurrence in the oral testimonies of Dongria Kondh villagers presented to the Supreme Court of India to protect Niyamgiri from bauxite mining. Dambu Praska, similarly, comments on the incoming dispossession by the mining industry. He laments that the answer to the riddle of the seeds is ultimately irrelevant if the land is threatened:

Seven days in the sun,  
the seeds of the pumpkin and cucumber dry up.  
Listen, O brother,  
with the sunrise, the earth warms, the mounds crumble—  
the mountains grow muddy,  
flow murky in the streams—  
know this, O brother,  
a measuring has begun of *Leka houru*.  
Tell me, O brother,  
how many seeds of the pumpkin are hollow?  
how many will sprout?

*Here are nine pouches of pumpkin seeds,  
here are nine pouches of cucumber seeds—*  
if the land is lost, how would seeds matter? (Praska, qtd. in Dash 2013).

Praska conveys a disillusionment with the government hearing. The Supreme Court hearing was limited to only a few villages in Niyamgiri. By then, continued industrial mining (more regularly since the 1990s) had already displaced several Adivasi communities and destroyed the ecology of the neighboring hills and villages in south Odisha. His image of muddy mountain streams evokes the image

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of the toxic industrial mud ponds constructed by the company. Vedanta alumina refinery not only consumed water that forms perennial streams of the Niyamgiri hills, but also constructed an ash pond at the mouth of Vamsadhara River. The river and streams on the mountains were polluted, rendering them unusable for human consumption. Praska is aware of the ongoing devastation to their hills and performs a series of denials towards the end of the song. He denies the offer of seeds, buffaloes, and mangoes, metaphorical suggestions to the material gains that the company and state offered in the name of "development" and progress. The narrative voice in the song realizes and communicates the indispensability of the *dongar*. Similar to Bhagban Majhi, Praska communicates that mining their *dongar* would herald a breakdown, destroying the slow and prolonged elemental bind of the mineral that has formed the ecology of eastern India. The continuity of seeds, and consequently of his community depends on the continuity of the mountain.

Conclusion:

They cannot tolerate the existence of trees  
for the roots demand land. (Kerketta, 168)

In a visionary couplet written in Hindi, in her second anthology *Jadon Ki Jameen* (*Land of the Roots*), Oraon poet Jacinta Kerketta engraves the existential "stakes of the Anthropocene" (David and Todd, 767). As the titular poem to this anthology, a two-line afterword that appears on the last page, she says that the reason *they* cannot tolerate the presence of trees is because the roots demand *jameen* (land). This form of non-human need is unimaginable and therefore unaccommodated within human systems of legality and ethical practice. In this couplet, she effectively articulates that to comprehend our present crisis necessitates re-formulating the question of land rights, evoked here as the rights of the land.

Through a literary reading, I situated the recurrence of *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* as climate vocabularies to explore the Adivasi literary tradition's response to the

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climate crisis. The paper was limited to the context of east-Indian geographies. What are the other possibilities of imagining climate vocabularies, and how will these literary readings support work on micro-histories of particular geographies and documentation of specific Adivasi philosophies? Similar to the “fleshy philosophies” of earthworms and seeds, present in the songs of Dambu Praska and Bhagban Majhi, what are the ways to archive and read similar connections to the material and vegetal? This further raises the question of what are the various forms that climate vocabularies can take in different Indigenous traditions and languages? In a paper titled “Inventing Climate Consciousness in Igbo Oral Repertoire: An Analysis of *mmanu eji eri okwu* and Selected Eco-Proverbs” by Dr. Chinonye C. Ekwueme-Ugwu and Anya Ude Egwu, the two Nigerian writers present a climate consciousness embedded in Igbo proverbs. Similarly, Nicole Furtado’s evocation of “Ea”, a concept stemming from Native Hawaiian epistemology, informs the climate vocabularies framework.<sup>30</sup> In the panel discussion titled “Climate Change, Infrastructure and Adivasi Knowledge”, panelists Akash Poyam, M. Yuvan, Archana Soreng, and Raile R. Ziipao shared some of their ongoing documentation of Indigenous knowledge traditions, ecological vocabularies, and sustainable practices (Poyam, Soreng, et al.). These methods—for instance, M. Yuvan’s Instagram handle titled “A Naturalist’s Column”—are innovative archives and a necessary glossary for ecological education. Similar work can help uncover literary recurrences that have served as a “common organising concept” (Todd, 5-6) in diverse contexts and languages.

I hope a transnational glossary on climate vocabularies can channel further comparative work that connects the climate histories of India with settler colonial nations, and Indigenous literary responses in the respective contexts. Similar to India, ENSO occurrences have impacted Australian geographies resulting in severe drought conditions in the nineteenth century. Settler colonialism’s lasting impact on North American and Australian land through forced removals, disease, and

genocide radically altered ecologies. The global industrial complex further impacts Indigenous communities in all three contexts. The raging bushfires of Australia in 2019, the wildfires of California in 2020, and the recent forest fires on the Similipal reserve, eastern India, in 2021 are some of the many symptoms of insurgent ecosystems. Here, Indigenous communities are affected by climate change and ironically held responsible. In India, the conservation narrative excludes Indigenous participation and sustainable practices and penalises Indigenous communities for environmental encroachments on their own land. Adivasi peoples are displaced to “protect” wildlife and habitats. Kharia climate activist Archana Soreng, therefore, demands that Adivasi communities lead the narrative and efforts on conservation, rather than be made “victims” (Poyam, Soreng, et al.). Forthcoming discourse on climate, conservation, and the pandemic may need to reflect on the role of authoritarian nationalism and racism in abetting already fragile conditions. Indigeneity and land rights of Adivasi communities are oppositional to the Hindu nation and aligned corporate and industrial interests. Here, Adivasi and other minority communities become dispensable bodies in their lands as well as in urban centres where they work as migrant labourers. The exodus of migrants from urban metropolises following the Indian state’s overnight lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 was an authoritarian measure. In so far as the pandemic is indicative of the climate emergency, the exodus was also a climate-induced displacement.<sup>31</sup> How to rethink and safeguard Indigenous climate justice in authoritarian nation-states? This concern is not limited to the Hindu nationalist state. Appropriations of Indigeneity in Europe and Britain has led a rise in xenophobia claiming indigeneity of the “original white” population. Claiming such indigeneity, the Far Right draws a dangerous analogy between immigration of minority populations to UK and colonialism in settler nations.<sup>32</sup> This ideology can influence conservative anti-immigration policies. At a time when climate-induced displacements and violence within authoritarian regimes of the Global South render

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Indigenous and minority populations homeless, these policies, if realized, will deprive alternatives of safety to climate refugees.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Imperial copy" is defined in reference to Pratt's discussion on how the colonies and the colonial subject were documented through "imperial eyes" of a "global classificatory project" (1-36) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's discussion in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (49-65).

<sup>2</sup> A. K Pankaj similarly writes, "Because tribal discussions in the present times are organized only by the non-tribals and in these the voice of the tribal is absent. The basis of these discussions are on the fictions (fictional literatures) written by non-tribals like Mahashweta Devi on Tribals [...]" (9). Similar concerns are echoed by

Poyam, who writes, "A quick web search for 'Adivasi books' will show that most books about Adivasi communities have been and are still written by non-Adivasi, upper-caste writers" ("Ten Voices").

<sup>3</sup> In the context of Australian First Nations literatures, Waanyi writer Alexis Wright conceptualises a "sovereignty of the imagination" as paramount for Aboriginal sovereignty and which can be understood as analogous to re-imagining a sovereign and "responsible" form of literary fiction (the Indigenous novel, in Wright's case) that is rooted to the "powerful, ancient cultural landscape of this country", ("The Ancient Library").

<sup>4</sup> Simon Ortiz's 1981 essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism" was a founding work on "literary sovereignty" in Native American national contexts, a precursor to Robert Warrior's publication of *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1995) and subsequent scholarship on literary nationalism. Wright defines a sovereignty of the "imagination" and "sovereign thinking" for Australian First Nations communities in her speeches and essays archived in *Sydney Review of Books*, *Meanjin* and *Overland*.

<sup>5</sup> A note on terminology: my use of the term relies on the critique of the Anthropocene in the works of Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (761-780), and Vineeta Damodaran (93-116).

<sup>6</sup> Indigenous communities were made "unthinkable" through elimination and erasure; in the Australian context declaring Indigenous First Nations land as terra nullius, for instance, erased Indigenous existence, as well as laws and access to the land as archive. Moreover, colonial constructions influenced by nineteenth-century scientific racism has further rendered Indigenous intellectual productions "unthinkable" which persist in discourses on Indigenous communities in dominant institutions in the postcolonial state. This is a subject of related enquiry in my doctoral work, and I draw my ideas from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Patrick Wolfe, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's conception regarding the Haitian slave subject.

<sup>7</sup> Amitav Ghosh describes his experience of a tornado in Delhi as "uncanny" and points out that the word has recurred significantly in the discourse related to climate change to describe the "freakish" and "improbable" events. He writes that they appear uncanny because it is a moment of "recognition" (a re-cognition as he explains) of the "presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" (30-31).

<sup>8</sup> As Damodaran mentions in the paper, a "series of regional histories" has been written in India since the 1990s, focusing on the "local", namely by Richard Grove, Mahesh Rangarajan, Rohan Dsouza, Vasant Saberwal, and K. Sivaramakrishnan.

<sup>9</sup> On voice, translation and "telling stories" on behalf of Indigenous communities, see Wright ("What happens", np), and Muecke and Shoemaker's discussion on "Repatriating the Story" (Unaipon, xi-xliii).

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Kyle Whyte argues that the vocabulary of the Anthropocene or “anthropogenic climate change” are “not precise” terms for Indigenous communities (Whyte “Indigenous Climate” 159).

<sup>11</sup> On the deep connections between words, and ecology, M. Yuvan’s glossary documented in his social media handle *A Naturalist’s Column* has particular relevance to direct similar forms of research in the Indian context, (“A Naturalist’s Column”; “Speaking River”).

<sup>12</sup> I draw from the discussions on temporalities and scale, planetary and historical, from Davis and Todd, Damodaran, and Ghosh; further, on poetry and the “scalar challenges of the Anthropocene” from Lynn Keller’s critique of the varied perceptions of human and non-human agency, disparate temporalities, and how this defines the condition of the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (Keller 1-60; 136-173).

<sup>13</sup> Kimmerer writes that the English name for “pecan” derives from the Indigenous word *pigan* which could mean any nut. The names, along with the trees, and land around Lake Michigan, writes Kimmerer, were lost to settlers during the Trail of Death (*Braiding* 12-13), linking a history of language and landscape acquired from a history of violence.

<sup>14</sup> Given that the processes I chart in this section have affected Adivasi communities in what are parts of present-day Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Telangana (east and south-east India), which were earlier parts of princely states and provinces like Chottanagpur, Gondwana, Santhal Parganas, etc., I draw from a wider source of histories of these regions, rather than limiting myself to the geography of present-day Odisha.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Davis delineates two forms of drought: a meteorological one that depends on natural rainfall and local climate, and a hydrological drought which he notes, “always has a social history” (52).

<sup>16</sup> I acknowledge the conversations and references suggested by Richard Mohapatra.

<sup>17</sup> A significant limitation in my archival research from the early twentieth century is that some texts are accessible only through translations in English in collections by Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hilvale. Further fieldwork in vernacular languages may challenge this reading and provide a more informed analysis.

<sup>18</sup> While the idea of mountains as assets was tied to existing ideas of co-dependence between human and non-human species, the state’s interest in mineral-rich mountains as resource and capital was adapted to negotiate Adivasi rights. The beginning of the Jharkhand Province Movement, to demand a separate state for Adivasis of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas, was also built on Adivasi ownership of “resource” to claim statehood. Jaipal Singh Munda claimed that the “deficit area” argument could be easily countered, given Jharkhand was

"unquestionably the richest mineral area in Hindustan". He further adds, "We have mountains of bauxite. We have a monopoly of mica and lac. Besides we have gold, silver, asbestos, manganese, [...] coal, valuable forests and an admirable climate" (Pankaj, 58).

<sup>19</sup> My comparative readings of "sacred" to situate Adivasi epistemologies around *jal, jangal, jameen* is a section of my doctoral research informed by Native American philosophy of sacrality as ethical kinship with land as expressed in the writings of Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday (*The Man Made*, 45), Simon Ortiz (Ortiz et al, 365) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson ("Land as Pedagogy", 151).

<sup>20</sup> Akash Poyam talks about how in Adivasi "social structures, there's an obligation to protect and take care of non-humans", and make claims to rights based on the protection of "sacred groves" and "village spirits" (Poyam, Soreng, et al.); Damodaran similarly writes, "Adivasi identities and beliefs are based on ancient linguistic, religious, and literary conceptualizations and on cultural origin myths in which important deities are believed to be present in the distinctive mountain and deltaic landscapes and especially in the sacred woodlands" (109).

<sup>21</sup> Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren claimed recently, "Adivasis were never Hindus and never will be", (qtd. in Angad "Adivasis were", np).

<sup>22</sup> While scanning and documentation of these hills feature in early twentieth-century geological surveys, the Memorandums of Understanding, signed by the Odisha State government in the 1990s, allowed access to private mining companies like Vedanta for mineral extraction, claiming it would help "development" in Adivasi regions.

<sup>23</sup> For details of the movement, see Ratha, B., et al., Padhi and Sadangi.

<sup>24</sup> The prayer can be read as acknowledging the sisters, Baplamali and Palangamali, characters in one of the Kondh mythologies of the region. The two sisters played in moonlit-drenched water and turned into *malis* (hills) as they ignored the warning cries of a bat – bat meaning *bapla* in Kui (Das and Padel, 71).

<sup>25</sup> Das and Padel further note how people of Kashipur refer to themselves as "frogs and fishes" (102), presenting themselves as part of an undivided human-non-human ecology.

<sup>26</sup> An earlier version of this section of the song in its English translation was produced as a recording (Mishra "Of Mountains").

<sup>27</sup> Dambu Praska's song filmed by Surya Shankar Dash is translated in Hindi by Madhu B Joshi and Gorakhpur Film society. An English translation and subtitles of the video is by Jitu Jakesika.

<sup>28</sup> An oral translation from Kui-Oriya by Arna Majhi has been transcribed by Rabi Shankar Pradhan, and then adapted into Oriya language and form by Devidas Mishra. My translation into English has been aided through this process across two languages, as well as the previous translation by Jitu Jakesika.

<sup>29</sup> Whyte synthesizes scientific and policy literatures alongside Native scholars' definitions of TEK, ("On the role of" 2-12).

<sup>30</sup> Both papers delivered at CRASSH *Climate Fictions/ Indigenous Studies Conference*, University of Cambridge, 24-25 January 2020.

<sup>31</sup> A recent exploration of the non-human in climate studies historically situates the emergence of the COVID-19 virus in the long history of unstable relations between humans and pangolins. Shivasundaram writes that zoonotic transfers are inalienable from the climate emergency and the unequal pasts on which it is built. In the paper, he reads the descriptions of pangolins found in Sri Lankan Indigenous literatures to historicise this frontier of relations ("The Human", 1-30).

<sup>32</sup> For discussion on Indigeneity as co-opted by the European and British Far Right, see Introduction and chapter 3 by Mackay and Stirrup 1-24; 59-83.

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