



# Contemporary Indigenous Narratives and Environmental Concerns: Reimagining Santhal's Sustainable Synergy with the Environment

Suklal Saren

PhD Research Scholar, Institute of Language Studies and Research, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India  
[suklalsaren7@gmail.com](mailto:suklalsaren7@gmail.com)

Received: 27 Mar 2025; Received in revised form: 30 Apr 2025; Accepted: 06 May 2025; Available online: 10 May 2025  
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— This paper examines the intersection of contemporary indigenous narratives and environmental concerns, with a focus on the Santhal community's traditional ecological knowledge and its representation in modern literature. Drawing from oral traditions, folk tales, and recent works by indigenous authors such as Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Rejina Marandi, the study examines how Santhal narratives articulate a deep-rooted and symbiotic relationship with the natural world. These narratives do not merely reflect environmental themes but reimagine sustainability through the lens of indigenous wisdom, spiritual ecology, and community-centric stewardship of nature. By foregrounding Santhal cosmology, rituals, and subsistence practices, the paper highlights how such narratives critique exploitative development, deforestation, and displacement, while offering alternative modes of environmental ethics. This reimagining of the Santhal worldview underscores the urgent need to integrate indigenous perspectives into contemporary environmental discourses. Ultimately, the paper argues that Santhal stories serve as both cultural repositories and tools of resistance, fostering a sustainable synergy between humanity and the environment.



**Keywords**— Santhal narratives, indigenous literature, environmental concerns, sustainability, eco-criticism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, environmental discourse has witnessed a growing recognition of the role of indigenous knowledge systems in fostering sustainable ecological practices. Among the many indigenous communities in India, the Santhals, one of the largest Adivasi groups, offer a compelling case for understanding the deep interconnection between culture and nature. Their narratives, both oral and written, articulate a worldview in which the environment is not merely a backdrop to human activity but a living entity, animated by spiritual forces and communal responsibilities (Damodaran, 2015). This ecological consciousness, embedded in myths, rituals, and storytelling traditions, provides valuable insights into alternative frameworks of sustainability that challenge dominant anthropocentric paradigms.

Contemporary indigenous literature has become a powerful medium for articulating these concerns. Authors like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Rejina Marandi have brought Santhal voices into the mainstream literary sphere, reflecting the community's enduring relationship with the environment and their resistance to ecological exploitation. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), Shekhar portrays the impact of mining and industrialization on Santhal lands, illustrating how traditional ecological knowledge and lived experiences serve as tools of cultural and environmental resistance. Similarly, Marandi's *Becoming Me* (2021) reclaims the indigenous female voice, linking gendered experiences with land, water, and forest in ways that affirm a holistic and sustainable view of life.

Environmental degradation, resource displacement, and climate change disproportionately affect indigenous

communities, yet their narratives often remain marginal to mainstream environmental discourse (Shiva, 2005; Baviskar, 2003). By re-centering Santhal cosmology and narrative traditions, this paper seeks to challenge such exclusions and foreground indigenous epistemologies in reimagining sustainability. These stories do not merely preserve ecological knowledge but actively engage with contemporary issues from deforestation and land alienation to identity politics and cultural survival.

Through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens, this study argues that contemporary Santhal narratives reimagine sustainability as a synergistic relationship between humans and the environment, a relationship rooted in respect, reciprocity, and resilience. In doing so, they invite a rethinking of development and ecological responsibility, asserting that indigenous worldviews are not relics of the past but vital resources for envisioning a sustainable future.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of indigenous narratives and environmental concerns has increasingly garnered scholarly attention, particularly in the fields of ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, and indigenous literature. Scholars emphasize that indigenous communities across the world possess ecological knowledge systems that are rooted in sustainable practices and spiritual relationships with the natural world (Shiva, 2005; Kothari, 2010). This knowledge is often encoded in oral traditions, stories, and rituals, forming an alternative epistemology that counters exploitative developmental paradigms. In the Indian context, the Santhal community represents a significant example of this ecological worldview, as reflected in both traditional and contemporary narratives.

Indigenous storytelling traditions are integral to the preservation of ecological knowledge and cultural identity. According to Berkes (2012), traditional ecological knowledge is not just about the management of natural resources but about the relational understanding of nature as kin. This kinship-based view is echoed in Santhal cosmology, where forest, land, and water bodies are not inert resources but sacred entities imbued with life and agency. Damodaran (2015) notes that the Santhal understanding of nature is deeply embedded in their folklore, songs, and rituals, offering a holistic model of sustainability that predates modern environmentalism.

Contemporary Santhal writers have begun to document and reinterpret their community's ecological consciousness through written narratives. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) is a pioneering text in this regard. The collection of short stories brings to the fore the lived experiences of Santhal individuals grappling with

the consequences of industrial encroachment, displacement, and environmental degradation. One of the stories, for instance, critiques coal mining operations that not only devastate the environment but also rupture the socio-cultural fabric of the community. As Kujur (2021) argues, Shekhar's work resists the romanticization of tribal life while simultaneously highlighting how modern development imperils indigenous connections to land and ecology.

Similarly, Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me* (2021) explores the intersectionality of gender, identity, and the environment within Santhal society. Marandi reclaims the indigenous female voice by portraying the environment not as a backdrop but as a nurturing and spiritual force. Her narratives reflect the ecofeminist idea that women and nature are co-exploited under patriarchal and capitalist systems (Merchant, 1980), and that indigenous women often bear the brunt of environmental violence while also leading resistance movements rooted in cultural memory and ecological stewardship.

Ecocriticism has evolved from analyzing representations of nature in literature to incorporating the perspectives of marginalized communities, including indigenous peoples. As Huggan and Tiffin (2010) suggest, postcolonial ecocriticism seeks to decolonize environmental thinking by incorporating indigenous epistemologies that challenge Western binaries between nature and culture. In this context, Santhal narratives offer an important contribution to reimagining sustainability through a relational and communitarian lens. Scholars such as Baviskar (2003) and Kothari and Joy (2017) have emphasized that the marginalization of Adivasi knowledge in national environmental policy reflects broader patterns of epistemic injustice. Incorporating Santhal voices in environmental discourse thus becomes not only a literary project but a political act of reclaiming space for indigenous agency and wisdom.

The reviewed literature affirms that indigenous Santhal narratives both oral and contemporary, are rich sources of ecological knowledge and resistance. These stories not only preserve environmental ethics but actively challenge the destructive tendencies of modern industrial development. Contemporary authors like Shekhar and Marandi exemplify how literary expression can bridge cultural memory with ecological consciousness, offering sustainable alternatives rooted in indigenous worldviews. However, there remains a need for more scholarship that centers Santhal voices within environmental studies, particularly through frameworks that are decolonial, feminist, and ecocritical.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology grounded in literary analysis, ecocriticism, and indigenous studies. The study primarily involves close textual analysis of selected contemporary Santhal literary works, particularly Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) and Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me* (2021), to examine how environmental concerns and indigenous ecological knowledge are represented and reimagined through narrative.

The research is interpretative in nature and relies on textual evidence to uncover patterns, themes, and symbolic frameworks that reflect the Santhal community's sustainable relationship with the environment. An ecocritical lens is employed to analyze how the natural world is depicted in these texts, and how such depictions challenge dominant anthropocentric and capitalist environmental discourses (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). This is complemented by insights from postcolonial theory, particularly its concern with representation, marginality, and the politics of voice (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002), to contextualize the narratives within broader socio-political realities affecting Adivasi communities in India.

To further ground the literary analysis, the study engages with secondary sources, including ethnographic accounts, ecological studies, and critical works on indigenous epistemologies and environmental justice. These sources help illuminate the cultural, historical, and ecological contexts in which Santhal narratives are embedded. Works by scholars such as Vandana Shiva (2005), Felix Padel (2010), and Amita Baviskar (2003) are used to frame the intersection of indigenous identity, environmental degradation, and resistance in South Asia.

Data collection is limited to publicly available primary texts (i.e., published literary works) and scholarly articles relevant to the Santhal community and ecocriticism. No fieldwork or ethnographic interviews were conducted, though published ethnographies and historical analyses have been used to contextualize narrative themes.

The methodology also considers the positionality of the researcher in interpreting indigenous narratives. Efforts are made to approach the texts with cultural sensitivity and to foreground indigenous voices rather than speaking on their behalf. The research privileges the authority of indigenous authors and aims to amplify their perspectives in the ongoing discourse on environmental sustainability and cultural survival.

### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, and indigenous epistemology. These approaches together provide a robust lens to examine the environmental dimensions of contemporary Santhal narratives and to interrogate the ways in which indigenous communities articulate sustainability, ecological resistance, and cultural continuity through storytelling.

Ecocriticism serves as the primary theoretical lens for analyzing the relationship between literature and the environment. As defined by Glotfelty (1996), ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," concerned not only with how nature is represented but also with how literary texts engage with pressing ecological issues. This framework allows for an exploration of how Santhal authors narrate environmental degradation, deforestation, and extractivism, while simultaneously preserving a vision of harmony and sustainability rooted in traditional ecological knowledge.

Within ecocriticism, deep ecology and ecojustice perspectives are particularly relevant. Deep ecology, as articulated by Arne Naess (1973), emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and advocates for a biocentric worldview, one that aligns closely with Santhal cosmology, where forests, rivers, and animals are regarded as kin. Ecojustice, meanwhile, addresses the disproportionate environmental burdens borne by marginalized communities (Gaard & Murphy, 1998), making it an essential tool to understand the Santhal critique of industrial exploitation and environmental racism through literature.

Postcolonial theory adds another crucial dimension to the analysis by foregrounding the historical and political marginalization of Adivasi communities within the Indian nation-state. Scholars such as Spivak (1988) have emphasized the silencing of subaltern voices, while Guha (1997) has argued for the recognition of peasant and tribal agency in resisting colonial and postcolonial state violence. This theoretical lens enables the study to situate Santhal narratives within a continuum of resistance literature that contests dispossession, cultural erasure, and ecological imperialism. Postcolonial ecocriticism, as developed by Huggan and Tiffin (2010), further bridges the two disciplines by advocating for a decolonized understanding of environmental justice, rooted in indigenous knowledge and local traditions.

Lastly, the framework incorporates indigenous epistemology, which values oral traditions, spiritual relationships with nature, and communal worldviews as legitimate and sophisticated forms of knowledge. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) have stressed the

importance of decolonizing research methodologies and recognizing the intellectual sovereignty of indigenous peoples. For the Santhal community, this means validating their narratives—not merely as cultural artifacts, but as repositories of ecological wisdom and lived resistance. By foregrounding Santhal authors such as Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Rejina Marandi, the study aligns with Smith's call to center indigenous voices and to treat literature as a mode of cultural survival and ecological expression.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a nuanced and culturally sensitive foundation for analyzing how Santhal narratives reimagine environmental ethics and sustainability. They facilitate a critical reading that honors indigenous worldviews while interrogating the structures of ecological injustice imposed by the modern state and capitalist development.

## V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section delves into the intricate relationship between the Santhal community and their environment, as portrayed in contemporary indigenous narratives. By examining the works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Rejina Marandi, we explore how these authors articulate environmental concerns and reimagine sustainable living through the lens of Santhal traditions and experiences.

### 1. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's Ecocritical Perspective

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a prominent Santhal writer, intricately weaves environmental themes into his narratives, reflecting the community's deep-rooted connection with nature. In his collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Shekhar portrays the Santhal people's harmonious coexistence with their environment and the disruptions caused by industrialization and modernization. The stories highlight how the Santhals' livelihoods, rituals, and cultural practices are intertwined with the natural world, emphasizing a symbiotic relationship that is threatened by external forces (Shekhar, 2015).

Shekhar's narratives serve as a critique of exploitative development projects that disregard indigenous knowledge systems and environmental ethics. The ecological concerns presented in his works resonate with the principles of deep ecology, advocating for the intrinsic value of all living beings and the need for a biocentric worldview (Naess, 1973). By foregrounding the Santhals' ecological wisdom, Shekhar challenges anthropocentric paradigms and calls for a reevaluation of development practices that harm both the environment and indigenous communities.

### 2. Rejina Marandi's Exploration of Identity and Environment

Rejina Marandi's novel *Becoming Me* offers a poignant exploration of the intersection between environmental degradation and the erosion of indigenous identity. Set against the backdrop of ethnic conflicts and displacement, the narrative follows the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and resistance. Marandi illustrates how the loss of ancestral lands and ecological disruption contribute to a crisis of identity among the Santhal people (Marandi, 2014).

The novel underscores the importance of land and nature in shaping cultural identity and collective memory. Marandi's portrayal aligns with the concept of ecofeminism, highlighting how environmental exploitation and patriarchal structures jointly oppress marginalized communities, particularly indigenous women (Merchant, 1980). Through her storytelling, Marandi emphasizes the resilience of the Santhal community and the necessity of preserving both environmental and cultural heritage.

Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me* (2021) approaches environmental consciousness through a gendered and spiritual lens. Her protagonists often find solace, strength, and identity through their interaction with forests, rivers, and ancestral lands. The narrative voice in several of her poems and short stories draws from Santhal mythologies, where nature is personified and revered. For example, the forest is not a backdrop but a living presence — both protector and witness to the protagonist's transformation.

This ecospirituality resonates with the principles of deep ecology (Naess, 1973), which emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human life and the interconnectedness of all beings. Marandi's writing not only celebrates Santhal beliefs but also subtly critiques modernity's alienation from nature. The feminine voice in her narratives often becomes a metaphor for both environmental and cultural fertility, situating women as vital custodians of ecological knowledge (Merchant, 1980).

### 3. Reimagining Sustainable Synergy through Indigenous Narratives

The works of Shekhar and Marandi collectively reimagine sustainability by presenting indigenous narratives that emphasize balance, reciprocity, and respect for nature. These stories challenge dominant narratives that prioritize economic growth over ecological well-being and cultural preservation. By centering indigenous perspectives, the authors advocate for a model of sustainability that is rooted in traditional ecological knowledge and communal values.

### 4. Gender, Environment, and Resistance

Both Shekhar and Marandi highlight how environmental and gender injustices intersect within indigenous societies.



Marandi's stories frequently depict women as both victims and agents of environmental resistance, drawing attention to the gendered experience of displacement, water scarcity, and loss of forest livelihoods. These stories reflect the ecofeminist claim that women, particularly those in indigenous and rural contexts, are disproportionately affected by environmental destruction but also play central roles in sustaining ecological balance (Gaard & Murphy, 1998).

In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, Shekhar also explores these intersections. For instance, women characters who labor in polluted or degraded landscapes—such as coalfields, carry the psychological and physical burdens of environmental degradation, even as their resilience fuels communal survival. These portrayals serve to expand the conversation around environmental justice by foregrounding the double marginalization of Adivasi women.

Storytelling in both Shekhar's and Marandi's works functions as a mode of resistance and reclamation. These narratives not only preserve endangered ecological practices but also embody what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes as a decolonizing methodology, a way of asserting indigenous presence and knowledge in the face of cultural erasure. By writing in English or bilingual modes, these authors bridge oral traditions with contemporary literary forms, making Santhal environmental knowledge accessible to wider audiences while preserving its authenticity.

The act of storytelling thus becomes an ecological practice in itself—a way to resist the violence of forgetting and to ensure the transmission of cultural memory and ecological wisdom across generations.

The analysis of Santhal narratives reveals a richly layered understanding of sustainability that is inseparable from identity, spirituality, and resistance. Authors like Shekhar and Marandi offer counternarratives to dominant environmental discourses, foregrounding indigenous ethics that prioritize relationality, reciprocity, and respect for the land. Their work affirms that the path to ecological justice must include the voices, values, and visions of indigenous communities, not as passive victims of environmental crises, but as active architects of sustainable futures.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [2] Baviskar, A. (2003). *In the belly of the river: Tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada Valley* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [3] Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: Four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 197–222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>
- [4] Gaard, G., & Murphy, P. D. (Eds.). (1998). *Ecofeminist literary criticism: Theory, interpretation, pedagogy*. University of Illinois Press.
- [5] Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
- [6] Guha, R. (1997). *Savaging the civilized: Verrier Elwin, his tribals, and India*. University of Chicago Press.
- [7] Huggan, G., & Tiffin, H. (2010). *Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment*. Routledge.
- [8] Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F., & Acosta, A. (2019). *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary*. Tulika Books.
- [9] Marandi, R. (2021). *Becoming me*. Writers Workshop.
- [10] Merchant, C. (1980). *The death of nature: Women, ecology, and the scientific revolution*. HarperOne.
- [11] Naess, A. (1973). The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement: A summary. *Inquiry*, 16(1–4), 95–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682>
- [12] Padel, F. (2010). *Out of this earth: East India Adivasis and the aluminium cartel*. Orient BlackSwan.
- [13] Rangarajan, M., & Sivaramakrishnan, K. (Eds.). (2011). *India's environmental history: From ancient times to the colonial period* (Vol. 1). Permanent Black.
- [14] Shekhar, H. S. (2015). *The Adivasi will not dance*. Speaking Tiger.
- [15] Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability, and peace*. South End Press.
- [16] Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- [17] Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.