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Ecology, Memory, and Resistance: An Ecocritical Study of Mahadev Toppo's Adivasi Poetry

Laxmi Chanda
Research Scholar, Department of English, Samrat Prithviraj Chauhan Government College, Ajmer, (Rajasthan)

Abstract

Mahadev Toppo's Jangal Pahad Ke Paath (2017), subsequently translated into English as Lessons from Forest and Mountain (2020) by Santosh Kumar Sonker, is not simply poetry. It is lived history, ancestral wisdom, and a quiet act of rebellion. Based on the Oraon community of Jharkhand, Toppo's verses do not present rivers, forests, and mountains as poetic topographies but as teachers, guardians, and family — witnesses to history. His poetry shows how Adivasi culture preserves nature in thought, word, and song but point towards the violence of mining, machinery, and so-called development advancement. His poetry is politically incisive- it reveals the wounds caused by mining, industrializastion, and development policy's slow violence which dispossesses Adivasi people of their land. The present paper reads Toppo's collection ecocritically, but in a manner that keeps indigenous epistemologies at its center. The reading shows how Toppo is beyond ecocritical designations like wilderness or pastoral, and is rather an example of an Adivasi cosmology where ecology and culture are inseparable. The present study demonstrates how Jangal Pahad Ke Paath functions as cultural archive, ecological manifesto, and political testimony simultaneously. Based on ecocriticism and indigenous epistemology, the article translates his work as both archive and manifesto. Cultural survival and ecological justice are intertwined here. Finally, it argues that indigenous voices like Toppo's are essential for envisioning more equitable and sustainable futures for all of humankind.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Adivasi Literature, Mahadev Toppo, Jharkhand, Indigenous Epistemology, Environmental Justice, Sustainability*

Introduction

Each forest has tales. Each river contains recollection. Each mountain preserves murmurs. In Mahadev Toppo's poetry, these voices are not metaphors but animating presences of speaking, breathing, warning and instructing. In the past thirty years, ecocriticism has become a major literary undertaking. It began as an attempt to find out how literature describes the natural world, but soon developed into moral and political debates about environment, justice, and survival. Academics like Greg Garrard describe it as simply "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," but ecocriticism in action has turned out to be much more complicated. Today, it deals with climate change, displacement, violence by industry, and the wisdom of indigenous culture.

For decades in Indian literature, nature has been romanticized used as the backdrop of romance, religious imagery, or patriotic feeling. But Adivasi literature disrupts this habit. To tribal authors, the forest is not a metaphor. It is home. Alive. A character. A witness. In their songs and stories, the forest is not a passive presence—it is blood, breath, and family. It feeds, houses, heals, and

remembers. The Adivasi worldview does not view nature as an "other"; instead, it sees rivers, hills, and trees as members of the family of life.

This distinction is important. Because it means when an Adivasi poet such as Mahadev Toppo writes of the felling of trees, he is not recounting landscape transformation. He is recounting personal loss. Cultural loss. An injury to memory itself.

Toppo (b. 1954, Ranchi) is an Oraon poet whose *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* (2017) and its English translation *Lessons from Forest and Mountain* (2020) collect forty-four poems that reflect this profound entwining of ecology with identity, memory, and resistance. They talk of rivers, of trees, of ancestors. Of cutting machines. Of memory that will not be cut. He writes simply but the lines resonate. His life and work spring out of the same landscapes his poems are about forests being squeezed, rivers polluted by mining, villages displaced by development projects.

"The forest is my school, the mountain my scripture, the river my unending lesson." The language is uncomplicated. Almost chatty. But embedded in it is a revolutionary epistemology a whole epistemology of knowing the world. Here, education is not from books or schools but from hearing rivers, forests, and mountains. This is not figure of speech; this is Adivasi pedagogy.

This study has *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* as its core and interprets it using the perspective of ecocriticism. The objective is to observe how Toppo's poems have a double burden: they retain tribal memory as well as serve as acute criticisms of industrialization and ecological exploitation. In this way, the essay situates Toppo in both Indian Adivasi literary canons and environmental humanities' broader debate. The argument unrolls through a gradual braid: initially by placing ecocriticism on the global and Indian map; subsequently by considering how Adivasi literature creates unique ecological realities; then by immersing Toppo's poems in turn, listening to their tales, their sorrow, their protest; and lastly, by considering what can be learned from these voices toward a planet careening toward ecological catastrophe.

Literature Review: Ecocriticism from Global Origins to Adivasi Voices

Ecocriticism began in the 1990s, first in American academies, with early publications like *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996) asking fundamental questions: how does nature get figured in literature, and what do readers learn about human relations with the environment? The focus was initially on pastoral verse, wilderness tales by authors like Thoreau and Muir, and apocalyptic visions of ecological disaster. Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism*, lines up the field around tropes of pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and earth. But these first books tended to address nature as something outside something humans look on, idealize, or fear seldom inquiring what if the forest itself does the talking, or the river is ancestor, not setting.

By the 2000s, ecocriticism was turning its attention to environmental justice: how ecological harm harms disproportionately the marginalized, native peoples, and the poor. This movement paved the way for postcolonial ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and indigenous ecologies to come into mainstream discourse. Literature was no longer only a mirror of nature but also of uneven ecological relations. It is into this world current that Mahadev Toppo's writing runs. His poems, however, do not easily fit Western forms of wilderness, pastoral, or apocalypse; they speak an Adivasi cosmology wherein forests, rivers, and mountains are kin-related.

India evolved its own ecological thinking in tandem. Chipko movement during the 1970s and writings by Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil associated ecology with social equity. Guha's *The Unquiet Woods* (1990) chronicles Himalayan peasant movements against forest exploitation, and Gadgil and Guha's *Ecology and Equity* (1993) documents how environmental conflicts overlap with class and caste. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1988) countered that development through capitalist and patriarchal rationalities what she calls "maldevelopment" undermines ecological and social survival, highlighting the sustainability inherent in indigenous and wom-

en's practices. Indian ecocriticism therefore typically engages with survival, displacement, and justice, and not aestheticized landscapes. Scholarly work has tended to be concentrated on the dominant literature, however, leaving Adivasi voices underrepresented against the backdrop of their close association with lands most endangered by mining, dams, and industrialization.

Adivasi literature reflects a unique ecological grammar. In cultures such as that of the Oraons to which Toppo belongs, forest is nourishment, river is remembrance, and tree is bearer of ancestoral tales. Oral culture song, myth, and narrative commemorates ecological knowledge, connecting seasonal cycles, cultivation rhythms, and spiritual disciplines. Nature is never just a resource; its destruction amounts to violation of kinship. But this epistemology has been under sustained pressure. Jharkhand's forests and mineral resources have been targets of extraction, displacement, and industrialization for centuries. Villages were destroyed, rivers were polluted, and forests were cut, all under the guise of "development."

It is against this that Mahadev Toppo writes. His poetry remembers and resists at the same time: uncomplicated language encapsulates intricate ecological and cultural ethics. The forest speaks, the mountains remember, and the rivers flow with history in his work. Adivasi writing tests ecocriticism to stretch, to demonstrate that ecological and human worlds cannot be separated. Rivers become educators, mountains scriptures, forests classrooms—not as tropes, but as realities of being. By making Toppo the axis, ecocriticism itself is forced to hear indigenous epistemologies, oral culture, and those who dwell at the forefront of ecological disaster. It is only then that we can imagine a global and equitable environmental humanities.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on:

Ecocriticism (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Garrard, 2004)—for methods of reading nature's representation, agency, and ethical resonance in literature.

Environmental justice/postcolonial ecocriticism—to analyze how exploitation and dispossession are bound up with industrial and colonial practices (Guha & Gadgil, 1993).

Indigenous epistemology—privileging oral knowledge systems, kinship with land, and the pedagogical role of non-human beings.

These combined approaches allow the text to be read both as literature and as cultural testimony.

Methodology

A close textual and thematic reading of *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* (and Sonker's translation *Lessons from Forest and Mountain*) serves as the primary method. The paper reads poems as archives and ethical statements, attending to imagery, diction, metaphors, and orality. Secondary sources include critical works in ecocriticism, Indian environmental studies, and literature on tribal cultures (listed in the references). The reading is interpretative, descriptive, and comparative where relevant (e.g., with global indigenous voices).

Adivasi Ecological Grammar: Place, Memory, and Kinship

In Adivasi cosmologies (as represented by the Oraon worldview), place is not inert: forests, rivers, and hills are integral to memory and identity. Oral culture songs, myths, rituals encodes ecological knowledge: seasonal calendars, medicinal plants, and moral obligations towards the land. Unlike romanticized wilderness in much classical literature, the Adivasi relationship to nature is familial; nature teaches, remembers, and disciplines.

Jharkhand's forests and mineral wealth have been subject to extraction for centuries, producing a paradox: rich subsoil resources and poor human development indicators. It is in this terrain that Toppo writes not as a romantic but as a witness. His poems perform memory work, re-anchoring cultural identity in landscape and registering dispossession as both ecological and epistemic violence.

Ecocritical Interpretations of *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath*

Mahadev Toppo's *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* is constructed as an archive. But an archive unlike a papyrus library. Its texts are rivers, mountains, trees, and whispers of ancestors. As he writes, Toppo is not making metaphors; he is writing down voices that already reside in his land and community. His poems can be read through several ecocritical perspectives, as an archive, a political testimony, and an ecological manifesto. Below, the analysis is organized into key thematic sections.

Nature as Ancestor and Teacher: Among the strongest tides running through the collection is the idea of nature as teacher. Early on in the book, Toppo proclaims:

"The forest is my school,

the mountain my scripture,

the river my unending lesson."

This is not a throwaway line. It deposes the knowledge hierarchy that privileges written words over spoken ones, classrooms over lived experience, human teachers over environmental ones. In Toppo's universe, a tree shows patience. A river shows continuity. A mountain shows endurance.

Nature is personified, centring non-human agency and decentering the human subject a claim resonant with ecocritical calls to "decenter the human" (Garrard, 2004). In Toppo's universe, walking in the woods is a step into ancestral memory: "The echo of the mountain is the song of my ancestor, borne on the wind, awaiting hearing." Landscapes thus function as living archives; damaging them amounts to erasing memory.

Toppo frequently places nature not only as teacher, but also as ancestor. In one of his poems, he writes:

"The echo of the mountain is the song of my ancestor,

borne on the wind,

awaiting hearing."

Here, landscape is memory. To walk in the woods is to walk with ancestors. To ascend a hill is to hear the voices of ancestors. Ecocritically, this is memory ecology landscapes are stories, and stories are landscapes.

For Adivasis such as the Oraons, this is not poetic imagery. This is cosmology. Ancestral spirits inhabit groves, rivers, and rocks. Sacred places are frequently associated with ecological landmarks sal trees, hills, water bodies. When these are ruined, it is not just environmental destruction. It is erasure of ancestors.

This is where Toppo's poetry breaks away from Indian romanticism as a whole. Where Wordsworth would celebrate a mountain because of its sublimity, Toppo hears it as kith.

Industrialisation as Ecological Violence: If forests are schools, then machines are intruders. Toppo's verses have biting critiques of industrialization and its devastation of environmental balance. One poem starts with the ominous lines:

"Machines entered the forest,

and the silence of birds was broken.

The trees fell,

the streams ran dry with sorrow."

Observe the action here: machine → silence broken → trees fall → rivers mourn. It is a chain of violence, documented nearly in the form of a witness account. And it is strongly ecological as well illustrating how one invasion upsets the whole system of living. The poetry gives witness to the "slow violence" described by Nixon (2011) incremental, often invisible harms inflicted upon marginalized landscapes and peoples.

Jharkhand, from where Toppo writes, is one of the wealthiest states in India as far as minerals-coal, iron ore, bauxite are concerned. But one of the poorest regarding human development. The irony is because mining has made corporations rich by displacing Adivasi tribes. Steel factories have razed villages. Rivers have been befouled with coal dust. Forests cut down for dams.

Toppo's poetry is a testament to this lived experience. His deceptively simple words machines, silence, sorrow gathers together decades of violence. Vandana Shiva calls such development "ecological apartheid," whereby the benefits ac-

crue to the powerful and the ecological costs are faced by the marginalised. Toppo inscribes apartheid into his poetry, but he does so jargon-free only the silence of birds, the sorrow of rivers.

In another poem, he documents the memory of displacement:

"The land was sold,
though no one agreed to sell.
The forest vanished,
though no one agreed to cut.
We were asked to move,
but no one agreed to leave."

This abrupt listing is a mirror of the bureaucratic ferocity brutality of land-taking. People are told to vacate, but their approval is never requested. Trees are cut down, but the forest never consented. By personifying land and forest as unwilling actors, Toppo points towards the moral vacuum of industrial initiatives.

Such poems are in direct alignment with the environmental justice turn in ecocriticism. They show how ecological violence is intertwined with social and cultural violence. To annihilate a forest in Jharkhand is to annihilate Adivasi worlds of life, kinship arrangements, and memories of the past.

Community, Commons, and Sustainability: In opposition to the violence of machines, Toppo repeatedly goes back to the ethic of community and sharing. In one of his poems, he states:

"The forest is not mine alone,
it belongs to the village,
to the as-yet-unborn,
to the forgotten ancestor."

This is an ethic of sustainability based on intergenerational responsibility. Nature does not belong to this one, but to all including those as-yet-unborn and those already departed. The forest becomes a common through time.

Such concepts resonate with what Gadgil and Guha describe as "ecological prudence" (1993). Adivasi societies have for centuries engaged in collective forest management gathering only what is necessary, saving sacred groves, forbearing taboo on seasons of hunting. It is not nostalgia; it is prudential ecological stewardship. Toppo's poetry maintains that ethic alive, transmuting it into poetry.

The collective voice in these poems also resists capitalist control. By stating "the forest is not mine alone," he is by implication rejecting regimes of private property that enable corporations to "own" and exploit the land. Instead, he affirms a world where land and forest belong to community, ancestors, and descendants in equal measure.

This reciprocity ethic speaks to people around the world across indigenous cultures. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) idea of looking seven generations ahead before taking action is reflected here in Toppo's appeal to the unborn child. Sustainability is not new it has been a part of Adivasi worldviews for centuries.

Language, Imagery, and Ecological Conciousness: One reason Toppo's poetry is so strong is its language. He writes in plain, straightforward words, but they are rich. For instance:

"The river holds our memory,
bearing it to the ocean of tomorrow."

Here, the river acts as archivist. It does not flow merely physically; it carries cultural memory through time. In a further poem, he notices:

"The forest breathes in silence,
teaching us patience."

The imagery brings ecological systems to life. The forest is not lifeless stuff; it breathes, it teaches, and it waits. Such language encourages readers to rethink their relationship with nature not as user and resource, but student and teacher.

Toppo's imagery challenges anthropocentrism too. By granting subjectivity to rivers, forests, and mountains, he undermines the human-centered worldview that prevails in modern literature. His poems are a paradigm for ecocriticism's demand to recast agency and voice in ecological narratives.

Simultaneously, his own language bears oral connotations. The use of repetition, rhythm, and sim-

plicity invokes the forms of folk songs and oral traditions. This orality makes his poems available yet situates them within community traditions. His poetry, in this context, becomes more than individual expression but carryover of collective oral traditions.

Indigenous Knowledge and Healing: There is one of the most striking lines in the collection which states:

"Wounding the forest is wounding us,

Healing the forest is healing our soul."

This is environmental philosophy in two lines. It reflects the indivisibility of nature and human in Adivasi philosophy. Spiritual health is ecological health. Ecological survival is survival of culture.

These feelings chime with Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist appeal for reciprocity, healing communities by healing the earth. They also echo G. N. Devy's insistence on the preservation of tribal epistemologies as a counterpoint to exploitative modernity.

For Toppo, the very process of writing heals. In encoding these voices in poems, he records and remends. His poetry is not merely complaint; it is a summons to recall, to hear, to recall. It reminds us that answers to ecological crisis might not be solely found in technology or policy, but in attending to indigenous knowledge systems.

Beyond Jharkhand: Comparative Resonances: While born in the Jharkhand forests, Toppo's voice is heard by other indigenous poets across the world. Take Native American poet Joy Harjo, who frequently describes rivers and ancestors in remarkably similar language to Toppo's stream and mountain imagery. Maori authors in New Zealand refer to rivers and land as living family members, rather than resources an attitude now mirrored in legal personhood recognitions of rivers.

By putting Toppo in this comparative context, we understand how Adivasi literature is adding to a global indigenous ecocriticism. His poems remind us that ecological knowledge is not monolithic but heterogeneous, local, and embedded. But the concerns—kinship with nature, challenge to industrial violence, ethic of sustainability are resonating across continents.

Findings and Discussion

From the readings above, several findings emerge:

Adivasi epistemology collapses the nature-culture divide. Toppo's poetry demonstrates that for Adivasi communities ecology is a mode of being, pedagogy, and history.

Poetry is a form of political testimony. Toppo's plain diction renders ecological injustice visible: machines, silence, displacement these recurring motifs show dispossession as both physical and mnemonic.

Orality and written poetry cohere to preserve knowledge. By encoding oral rhythms in written form, Toppo ensures intergenerational transmission and expands readership beyond local communities.

Toppo's verse challenges mainstream ecocriticism. His poetry suggests that Western categories (wilderness, pastoral) are insufficient; ecocriticism must attend to indigenous cosmologies and kin-based ontologies.

The poems suggest praxis. They are not merely descriptive; they call for protection, community stewardship, and remembrance as ways to mitigate ecological crisis.

Conclusion

Mahadev Toppo's *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* is not just a collection of poems it is a survival kit. It instructs us on how to coexist with the forests, rivers, and mountains not as consumable resources, but as kin to be nurtured. It is laced with memory, charged with resistance, and can heal.

This study set out to examine *Mahadev Toppo's Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* through the lens of ecocriticism, focusing on how his poetry transforms tribal worldviews into a language of ecological consciousness and cultural resistance. The analysis reveals that Toppo's work goes beyond literary expression it is an act of reclamation and environmental ethics rooted in Adivasi epistemology.

Through his depiction of forests, rivers, and mountains as sentient and instructive beings, Toppo reconstructs an indigenous cosmology that resists the anthropocentric and exploitative ethos of industrial modernity. His verse redefines education, positioning the natural world as teacher and healer rather than resource. The poems also expose the socio-ecological violence of mining, deforestation, and displacement, turning ecological degradation into moral indictment and testimony of survival.

At the same time, *Jangal Pahad Ke Paath* restores the collective ethic of sustainability embedded in Adivasi communities an ethic of sharing, restraint, and intergenerational responsibility. In doing so, Toppo bridges the gap between literature and activism, between ecological awareness and social justice. His voice aligns local tribal wisdom with global ecological movements, revealing that indigenous worldviews hold vital answers to planetary crises.

In synthesis, the research concludes that Mahadev Toppo's poetry is significant for three reasons—

Ecological Ethics: It offers an indigenous framework for environmental consciousness rooted in kinship and reciprocity, Cultural Resistance: It reclaims Adivasi identity from literary marginalization and repositions it as central to sustainable thought & Critical Intervention: It expands the scope of ecocriticism by insisting that environmental crisis is inseparable from questions of justice, identity, and belonging.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that reading Adivasi poetry ecocritically is not merely an academic exercise but an ethical necessity. Toppo's work invites readers to reimagine the world as an interconnected living system a world where, as he writes, *"to hurt the forest is to hurt us; to heal the forest is to heal our soul."*

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