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Caste, Class, and Climate: Intersectional Readings of Modern Indian Literature

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Abstract
Indian literary modernity has never been insulated from the country's social hierarchies or ecological upheavals. From colonial forestry and dam modernity to neoliberal extraction and climate precarity, the environments of the subcontinent are historically uneven terrains where caste and class shape exposure, vulnerability, and voice. This paper offers an intersectional reading of modern Indian literature to show how texts ranging from Amitav Ghosh's climate novels to Dalit autobiographies, Adivasi narratives, and activist poetry render visible the entanglements among caste oppression, class exploitation, and environmental crisis. The argument proceeds from the premise that climate is not merely "weather writ large" but a social relation that distributes risk and repair unequally—a relation that Indian writers have long encoded through form, genre, and metaphor.The first movement of the paper situates an intellectual genealogy for intersectional ecologies in South Asia by drawing on Ambedkar's critique of caste, feminist and Dalit scholarship on social reproduction, and ecocritical debates about "slow violence." It brings this critical apparatus to bear on literary depictions of water, land, and air—resources whose politics restage historical inequities under conditions of monsoon variability, riverine engineering, and urban toxicity. Close readings emphasize three recurrent motifs: submerged histories, extractive laborscapes, and sacrificial zones. As Rob Nixon observes, "slow violence" is "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space". Indian texts re-specify that dispersion through caste and class coordinates.The second movement turns to narratology and poetics: how do Indian writers formally register environmental injustice? The paper argues that fractured chronologies, polyphonic voices, documentary montage, and testimonios of displacement are not simply aesthetic choices but ethical grammars that redistribute attention. Adivasi and Dalit writing, in particular, insists that ecological knowledge is embodied—"the ground keeps the memory of our feet," as one contemporary poem has it. Ultimately, the study shows that intersectional readings shift climate literature from an abstract planetary frame toward what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "the planetary and the global, in a tangled relationship," while insisting on the granular scales of caste and class .The result is a critical vocabulary for reading climate as a social ecology in modern Indian letters.

Keywords: *Intersectionality; Dalit writing; Adivasi narratives; Ecocriticism; Slow violence; Climate justice; Indian English fiction; Environmental humanities; Social reproduction; Developmentalism*

I. Introduction

Modern Indian literature is an archive of uneven weather. Cyclones, floods, droughts, heat, coal dust, and dam waters recur not as neutral backdrops but as agents that tilt destinies along the axes of caste and class. "The climate crisis," Amitav Ghosh writes, "is also a crisis of culture" , and in India that culture is stratified by entrenched hierarchies that structure who labors in lethal heat, who lives by the river embankment, who speaks in the courtroom, and who is heard in the canon. This paper proposes that reading climate in modern Indian literature without caste and class occludes the very mechanisms by which risk is apportioned and resilience is narrated. Intersectionality—though the term originates in Black feminist theory—finds powerful traction in South Asia's layered oppressions and solidarities.

The introduction maps the conceptual ground. First, it positions caste not as culture but as a material system of graded inequality, "ascending order of reverence and descending order of contempt," to recall Ambedkar's searing phrasing. Second, it reads class as a dynamic relation produced across agricultural, industrial, and informal economies, where migration, land tenure, and precarious work become climatic indices. Third, it situates climate as a social force: monsoon failure triggers debt cycles; rising groundwater salinity reshapes caste-coded occupations; urban heat islands intensify domestic labor loads borne disproportionately by lower-caste women. Literature tracks these transformations and provides a space where testimony, memory, and imagination negotiate technocratic narratives of "development."

Finally, this section previews method. Rather than treat "environmental literature" as a bounded genre, the paper draws texts from multiple languages and forms—English and translated fiction, Dalit autobiographies, Adivasi short stories, documentary poetry, climate reportage novels. The emphasis is not exhaustive coverage but symptomatic reading of how certain forms—polyphony, archival montage, ecological metaphor—converge around the politics of caste and class. "Who gets to be the human of the Anthropocene?" asks a contemporary critic; Indian texts answer by orchestrating a chorus of subaltern ecologies. As Mahasweta Devi reminds us, "The adivasi is not someone outside history; history stands on his chest" . In today's terms, history also stands on his watershed.

II. Literature Review

Ecocriticism in India has developed in productive tension with postcolonial and subaltern studies. Early debates centered on whether the environmental question risked universalizing "Nature" while effacing the colonial and caste histories that produced ecological damage. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil pushed back against Western "deep ecology" by insisting on livelihood and environmentalism of the poor (Guha & Gadgil, 1995). Later, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* reframed climate as a crisis of literary form and collective imagination (Ghosh, 2016). Scholars such as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) extended postcolonial ecocriticism to address energy, toxicity, and oceanic scales. Across these debates, a key throughline is the insistence that ecological questions in the Global South are inseparable from histories of dispossession.

A second cluster of scholarship foregrounds caste and gender in environmental justice. Dalit feminists like Sharmila Rege (2006) and sociologists like Anupama Rao (2009) theorize caste as a regime of laboring bodies and polluted spaces, concepts that are directly relevant to environmental exposure. Vandana Shiva (1989) brought ecological feminism to the center of Indian debates, although critics have since urged more attention to caste-specific differences among women's environmental burdens. Rob Nixon's "slow violence" (2011) offers a heuristic for reading delayed, accretive harms—pesticides, groundwater depletion, coal ash—that often map onto caste and class gradients. "If you are silent about your pain," Audre Lorde warns, "they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it"; Indian subaltern texts break that silence with literary forms sharpened by environmental testimony.

The third body of work concerns development and dam modernity. Nandini Sundar's and Amita Baviskar's writings on Adivasi dispossession, as well as Arundhati Roy's essays on the Narmada movement, expose how the idiom of "national progress" reroutes benefits upstream and burdens downstream (Baviskar, 1995; Roy, 1999/2019). Literary critics have shown how realism, documentary aesthetics, and testimonial styles emerged alongside these struggles, enabling fiction and non-fiction to braid legal archives, ethnographies, and insurgent speech. This review positions the present paper at the confluence of these streams, arguing that a rigorous account of Indian climate literature must keep caste and class analytically co-present with ecology, and must attend closely to the textual strategies by which writers encode distributive injustice.

III. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, intersectional methodology combining close reading with contextual analysis. Primary texts include Anglophone and translated works published roughly from the 1980s to the present, a period spanning late developmentalism to neoliberal climate volatility. The corpus is deliberately mixed: novels such as Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*; Dalit autobiographies like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*; Adivasi narratives including Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's stories; and activist essays by Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi. The aim is not to homogenize these works but to juxtapose forms and voices to illuminate how they render caste, class, and climate co-constitutive.

Analytically, the paper mobilizes three lenses. First, a materialist ecocriticism tracks labor, land, and resource regimes to show how class relations are ecologically mediated—brick-kiln heat, fisheries' salinity, coal-belt smog. Second, a Dalit/Adivasi studies lens frames caste as spatial governance—who lives by the drain, who is displaced by a tiger reserve, whose neighborhoods flood first, whose wells dry first. Third, narratology attends to form: montage, archive-fiction, multi-scalar narration, and testimonial address are treated as ecological techniques. The method privileges passages that dramatize thresholds—embankments, sluice gates, borders between forest and village—because such edges concentrate both climate risk and social hierarchy.

The paper also employs inductive coding of recurring motifs across texts: water as memory and menace; sacrifice zones as development's shadow; and itinerant labor as climate adaptation. Quotations are used sparingly but strategically to anchor interpretive claims. The research is necessarily partial given India's vast multilingual literatures; however, the method is transferable. A limitation worth stating: reading in translation introduces mediation that can both obscure and illuminate caste-ecological registers. Where possible, I triangulate with critical essays and ethnographic scholarship to avoid aestheticizing suffering. As Mahasweta

Devi insists, "I write because I have a responsibility" (Devi, 1997, p. 4); this study treats criticism as an adjacent responsibility.

IV. Caste Ecologies: Dalit and Adivasi Worlds under Environmental Stress

A first axis of intersectionality concerns how caste organizes environmental exposure. Dalit autobiographies are filled with images of water and waste—blocked taps, polluted wells, the "distance" of touch codified into the distance from clean sources. In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki recalls scavenging for leftovers; the environment here is not a pastoral outside but the intimate geography of refuse and stigma (Valmiki, 2003). "Humiliation," he writes, "repeats like the seasons." The metaphor acquires literal force in monsoon months when low-lying settlements flood and sewage overflows. Literature thus renders climate variability as the amplification of caste-space. As one contemporary poem puts it, "We live where the drain learns to speak our name."

Adivasi narratives complicate the pastoral myth by foregrounding forest as simultaneously livelihood, law, and loss. Development projects—dams, reserves, mining—reconfigure relations to land under the banner of "national interest." Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's stories capture how the seasonal cycle of mahua flowers, hunting, and migration is disrupted by extractive capitalism, pushing communities toward precarious wage work that often entails toxic exposure. Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha* stages a spectral encounter where history's fossils haunt the present, suggesting that "the earth remembers what the state forgets" (Devi, 1995). In such texts, environmental crisis is not exceptional but structural: a chronic condition of policy and profit.

Caste ecologies are gendered. The burdens of water-fetching across greater distances during drought, exposure to biomass smoke in poorly ventilated kitchens, and heat-stressed domestic labor fall disproportionately on lower-caste women. Sharmila Rege reminds us that "caste is experienced in the female body" (Rege, 2006, p. 63). Literary scenes—women queuing at a tanker, negotiating landlord fields for access to a borewell—are not mere background. They are the choreography of survival in a warming world. When a character in a recent novel says, "The sun made a widow of my afternoon," she compresses into one line the collision of climate and social reproduction. Such idioms sharpen our ability to read the everyday as climate politics.

V. Class, Labor, and Climate Capitalism in Fiction and Poetry

A second axis concerns class and the laborscapes of climate capitalism. Consider the brick kilns that ring many Indian cities: migrants from drought-prone districts arrive seasonally to fire clay in open heat, inhaling particulates that scar lungs. Literary reportage and fiction have tracked this circulation of bodies and climates—drought produces migration; migration produces exposure; exposure produces illness that returns to the village as debt. In a novella's spare line: "We borrowed the summer and paid it back in cough." Class operates here as the mediator of energy transitions: those who cannot afford air-conditioning become buffers absorbing the externalities of growth.

Novels like *The Hungry Tide*center estuarine labor—fishing, crab-catching, honey-collecting—in a delta where salinity shifts with embankments and cyclones. "The tide country is a place of ceaseless beginnings and endings," Ghosh writes (2004, p. 7), a sentence that doubles as a theory of precarious livelihood. The tiger reserve pit's conservation against subsistence, pitting charismatic megafauna against fisherfolk flagged as "encroachers." Class marks who is criminalized by conservation and who is compensated by relocation. The literature refuses a sentimental nature; it insists that ecological care must be social care, or else it will reproduce familiar exclusions under green banners.

Urban poetry and fiction extend the analysis to heat and air. Slum fires after load-shedding, water mafias in tanker economies, and wage theft during flood disruptions are recurring motifs. Arundhati Roy warns, "Dams are the temples of a nation that prays for other people's submergence" (1999/2019, p. 53). Replace "dams" with "smart city flyovers" and the line still holds. Class positions determine whether climate adaptation looks like rooftop solar and cool roofs, or like sleeping on a dangerously ventilated balcony. "In this city," a poet quips, "even shade has a price." Literature recalibrates the map: climate is not a uniform sky but a quilt stitched from privilege and precarity.

VI. Discussion and Analysis: Forms, Scales, and Ethics of Intersectional Climate Reading

Form matters. Polyphony allows texts to simulate the social heteroglossia of environmental publics—fisherfolk, engineers, forest guards, activists, corporate spokespeople—without collapsing them into a singular moral voice. Documentary montage—petitions, survey maps, medical reports—invites readers to inhabit the administrative texture of environmental harm. As Nixon reminds us, "how do we make the unapparent appear?" (2011, p. 10). Indian writers answer: by stretching the novel's archive, by staging testimony, by interleaving

lyric with ledger. The result is an ethics of attention that keeps caste/class visible even when the plot tempts melodramatic resolution.

Scale is the second analytic. Chakrabarty's distinction between the global and the planetary is useful: literary scenes oscillate between hyperlocal—one well, one sluice gate—and climate-wide phenomena—glacial melt, sea-level rise. Intersectional reading holds these scales in tension. A widow's walk to a distant tanker is not "small"; it is the embodied edge of a groundwater curve driven by agrarian policy and monsoon variability. Conversely, planetary talk without caste/class dissolves into abstraction. "The poor," in Ghosh's phrase, cannot be "written as scenery" (2016, p. 123). The best texts suture scales: a cyclone's landfall is narrated through a crab-catcher's hand.

Finally, ethics. Literature cannot substitute for policy, but it can reshape publics by reassigning visibility. Ambedkar's injunction to "educate, agitate, organize" can be re-voiced for climate justice: "educate attention, agitate aesthetics, organize empathy." Short lines and sharp images matter: "The river takes our names and returns us numbers," says a displaced villager in a novel—an indictment of bureaucratic enumeration. At the same time, the analysis resists ventriloquizing subaltern voice. The task is not to redeem texts for an academic thesis but to learn how they compose climate as lived caste/class relations. Or, as Mahasweta Devi writes, "I speak because they have spoken to me" (1997, p. 5).

VII. Conclusion

This paper has argued that modern Indian literature offers a uniquely powerful lens for reading climate as an intersectional social ecology. By bringing Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class voices into conversation with Anglophone fiction and activist prose, we observe a repertoire of forms—polyphony, montage, testimony—that render environmental harm legible as caste- and class-differentiated. Quotations from Ambedkar, Roy, Ghosh, and Devi are not ornamental; they index a tradition that treats literature as civic labor. "Freedom of mind," Ambedkar declares, "is the real freedom" (1936/2014, p. 89). In climate times, freedom of mind requires freedom from environmental dispossession.

Policy implications follow. If literature reveals sacrificial zones and slow violence, climate adaptation must be redistributive: land rights for Adivasi communities; heat-stress protections for informal workers; participatory water governance that includes lower-caste women; compensation regimes that recognize cultural as well as economic loss. Literary archives are not data sets, but they are diagnostic: they teach where to listen, whom to invite, what to measure, and what cannot be measured. "Not everything that is faced can be changed," James Baldwin wrote, "but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Indian texts force us to face the weather of hierarchy.

Future research should widen the linguistic scope and attend more to poetry, theatre, and cinema; investigate climate grief and intergenerational memory in partitioned ecologies; and compare South Asian climate-literary formations with Afro-Asian and Latin American contexts. As Ghosh cautions, "the stories we tell determine the futures we make" (2016, p. 158). Intersectional readings help us tell better stories—ones that refuse a "view from nowhere" and instead commit to the vantage of those for whom climate is not a metaphor but a home, a job, a body. "The ground keeps the memory of our feet": let our criticism, too, remember.

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