



Research Article

"I Wish to Sing One Last Song for My Land": Anuj Lugun's Poetics of Resistance and Reclamation

T. T. Mukherjee & S. P. Satpathy

¹Associate Professor, Dept of English, Bhatner College, Dantan, India.

²Associate Professor, Dept of Humanities and Social Sciences, Siksha O Anusandhan, Bhubaneswar, India.

Abstract

This paper critically engages with Anuj Lugun's poetics of resistance and reclamation by focusing on his representation of the civilization of water, forest, and land. Lugun, an emerging voice in contemporary indigenous literature in India, uses poetry to articulate the struggles and resilience of tribal communities in India to resist the forces of displacement and environmental degradation and reclaim cultural identity. Through a close reading of selected poems translated by Pragya Shukla, this study analyzes the way Lugun weaves a narrative that challenges dominant historical and cultural discourses. The analysis also explores how Lugun represents the ongoing fight for Indigenous rights and environmental and social justice through a unique blend of traditional oral storytelling with modern poetic forms. This paper links Lugun's poetics with global Indigenous artistic practices by showing how Lugun's poetry addresses the same concerns. It also reflects the spirit of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on Gender Equality, Life on Land, Climate Action, and Reduced Inequalities.

Keywords: Indigenous poetry, Anuj Lugun, tribal philosophy, resistance, reclamation, SDGs.

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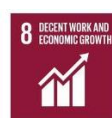
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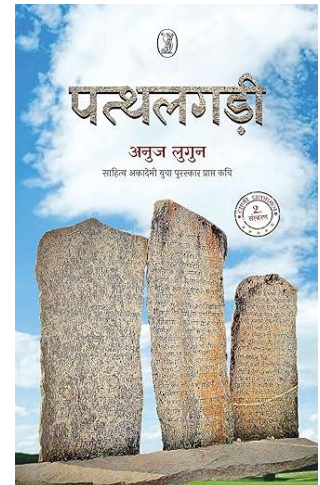


Introduction

Anuj Lugun's poetics is deeply rooted in the collective tribal philosophy of symbiosis, of coexistence with all living beings in nature. It rejects the subjugation of others in pursuit of wealth and power. This rejection has been historically proven by the coexistence of numerous tribes in the Chotanagpur region for thousands of years. Lugun's poetry is informed deeply by this historical sense that stretches back to the early periods. His poetic vision emerges from this sense of a deep connection to the civilization created by tribal ancestors in the larger techno-complex of the Chotanagpur plateau region. The poet himself says:

The inspiration for my poems is the Civilization created by the tribal ancestors—a civilization of water, forest, and land. The tribals never adopted the philosophy of subjugating any other living being; rather, they made symbiosis their philosophy of life. Such a philosophy of life in which all living beings of the universe can establish their existence. The tribal society has continuously tried to preserve its symbiotic civilization by resisting domination. (Shukla, 2024)

Primarily, Lugun's poetry springs from this ethos of symbiotic natural harmony and offers an alternative worldview that challenges Western and Brahminical ideologies (Shiva, 2013). Lugun's clear poetic vision thus enables him to create a poetics of resistance to fight the forces of oppression and destruction of nature (Guha, 2018) and counter the development narratives floated by the joined forces of the governments and the corporate groups (Ghosh, 2016). Thus, Lugun's poetics is not just about protest and resistance; it is also "a reclamation of the tribal civilization," a kind of rewriting of hidden suppressed histories through poetry in a symbolic act to re-establish the cultural symbols of the tribal people. This is to be visually noted on the cover page of a book of poems in Hindi, *Pathalgadi* (2021). Satpathy has commented on this aspect:



Pathalgadhi, the original Hindi poetry book, bears a symbolically significant cover by presenting a megalith with inscriptions. The megaliths of the region are originally silent with no inscriptions. Inscribing the stone artistically on the cover turns out to be a conscious act of reclaiming history. (Shukla, 2024)

Lugun does not explicitly claim the prehistoric megalithic culture of Chotanagpur as their own, belonging to the Mundari heritage. However, the cover design and his statement—"The inspiration for my poems is the Civilization created by the tribal ancestors—a civilization of water, forest, and land"—indirectly links it to a historical sense of continuity of that culture. Again, a few lines from the poem "Our pure-hearted ancestors / Will awaken / Holding the rocks that rest upon their chest," link it to a cultural continuity. "The past of the 'civilization,'" Satpathy writes, "can still be perceived in the rock paintings, megaliths, and cupules scattered throughout the region." Archaeologically, a part of the megalithic culture is tentatively linked to the Mundari culture of the present day. Researching the megalithic culture of Hazaribagh and Ranchi of Jharkhand, Shekhar and Mohanty (2022) conclude:

The typology of the monuments, the nature of the funerary remains, and their ethnographic parallels indicate that there is a degree of continuity in the megalithic tradition in the region. Ethnographic evidence of multiple burials under a single capstone shows a tradition similar to that of ancient times. Ceramic assemblages recovered from megalithic sites in the region can be tentatively dated to between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE... The above observations indicate that both ancient and contemporary megalithic people share similar cultural traits, evident both in the archaeological record of the region and the ethnographic counterpart. (Shekhar & Mohanty, 2022)

Interestingly, historical narratives of the establishments are almost silent about the megalithic heritage of India despite the reporting of "a huge burial site covering approximately 7 acres of land at Chokahatu, near Sonahatu in Ranchi district" with "7360 megaliths" by Col. E.T. Dalton in 1873 (Sinha & Sinha, 2016). This represents systematic academic neglect of the Indigenous heritage and history in India, a continuation of the colonialist mentality.

Insights from Indigenous Poetry of the World

Indigenous poetry from various cultures worldwide shares several significant characteristics despite different geographical locations, and diversity of cultures. Neal McLeod points out its core spirit: "Indigenous poetics is the embodiment of Indigenous consciousness." (McLeod, 2014). For Lugun, poetry becomes a reflection of a deep-rooted indigenous consciousness, a medium for expressing the collective memory and identity of the community. Lucille Lang Day's observations about the Indigenous poetry of North America are also relevant here:

... there are some common threads in the traditional Indigenous cultures of North America. These include an identification with and belief in the sacredness of the land, belief in the value of families and in working together to provide the necessities of life, and participation in ceremonies to connect with the spirit world and celebrate the cycle of the seasons and one's own life. (Day, 2021).

Lugun's poetry is similarly concerned with the vital questions of tribal existence, land, and spirituality. The poems create an aesthetic impact through oral nature deeply embedded in the structures and themes. Direct utterances, sometimes dramatic, follow the structure of traditional stories and songs. The musical progressions, akin to symphonic movements, are likely influenced by the communal tribal music and dance traditions. Again, by incorporating references to tribal dances and musical instruments of the community, Lugun stimulates the readers' imagination, prompting them to enter the unspoken and implicit dimensions of his works. With this, he also relegates the poetic self 'I' to the collectiveness of the community. In this context, we can use Christopher B. Teuton's insight to understand the oral nature of his poetry: "Indigenous peoples bear the legacy of the oppositional construction of modern subjectivity by being profoundly associated with notions of "orality" and its textual counterpart, "oral literature." (Teuton, 2014) Furthermore, Lugun's work can be seen as part of a broader Indigenous renaissance, sometimes called "Native Renaissance 2.0" in the context of the proliferation of digital technologies (Pember, 2024). This links Lugun's work with the global Indigenous movements through which the writers and artists try to reclaim their identity and celebrate their cultural heritage.

Performing Resistance

Participation in ceremonies and spiritual practices is a recurring theme in Anuj Lugun's poetry, and it serves as a symbolic act of resistance to the imposition of colonial and Brahminical ideologies on the people. This closely resembles the poetic practices of poets like Simon J. Ortiz, who also celebrates the spiritual dimensions of indigenous life and the significance of rituals. Celebrating the rituals by Lugun thus becomes performative, with the poet becoming the shaman and uttering deep truths about life. The readers actively engage in the performative acts of reading and immerse themselves in the interplay of cultural symbols. The incorporation of the elements of tribal music and dance enriches Lugun's poetic expressions. These art forms are not merely aesthetic in isolation; they are integral to the cultural and spiritual life of the community. Tribal rituals and ceremonies are often accompanied by rhythmic beats and evocative melodies. This collective participation and celebration create a powerful sensory experience that reinforces the themes of resistance and resilience. Dance, too, plays a crucial role and, with its expressive movements, contributes to the symbolic connection between the people, their land, and their ancestors. These performances are communal events, bringing people together to celebrate their shared heritage and resist the erasure of their cultural identity by the dominant forces. By integrating these elements into his poetry, Lugun preserves these traditions and uses them as acts of defiance against cultural assimilation. As Sayam Prabha Satpathy has written:

Oral and visual in communication, the arts have gone to the collective cultural memory of the Adivasis. Dr Anuj Lugun has drawn on these traditions; with this, his poetry has become polyphonic and multi-layered. Many voices—ancestors, male and female, nature, flora and fauna- speak through his art. (Shukla, 2024)

The act of writing and reciting poetry in itself becomes a ceremonial practice, a way to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge and values.

Translation as Resistance

Translation can serve as a powerful tool of resistance, challenging dominant narratives and promoting marginalized voices. This concept, often referred to as "translation as resistance," involves using translation to amplify the voices of the oppressed and counteract cultural erasure (Huang, 2019). We are reminded of Achebe's valuable words:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe, 1965)

The translator, Pragya Skhula, can be said to have collaborated with the poet in the act of resistance. By translating Lugun's work, Shukla not only makes the rich tribal heritage and resistance accessible to a broader audience but also preserves the cultural and political connotations embedded in the original texts as far as possible. Her work ensures that the essence of Lugun's resistance is not lost in translation but is re-contextualized for the global audience. Shukla has kept the essential symbols of tribal culture untranslated, thus forcing the reader to know more about the contexts of the words. This also points to cultural translation as a political

act: translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but also a form of political engagement (Baker, 2012). Md. Rakibul Alam (2019) writes that translational activities address resisting stereotypes and contributing to the transformation of unjust structures worldwide. This resistance could provide an opportunity to seek an alternative human history by challenging insular, elitist, exclusionary, fragmentary, and hegemonic perspectives. Suneetha Rani has rightly commented:

If Anuj Lugun's poetry is a reclamation of the tribal civilisation, Pragya Shukla's translation is the re-creation of tribal civilisation in English. This poetry echoes the resurgence of voices that question the elimination of people and the exploitation of nature. It celebrates, but does not exoticise, the resilience that can never be suppressed by any force. (Shukla, 2024)

Modernity, Change, and Resistance

The treatment of tribal societies by colonial powers has historically involved branding them as uncivilized and exploiting their resources (Smith, 2010). This narrative of degradation has sparked widespread resistance from tribal communities with the aim of safeguarding their cultural heritage and environment (Johnson, 2015). "In today's globalized world," Lugun writes, "where even the most basic elements of life like air, water, sunlight, and soil are commodified, the tribal society is waging a battle to safeguard them, recognizing them as fundamental necessities for every living being" (Shukla, 2024).

In the 21st century, Indigenous communities face myriad challenges complicated by globalization and assimilation. Many of them are deeply rooted in colonial historical injustices, and new threats are arising out of neocolonial and neoliberal conditions. Globally, climate change, deforestation, pollution, and resource extraction threaten their lands, livelihoods, and existence. As per the UN Report, these environmental issues disrupt their traditional ways of life and lead to the loss of biodiversity and traditional knowledge (Jerez, 2021). Indigenous communities have long been fighting to secure legal recognition of their ancestral lands. But when recognized, these lands are again threatened by government and corporate forces that seek to exploit natural resources for large-scale profits.

The impact of globalization and assimilation poses a grave threat to indigenous cultures. These powerful influences result in the loss of cultural identities as dominant cultures overshadow and supplant indigenous ways of life. This extends beyond the loss of language and customs and leads to the gradual vanishing of unique worldviews and indigenous knowledge systems. UNESCO reports that approximately half of the world's 7,000 recognized languages are endangered, with 1,500 at particularly high risk (UNO, 2022). When a language disappears, the socio-cultural fabric of its community suffers greatly (Mankiller, 2010).

Indigenous communities experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment compared to non-indigenous populations. This economic marginalization is further worsened by limited access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. Despite some progress, tribal people still lack adequate political representation in decision-making processes. Additionally, women in these communities face intersectional gender issues.

Drawing upon the ancestral knowledge and traditions of the tribal culture, Lugun's poetry adds a strong voice to this ongoing struggle (Gupta, 2019). His poetry sheds light on the resilience and resistance of these communities and critiques the failure of the so-called civilized society to acknowledge and honor tribal civilization (Patel, 2017). Lugun's poetry embodies the spirit of resistance against the opposing forces; it exactly deals with the issue of "how Indigenous communities can regenerate themselves to resist the effects of the contemporary colonial assault and regenerate politically and culturally" (Alfred & Corntassel, 597: 2005). Through poetry as a powerful medium of art, he reiterates the importance of linguistic and cultural preservation in the face of modern challenges and becomes a collective voice calling for cultural and social justice.

Women of Ulugulan

Anuj Lugun's poem "Women of Ulugulan" is primarily an ode to the strength and resilience of tribal women, depicted as both beautiful and formidable in their fight for rights and self-respect (Das Gupta, 2015). However, Lugun envisions their journey as a historical continuation of the spirit that had started long ago by the *Ulgulan* or rebellion (1899-1900) organized by Bhagawan Birsa Munda against the British administration to the present day leading to the future. Vasavi Kero in her book *Ulgulan ki Aurthen* (Women of Revolution) mentions some of the tribal women fighters who were "martyred in the fight for independence and tribal identity" (Prasad, 2021).

Phulo and Jhanno Murmu were martyred in the Santhal rebellion of 1855-56. In Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan* (1890-1900) Maki, Thigi, Negi, Limbu, Sali and Champi and the wives of Banki Munda, Manjhiya Munda and Dundanga Munda were martyred. (Prasad, 2021).

The title of the poem and the lines "Ferocious—/Like their commanders" establish this historical connection by using the technique of allusion (Ulemale, 2021). The line "More dangerous than beautiful" places the women in an antithetical position in terms of a conventional sense of beauty. The paradox is revealed in the next few lines:

Their buns decked
Not with *echa-ba*
But blossoms of courage
And hope as ear-rings
Grace their ears.¹

The traditional decoration of *echa-ba* or the flowers of Sal tree on their buns and traditional earrings, signifying docility and categorization, is rejected in favour of dignity and self-respect that generate courage and enable them to "fight for Rights". The stanza rounds off with the line, "They planted seeds of self-respect." The image of planting seeds is carried to the next stanza in the organic development of the tribal women of the old and new generations through a vegetative metaphor:

¹ All the poems here are from *Selected Poems of Anuj Lugun*, translated by Pragya Shukla, Rupakatha Books, 2024. Available at <https://doi.org/10.21659/rtp01>

Roots burrow deeper
Creepers sprawl around
Across villages
And towns
In all directions
The sidewalks
Outside the narrow lanes

That, despite progress, women are still connected with nature is conveyed through the lines:

In courtyards—
Mothers pat cow-dung cakes.

In the next stanza, Lugun extends the topic of liberation and progress of women through a poetic vision. However, the two-word first line, "After ages," carries a heavy weight of history. Again, the eco-conscious is reflected in their ways of life: "... at the crack of dawn/ Run towards the fields". The poet thus blends the aspects of tradition and modernity: the women are involved in traditional activities such as crafting cow dung cakes, while at the same time, they are embracing new opportunities such as education and employment and participating in acts of resistance through public demonstrations. This dual portrayal captures the evolving roles of tribal women amidst rapid globalization.

The image of "hundreds of women unite in unarmed solidarity" emphasizes the collective spirit of the tribal women. Their synchronized movement, reminiscent of balancing water vessels on their heads, symbolizes their integrity with nature and essential role in sustaining life. This collective action directly challenges the "ominous aspirations" of those who aim to exploit and dominate the tribals and their land. Of course, the unnamed "enemies of Nature" are the ones who are using the development narratives for large-scale profit. We know about many tribal resistance movements against such forces in India (De, 2023). Lugun's criticism is evident in the contrast between the women's beauty and strength as "lovers of Earth" and their threat to the "enemies of Nature." This dichotomy clearly demonstrates the failure of the powerful to acknowledge and honour tribal civilization and its principles. The poet calls for a reassessment of what constitutes genuine civilization and advocates for a worldview that prioritizes harmony with nature and mutual respect among all living beings.

The Moon Waiting for a Woman

The theme of symbiosis is also found in the next poem in the collection, "The Moon Waiting for a Woman". On the surface, the poem deals with the theme of a woman's prioritizing domestic duties over her artistic talents. However, reading the poem from a psychoanalytic perspective makes it complicated. Set in a surreal interiorized landscape of the mind, it draws upon the cultural memory preserved in the tribal folktales. The bare, barren dream situation is reminiscent of Henri Rousseau's surrealist painting, *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1897). The woman in the poem, possibly on a nomadic journey with her family, is also 'sleeping' out in the open and having a dream:

That night gazing at the Moon
Lying on the floor with her children and husband
She looked at the sky
Contemplating the tranquil and profound

In the next few lines, she is seen performing a kind of shamanistic ritual:

She pondered for a while
Her bangles, bindi and bit of kohl
She tacked
On to the sky
And the sky
Took on an even more exquisite beauty

This kind of practice of magic is forbidden for women in the Mundari culture. This implies that the woman is engaged in a forbidden act. With her "bangles, bindi and a bit of kohl," she is, however, able to create a spell of beauty on the sky. By adorning the sky with her touch, she not only beautifies the night but also asserts her agency and spiritual connection to the universe. The woman's engagement in a shamanistic ritual implies her defiance and the transformative power of her actions. This brings up the repressed cultural memory of the women as shamans in the earlier stages of the Mundari culture. Some of the folktales preserve such memories of suppression of women and their replacement later by patriarchy.

The next stanza evokes the surrealist landscape, connecting us to the collective unconscious. The setting of midnight in the forest, where "tranquillity embraced the foothills" and "the winds softly caressed the villages," creates a serene and mystical atmosphere:

At midnight, deep within the forest
Where tranquillity embraced the foothills
The winds softly caressed the villages

The 'forest' represents the unconscious metaphorically, and the image of "tranquillity embraced the foothills" symbolically alludes to the operation of *eros* in nature. This is reinforced in the next erotic line: "The winds softly caressed the villages." Accentuated by the presence of her family, "... she gazed at her children and husband", the stanza gives way to an intrusion, a celestial intrusion by the moon almost in an eerie way: "The Moon silently drew near". If we follow the Mundari tales, we can find that the moon is not a female goddess but a male god perpetually being pursued by the sun for failing to keep his promise of sacrificing his family and arranging a feast like the latter. Here, the woman attracts the moon through her shamanistic spell. Because of this, the moon can approach her with words that seem almost familiar to her. In other words, she already knows the intention of the moon:

Listen it has been a thousand years and more
Sitting-rising-walking
Drinking-eating-talking
your talents will manifest in novel ways
—adorn and breathe life anew”
— recreate me, please.

The Moon’s approach and plea to the woman—“recreate me, please”—suggest a deep, almost spiritual connection between the celestial body and the woman. The Moon acknowledges the woman’s talents and asks her to use them to bring new life and beauty. This request can be seen as a recognition of the woman’s inherent power and creativity, which transcends cultural restrictions.

Once I am free
I will attend to your work
Please go for now
The moon departed, awaiting the woman
The moon continues to wait for her.

The moon’s waiting in Lugun’s poem signifies a profound sense of longing and patience. It represents an eternal hope and a timeless connection between the celestial and the earthly. It can represent the union of Mother Earth with the Sky God. Thus, the moon’s waiting becomes a metaphor for the enduring hope and the cyclical nature of life, where moments of separation are followed by eventual reunion and fulfillment.

I Wish to Sing One Last Song for My Land

“I Wish to Sing One Last Song for My Land” is a powerful example of how performance can serve as a form of resistance. It turns out to be a powerful allegory of the struggles of tribal communities in India against the adverse forces that threaten their existence and ways of life. Through the protest song of an injured hunter, Lugun vividly presents the tragic consequences of urbanization and development, which force elephants to invade human settlements and agricultural fields in search of food. This symbolizes the broader conflict between development and nature, where the expansion of human activities leads to the displacement of wildlife. This conflict is not just physical but also symbolic of the more significant clash between traditional ways of life and modern development (Shiva, 1993). The poem critiques the notion of development that prioritizes economic growth over ecological sustainability and social equity. Lugun’s work forces readers to reconsider the true cost of progress and to recognize the value of preserving natural and cultural landscapes. The struggle presented here becomes a cautionary allegory for the broader environmental and social upheavals caused by unchecked urbanization (Gadgil and Guha, 1992).

Two adverse forces threaten the symbiotic tribal existence: first, the displaced animals, and, second, the state with its cold yet cruel apparatuses. The hunter expresses his anger and frustration with the indifference of the administration to their plight:

We lodged complaints against them
They turned away
Denied our toil in fields.

This indifference is further conveyed by the administration's dismissive attitude, as seen in the lines,

They claimed our crops
And our sweat-soaked fields, too
Said we should be grateful for their kindness

This points to the systemic injustice faced by the tribal farmers everywhere in India.

The speaker, an old "injured hunter whose friends are "all killed" in the bloody conflict with the elephants, represents the older generation of hunters who shared hardships in "transforming barren lands" and volunteered as fighters to protect the newer generation, sacrificing their lives. The new generation, represented by his son, is presented with a productive role in continuing the tribal ways of life. The ritualistic hunt, *sendera*, undertaken by the Mundas of Jharkhand on a two-year basis, represents the continuation of the fighting spirit against the evil forces.

As an act of psychological resistance, the speaker, resorts to cultural symbols and acts. The reference to guerrilla warfare and the singing of songs amidst the beat of *mandar* and *nagada* not only emphasises the resilient spirit of the community but also represents their deep-rooted cultural practices. The poem emphasizes the symbiotic way of life of the tribal community: "The roots of crops are intertwined with our existence".

The hunter's resignation to death ends with a hope for continuing the tribal ways of life. In his ultimate vision before death, he finds affinity in the naturalness of peaceful existence and subsistence, just like the returning birds in the sky to their nests. Despite the challenges, the speaker's unwavering spirit and hope are captured in the lines,

My unwavering spirit in my clenched fists endures
And hope imbued in each assault.

World of Hearths

Lugun's poem "World of Hearths" is a critical reflection on discord in the traditional ways of life created by the forces of modernization. The poem begins by celebrating the abundance and harmony of subsistence in the natural world:

Fire aplenty for the hearths
Wood aplenty for the fire
Trees aplenty for the wood.

This repetition stresses the interconnectedness and self-sustaining nature of the ecosystem. The progression from fire to wood to trees to forests illustrates a seamless, interdependent

relationship where each element supports the other. The image of birds thriving in the forests with abundant nests symbolizes a balanced and nurturing environment.

From the instance in nature, Lugun moves on to the human context, to the hearth, a powerful and sacred symbol of home and family (Brighton, 2023) since the discovery of using fire. It universally represents the core of communal life. The poet thinks that the strength of the community lies in its unity and shared resources: when the hearths were united, so were the families, creating a strong community.

The poem then shifts to a theme of disruption:

When hearths were divided

Families parted ways.

This division is not just physical but also symbolic of the fragmentation of community and culture. The aroma from the hearths, which once unified neighborhoods, now serves as a poignant reminder of the lost harmony. The lines "People effortlessly grasped / The discourse of the hearth" suggest that the hearth was a source of wisdom and communication, a place where values and traditions were passed down. Lugun critiques modernity through the imagery of loudspeakers disseminating rumors from other religious establishments. This represents the intrusion of external, divisive forces into the community. However, the poem asserts that "The talk of the hearth / Was always / Mouth-watering—delectable," implying that the wisdom and unity of the hearth can withstand these external pressures. The poem also contrasts the past and present and concludes with an optimistic note that the world of hearths, with its taste and warmth, is not lost but can be reclaimed. The lines emphasize self-reliance and the potential for reclaiming this harmonious way of life through determination and unity:

The key to this world is not with others

The key resides within

And can be unlocked with resolute fists.

Preparing Lakhtho at Home

In the poem "Preparing Lakhtho at Home," Lugun employs a minimalist style to convey the pervasive poverty and scarcity among tribal communities. It is also a poignant reflection on familial love, sacrifice, and the hidden labour of the mother that sustains a household and transforms it into a home. This establishes the fact that home is a psychological space created by love and care. "'Home' includes primary locations where early memories and their emotions result in attachment scripts and their consequences." (Tower, 2021)

Lugun's simple, unembellished language emphasizes the harsh realities of poverty without romanticizing them. The speaker of the poem is the voice that exposes the condition from a personal perspective. The poem begins with a chilling picture of scarcity:

Sometimes wheat flour found its way home

Sometimes sugar graced our kitchen

Sometimes there was oil in stock.

The recurring use of the word “sometimes” intensifies the uncertainty and instability that characterize the family’s access to food. We understand that the poet is talking about the general condition of the tribals in India through a personal situation, and with this, it turns into an allegory of exploitation, denial, and betrayal. A reader definitely finds it shameful when we are talking about food security². Despite these challenges, the mother (“Maa”) manages to prepare Lakhtho, a traditional dish, bringing joy to her children. This act of cooking becomes a symbol of love and care in the face of scarcity, and for the children, it becomes a ritualistic celebration.

Lugun’s portrayal of the mother’s quiet labor is central to the poem. The lines “Maa would quietly prepare the batter / Deftly rolling and cutting” emphasize her skill and dedication. The father’s remark, “No one can ever prepare like her,” conveys the family’s appreciation for her efforts, yet it also hints at the unspoken sacrifices she makes. At this point, we are also reminded of the feminist concept of “hidden labour”, a critical component of the domestic sphere that sustains the workforce and the economy at large. Because it is unpaid and often taken for granted, it remains invisible in traditional economic analyses (Garbes, 2022). This invisibility perpetuates gender inequalities, as women are expected to perform these tasks without recognition or compensation. (Hochschild, 1983). The revelation that the ingredients were “borrowed” adds another layer of complexity to the narrative. This suggests that the mother’s labour extends beyond the kitchen to securing resources through social networks. The children’s reactions - dancing with joy and fighting - reflect the normalcy and vibrancy of family life, which the mother sustains through her efforts. The transformation of borrowed ingredients into a meal represents the alchemy of love and labor that turns scarcity into abundance.

Should You Decide to Come

Anuj Lugun’s poem “Should You Decide to Come” is like an open declaration that juxtaposes themes of welcome and resistance. Through its vivid imagery and powerful narrative, the poet lists the conditions under which outsiders are welcomed and the consequences of the violation of cultural and environmental integrity. Indirectly, it points to the vital concerns of biodiversity conservation. As Vibha Singhal et al. write, the tribal communities from Jharkhand “...protect and conserve the plant and animal diversity in the landscape through their religious belief system which encompasses the concept of totemism, sacred trees, and groves.” (Singhal et al., 2021). In this context, the introduction of development and modernization needs a revision of policies. This is to be understood against the larger backdrop of displacement. Singhal et al. (2021) have reported:

Jharkhand has been the largest producer of ecological refugees. This displacement has caused more than economic losses to the indigenous communities. They are likely to suffer far more than their counterparts in the general population, as displacement has led not only to impoverishment, but also “cultural genocide, since every aspect of the social structure of indigenous communities is fundamentally affected, including the economy,

² Read the sample study for similar conditions prevailing in the adjoining region: Moyra, S. K., & Hazra, S. (2022). Dealing with vulnerabilities in tribal food security—a study on Jhargram district of West Bengal, India. In *Indigenous People and Nature*, Edited by Uday Chatterjee et al (pp. 399-418). Elsevier.

political system, material culture, relationship with the environment, religion and system of values" (Government of Jharkhand 2014, 45)

Lugun's poem arises artistically from these concerns about the violation of indigenous principles.

The poem begins with a cautionary invitation: "Should you decide to visit / You are welcome." This welcoming tone is conditional and emphasizes the need for outsiders—tourists and the corporate and government representatives, to respect and harmonize with the natural and cultural environment. The simile of ascending "one step at a time / Like the ascending sun / On the mountains" suggests a gradual and respectful approach, which is reflected in the natural progression of the sun, a principle of reverence for nature inherent in indigenous cultures. The comparison to "positive, affordable energy similar to cow dung" invokes the principle of sustainability and beneficial presence: cow dung is traditionally used as a natural fertilizer and energy source. The poetic image of "spring winds" breathing life into "dry branches, tender buds" symbolizes rejuvenation and the positive impact the outsiders can have on the environment. The poem also uses the imagery of doves and rivers to emphasize harmony and peace: "Like doves / Let your voice / Gift a melody to the flowing rivers." This means that outsiders should contribute positively to the natural and cultural landscape, much like doves symbolize peace and rivers signify life and continuity.

The poem takes a stark turn when it addresses the consequences of disrespect: "If all these do not happen / On your arrival Then— / From the mountains will descend / Our Gods / To rain fire." This shift clearly states the protective stance of the community towards their land and culture. The awakening of "pure-hearted ancestors" and the imagery of "mothers and sisters...armed with bows, arrows, and axes" manifests the readiness to defend their heritage and environment against exploitation and disrespect.

The concluding lines, "In our culture / Deception for wealth is an art we lack," serve as a powerful statement about the values of the community. It contrasts the integrity and honesty of the indigenous culture with the deceit often associated with external forces seeking wealth and exploitation. This line reinforces the poem's overarching message of conditional acceptance based on mutual respect and integrity.

Rewriting Historical Narratives and Reclamation of Identity

Rewriting historical narratives and reclaiming identity are pivotal themes in Indigenous poetry, both globally and within the Indian context. Indigenous poets use their work to challenge dominant historical narratives that have often marginalized their communities. They offer alternative narratives that are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and oral traditions. This act of rewriting history is not only a literary endeavor but also a political one that is aimed at reclaiming agency and asserting the validity of Indigenous experiences and perspectives, "an act of reclamation of identity". (Michalec, 2021)

Globally, indigenous poets like Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Joy Harjo have used poetry to expose the injustices faced by their communities and reclaim their cultural identities. Noonuccal's poem "The Dispossessed", for instance, addresses the loss of land and culture experienced by Aboriginal

Australians due to colonization. She provides a counter-narrative to the often-sanitized versions of history that tend to overlook or minimize the suffering and resilience of indigenous peoples. Similarly, in her collection, *An American Sunrise*, Harjo, blends historical reflection with personal narrative and revisits the lands from which her ancestors were forcibly removed. This work not only honours the memory of her ancestors but also asserts the ongoing presence and vitality of indigenous cultures. By intertwining past and present, Harjo's poetry challenges linear, Eurocentric notions of history and emphasizes the cyclical and interconnected nature of indigenous experiences (Young, 2019). His poetry also deals with the themes of displacement, loss, and survival (Lee, 2020). Simon J. Ortiz's poetry frequently addresses the themes of resistance and cultural survival. In his poem "My Father's Song," Ortiz reflects on the importance of cultural memory and the transmission of traditional knowledge as a form of resistance against cultural erasure. Rita Joe's poem "I Lost My Talk" addresses the impact of residential schools on Indigenous identity and the struggle to reclaim one's language and culture. These poets draw on oral traditions and ancestral knowledge to create a rich web of historical and cultural narratives that can challenge colonial histories and assert indigenous identities.

In Lugun, too, we find similar poetic approaches to reclaiming Indigenous identities and rewriting historical narratives. He asserts the cyclical nature of history, where the powerful can be overthrown and the weak can rise to power. This cyclical view challenges the notion of history as a linear progression dominated by the powerful. Instead, it presents history as a series of struggles and resistances that continually reshape the socio-political landscape.

Adivasi

Anuj Lugun's poem "Adivasi" offers a powerful commentary on two types of identity: one imposed by outsiders and one created by the tribals themselves over thousands of years in harmony with nature. Through precise language, the poet dismisses the various labels imposed on the tribals by different external groups, refuses these identifications, and ultimately establishes their identity in connection to nature. This process of cheating is historical and so well-known that no reference is needed. The poem opens with an angry note:

Materialists,
Or opportunists,
Advocates of reservation
Those pursuing votes
Label us as Adivasis.

This enumeration emphasizes how the external forces have historically sought to categorize them for their own purposes. The use of the term "label" here implies the superficiality and the reductive nature of these categorizations and false constructions. In a similar vein, we can read "I am Not a Savage" by Simon J. Ortiz, a renowned Acoma Pueblo poet who confronts the pervasive stereotypes and misconceptions imposed upon Native Americans.

I am not a savage
in my own country

I am not a savage
in my own country
I am not a savage
in my own country
I am not a savage.

Ortiz's poem is a "powerful assertion of identity, challenging the dehumanization and erasure that Indigenous communities have long confronted...Ortiz reclaims his culture and heritage, emphasizing the strength and resilience of Native American peoples."

Lugun continues this critique by addressing the derogatory labels used by missionaries:

Missionaries
Call us
Adivasi savages.

Thus, Lugun attacks the colonial approach to the Indigenous culture that has viewed indigenous peoples as primitive and in need of "civilizing", and colonized their minds with Christian teachings. At this point, we may recall what E.T. Dalton, Commissioner of Chota-Nagpore, wrote about "The Kols" of Chota-Nagpore in 1866. This was a brilliant piece of ethnography but at the same time, a nasty colonial conspiracy:

"The young Oraons of both sexes are intensely fond of decorating their persons with beads and brass ornaments. These they entirely recognised by the total absence of all such adornment. The converts do not join in the dances, or festivals, and must not even be seen as spectators, when they are going on. They appear indeed to lose all relish for their old amusements, and shrink with horror at the idea of resuming their discarded ornaments. And as Christianity is rapidly spreading amongst them, and in all probability will continue to spread more and more rapidly every year, it is quite possible that in the course of a few generations, the most marked characteristics of the races I am describing, will have been effaced for ever. It is marvellous with what firmness old prejudices are abandoned, old customs discarded, and even tastes changed, when they become Christians; and there is now a wide-spread feeling amongst the Kols themselves, that this change will inevitably come upon them all."

Lugun's struggle for reclamation of identity can truly be understood against such a backdrop of colonial conspiracy, which is continuing in the name of 'God' and his 'Son'. Now, we understand how the imaginary 'sons' of the Empire were conceived by colonialist 'fathers'.

Lugun contrasts these external perceptions with the self-identity of the people, who "never proclaim / themselves as Adivasis" but are deeply connected to their land and traditions. Here we are reminded of Native American poet Joy Harjo's deep connection to the land and the struggle against imposed identities in her poem "Remember," where she emphasizes the importance of remembering one's roots and the interconnectedness of all life forms (Steinman, 2022). As an answer to the colonial approaches, Lugun offers the indigenous ontology that conceives the

existence of the tribal people in collective consciousness in harmony with nature. The lines "They know to heal with herbs / can prophesy by observing animals / weather patterns, and potential outcomes" refer to the deep ecological consciousness and wisdom of these people. This knowledge is not just practical but also spiritual, and it is intertwined with their identity and ways of life:

Every tree, plant, mountain, hill
rivers-waterfalls know
their identity.

This personification of nature suggests a reciprocal relationship where the land and its elements recognize and affirm the identity of the people.

Their Symbols

Lugun's poem "Their Symbols" may be considered complementary to the previous poem "Adivasi". It also deals with identity and belonging by critiquing the imposition of external religious and cultural symbols on indigenous communities. Ultimately, the poet demands cultural autonomy and the preservation of indigenous identity. The poem begins with a series of negations:

We were never tasked
With venerating cows
Never instructed
To raise awareness
Of the cross's sanctity.

These lines establish a clear distinction between the indigenous community and the external religious ideologies imposed upon them. The repetition of "never" emphasizes the community's autonomy and resistance to adopting foreign symbols and practices. The poem addresses the derogatory labels imposed on the indigenous community:

People called us untamed
And uncivilized
Our ancestors were called demons.

These lines reflect the colonial and Brahminical attitudes to the indigenous ways of life. Lugun highlights the community's silent endurance in the face of such derogatory perceptions:

We never uttered a word
Never in return did we
Tarnish the adjectives of our language.

This silence is a form of resistance arising from the integrity of their language and culture despite external pressures. Lugun contrasts the imposed religious practices with the Indigenous community's own cultural practices:

We remained engrossed
Pulling Mandal strings
Or steadying bows
We composed our songs.

These lines celebrate the community's dedication to traditional practices and arts, which are integral to their identity. Composing songs and engaging in traditional activities symbolizes the preservation of their cultural heritage, an act of resistance through the purest and highest form—art, that “challenges stereotypes, confronts historical trauma, and affirms their cultural identities.” (Poemverse)

The poem critiques the power dynamics inherent in the imposition of external symbols:

Those voices, to safeguard the Divine
Demand our offerings
Service for them
Are secret gateways for asserting dominance.

Lugun suggests that the imposition of religious symbols and practices is a means of asserting dominance over the indigenous community. The introduction of these symbols into the forests, a sacred space traditionally associated with Indigenous life, represents a violation of the sacred space, an encroachment on their cultural and spiritual autonomy.

Bhima Koregaon



Bhima Koregaon Victory Pillar, 1 January 1818.

By Knitin777 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15746271>

Lugun's poem "Bhima Koregaon: History" evokes the historical significance of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon, fought on January 1, 1818. This battle, in which a small contingent of Mahar soldiers from a Dalit community fought against the Peshwa's forces, is celebrated as a symbol of Dalit resistance and empowerment. According to Ajeet Kumar Pankaj, it is one such historical struggle of Dalits to claim space in history and is a symbol of the Dalit movement directed towards fighting inequality (Pankaj, 2023). Including a picture of the memorial at Bhima Koregaon may be relevant and illustrative here:

To honor the bravery and sacrifice of its soldiers, the East India Company erected a "victory pillar" in the form of an obelisk at Koregaon (Ray, 1983: 176). The inscription of the pillar proudly proclaims that Captain Staunton's force "accomplished one of the proudest triumphs of the British Army in the East" (Kumbhojkar, 2015). The inscription lists the names of 49 Company soldiers who lost their lives in the battle, and 22 of these names end with the suffix "-nac" or "-nak," a title that belongs to the Mahar caste (Basham, 2008). Another dimension to the memorial was added when B. R. Ambedkar visited the site on 1 January 1927. To commemorate his visit to the site, now thousands of his followers visit the site every New Year's Day. (Kumbhojkar, 2015). However, the occasion also turned into violent clashes between Hindu groups and (Ex-Dalit) Buddhist groups on 1 January 2018. Lugun takes up this theme in the companion poem "Bhima Koregaon: Khunti".



By Unknown author - <http://navayan.com/photo-gallery.php?name=babasaheb-ambedkar&page=6>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=60253775>

While the British built it as a symbol of their own power, today, it serves as a memorial of the Mahars. (Kumbhojkar, 2012) This proves Lugun's assertion: "Powerful can be defeated /Weak can rise to power". It also tears apart the historical narratives fabricated by the colonialists like Dalton quoted earlier in this article.

Lugun's poem "Bhima Koregaon: History" is a controlled commentary on the dynamics of power and resistance through historical memory. Ultimately, it seeks the rewriting of historical narratives and the reclamation of identity. The opening line—"Powerful can be defeated / Weak can rise to

power”—sets the tone for the poem with a plain statement on the fluidity of power and the potential for change. Lugun suggests that history is not a static record of the powerful but also a dynamic narrative shaped by those who resist and challenge authority. It repeats the truth spoken by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), where he argued that history should not be viewed as a static record dominated by the powerful but rather as a dynamic narrative shaped by those who resist and challenge authority. (Foucault, 2012). The lines “Not all chroniclers of History / Were rulers” emphasize the importance of alternative historical narratives.

By referencing Bhima Koregaon, Lugun thus situates the poem within a broader context of historical resistance and the struggle for justice for the marginalized sections. He also speaks of the general truth that the dominant systems crush the people who challenge oppressive systems:

Those who will voice brave opinions
Will become martyrs.

Lugun, however, notes that their stories prove that “the powerful, too, become fearful” because of the impact of resistance on those in power.

The poem “Bhima Koregaon: Khunti” may be considered a companion piece to the previous poem. Through its indirect lines and symbolic references, the poem refers to two historical events: first, the Battle of Koregaon, fought (1818), and secondly, the 2018 clash of Bhima Koregaon, a violent eruption during an annual celebratory gathering on 1 January, 2018 at Bhima Koregaon to mark the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. These complex events are re-contextualized at a different place of protest, Khunti, Jharkhand, far off the original place of incidents. Thus, incidentally, it emphasizes the symbolic value of the events.

The line, “Questions were raised by a village,” immediately sets a tone of inquiry and resistance. This refers to a politically enlightened community actively engaging with contemporary events and questioning contemporary events. Lugun also criticizes the external perceptions and labels imposed on the villagers. The terms “traitors” and “missionaries” are indicative of how dominant groups attempt to control and suppress dissent. Lugun’s use of these terms exposes the disconnect between the lived experiences of the tribal villagers and the external narratives imposed upon them. The line, “Stone markers were raised by another,” introduces the idea of memorialization and the act of marking history. Identity is then mapped in relation to these markers. The transformation of the village into “Bhima Koregaon” announces the complete political enlightenment of the Dalit communities. It becomes an event that symbolizes the continuity of this spirit of defiance that will fuel future movements for justice and recognition.

Conclusion

Stuart Cooke, in his article, “Indigenous Poetics and Transcultural Ecologies,” has written, “...we might turn to indigenous knowledge systems not as part of a reactionary anti-modern form of Romanticism, but as an alternative, syncretic understanding of the contemporary, in which the past is partner to the present in the formation of future possibility” (Cooke, 2018). We can use this perspective to analyze Lugun’s poetics, which, on the one hand, engages with the tribal past in cultural memory as markers of history and, on the other, deals with contemporary political and

cultural situations. His works come to embody the syncretic and ecological dimensions of Indigenous poetics that resist forced assimilation and ultimately offers an alternative vision of the contemporary world.

We have moved away from Western and Brahminical concepts of poetics. Now, we find that Indigenous poetic visions harmonize with the United Nations' principle of sustainability, as framed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNO, 2015). Lugun's aesthetics of symbiosis similarly echoes the concerns of the SDGs, particularly those focused on Gender Equality, Life on Land, Climate Action, and Reduced Inequalities. This connection proves the greatness of his art based on a philosophical system embedded in an Indigenous culture, which is built on the vast experience of the environment and deep wisdom passed down from generation to generation. Lugun's poetics is oriented to the global efforts to protect endangered cultures and the environment. He is very much conscious of the transformative power of storytelling in shaping cultural narratives and he uses it to challenge dominant discourses and promote social justice. Thus, Lugun amplifies the voices of Indigenous communities and demands for adopting the principles of inclusiveness and equitability. Poetry, for him, is not mere aesthetic enrichment of a poetic tradition or becoming entangled in the labyrinth of another set of new theories; rather, it becomes a vital instrument for advocating cultural reclamation in a proactive manner. As we conclude, we are reminded of the transformative power of true poetry to inspire change and promote a deeper understanding of our shared humanity, our present existence on earth, and the future ahead:

The picture comforts me—
 These birds—
 In Palestine or Israel
 Turkey or Syria
 Korea or Ladakh
 Anywhere—
 Someday—
 Will surely land. ("Picture")

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