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Reclaiming Subaltern Subjectivities: Intersections of Caste, Gender, and Tribal Identities

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Abstract

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This study explores how caste, gender, and tribal identities intersect in contemporary Indian English literature, serving as powerful counter-narratives against colonial perspectives. It uses decolonial theories and indigenous Indian epistemologies to reinterpret and reclaim the experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women, challenging the dominant Brahmanical and colonial discourses that have historically silenced or erased marginalised voices. Modern Indian English writings, including works by Bama and Jacinta Kerketta, challenge mainstream narratives by addressing issues such as caste exclusion, patriarchal violence, and land and cultural dispossession. These texts oppose the colonial legacy of epistemic violence, characterised by orientalist portrayals of natives as primitive or passive, by promoting resistance through oral traditions, testimonial storytelling, and speculative narratives that celebrate tribal cosmologies, ecological knowledge, and gendered agency. Drawing on intersectional perspectives rooted in Dalit feminist theory (e.g., Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru) and Adivasi viewpoints, the analysis shows how subaltern women are not only victims but also active agents in the production of alternative knowledge. For example, stories of land memory and ecological resistance in Adivasi literature oppose displacement driven by development. At the same time, Dalit women's writings reveal how caste and gender hierarchies intersect in daily survival and resistance. By highlighting these marginalised voices, the paper argues that such literature contributes to decolonising English literary studies, broadening the canon beyond upper-caste dominance, fostering inclusive epistemologies, and envisioning futures based on equity, sovereignty, and indigenous resurgence. Ultimately, these counter-narratives act as ethical interventions, challenging inherited hierarchies of knowledge and emphasising marginalised histories as vital to global decolonial progress.

Keywords: Subaltern subjectivities, caste-gender-tribal intersections, counter-narratives, decolonial epistemologies, Indian Knowledge System, Dalit-Adivasi literature

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Introduction

Since India gained independence, English literary studies have continued to reflect colonial influences and Brahmanical dominance. These combined forces have often marginalised the diverse voices of Dalit and Adivasi communities, making their experiences either invisible or distorted in mainstream literature. For many years, the field favoured upper-caste viewpoints, perpetuating epistemic exclusion rooted in colonial history and caste traditions. Recently, however, Indian English literature has seen a significant revival, especially through works by Dalit and Adivasi women writers. Their writings serve as important acts of resistance, where marginalised identities are reasserted and expressed through complex intersections of caste, gender, and indigeneity.

At the core of this transformative literary movement is the belief that education is a powerful tool capable of shaping the future of an entire generation. Education holds a significant place in human life; it separates us from mere existence and enables individuals to challenge oppressive systems. In history, Dalit and Adivasi communities were part of Indian society's social and economic frameworks but remained subordinated under both British rule and the caste hierarchy. They were mostly limited to low-paying, exploitative jobs and were deprived of resources, dignity, and access to knowledge. For these groups, formal education was often a distant dream, systematically withheld over generations. This denial sustained cycles of illiteracy, poverty, and social exclusion, creating a legacy of systemic disadvantage that endured into the post-colonial period.

In recent decades, increased access to education has begun to bring significant change to these communities. It has boosted individuals' confidence, nurtured shared hope, and created opportunities for assertion, dignity, and peace. As Confucius's ancient wisdom states, education fosters confidence, confidence generates hope, and hope leads to harmony. It is now widely recognised that no society can achieve complete development without emphasising education. This changing landscape is vividly reflected in the creative writings of Dalit and Adivasi authors, forming a vibrant and expanding body of Dalit and Tribal Literature.[1]

Writers like Bama, a trailblazing Tamil Dalit feminist, and Jacinta Kerketta, an Oraon Adivasi poet from Jharkhand, demonstrate this change. Their works

vividly depict the interconnected issues of caste discrimination, patriarchal violence, land loss, cultural disappearance, and ecological harm.[2] Their stories oppose the colonial legacy of epistemic violence, represented by orientalist views that portrayed indigenous peoples as primitive, passive, or lacking agency. Instead, these authors use oral traditions, testimonial accounts, memory work, and indigenous knowledge to assert resistance and resilience.[3] They highlight tribal cosmologies, ecological knowledge, and gender issues, portraying marginalised women not just as victims of injustice but as active creators of alternative knowledge.

Dalit women's writings, for example, highlight the daily intersections of caste and gender hierarchies in work, family, and social mobility.[4] Adivasi literature emphasises stories about land, memory, and ecological resistance, strongly challenging development-driven displacement and the loss of indigenous sovereignty. Through personal and collective testimonies, these texts challenge dominant Brahmanical and colonial narratives, providing alternative stories rooted in lived experiences and indigenous knowledge.[5]

This collection of literature functions as more than just artistic expression; it serves as a decolonial intervention. It widens Indian English studies, challenges upper-caste dominance, and promotes inclusive epistemologies that honour marginalised histories. In doing so, it makes a meaningful contribution to global decolonial efforts by focusing on equity, cultural sovereignty, and indigenous revival. In post-independence India, English literary studies have been heavily shaped by colonial legacies and Brahmanical dominance, often marginalising Dalit and Adivasi voices. Modern Indian English literature, particularly works by Dalit and Adivasi women writers, acts as a space for resistance, reclaiming subaltern identities through intersectional perspectives on caste, gender, and indigeneity, recognising education's role in transforming generations.[6] Education is essential to human life and sets us apart from animals. Since British rule, Dalit and Adivasi communities have been part of society but remain oppressed, often expected to perform menial labour for survival. Education was once a distant dream, handed down as a legacy of illiteracy across generations. Today, education is beginning to transform these communities [7]. As said earlier, education seems to foster confidence, which breeds hope, and as Confucius noted, hope brings peace. Studies show that societal progress relies on education. This belief is reflected in

their writings, forming the foundation of Dalit and Tribal Literature. [8]

Objective of the study

- To analyse the chosen works of Bama, a Tamil Dalit feminist writer, and Jacinta Kerketta, an Oraon Adivasi poet from Jharkhand, as compelling examples of decolonial counter-narratives in modern Indian English literature.
- To investigate how caste, gender, and tribal identities intersect and shape the experiences and resistance strategies of Dalit and Adivasi women.
- This analysis examines how literacy and education act as tools of empowerment, aiding in overcoming historical illiteracy, marginalisation, and epistemic violence rooted in colonial and Brahmanical discourses.
- Reinterpret and reclaim subaltern identities through indigenous Indian knowledge systems, oral histories, testimonial stories, and tribal cosmologies that contest mainstream narratives.
- To illustrate how Dalit and Adivasi women's writings address issues like caste exclusion, patriarchal violence, land dispossession, ecological resistance, and cultural sovereignty.
- To establish these literary works as active spaces of knowledge creation, highlighting how marginalised women emerge not just as victims but as agents of resistance and alternative ways of knowing.
- Advocate for decolonising English literary studies by expanding the canon, promoting inclusive knowledge systems, and acknowledging Dalit-Adivasi literature as vital to global decolonial efforts and indigenous revival.

Literature Review

Focusing on study issues and understanding the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and spirituality in tribal communities, one notable characteristic cannot be overlooked. Despite the tribes' lack of awareness, Hinduism continues to be used to describe their strong religious beliefs and rituals. Starting with the Munda tribe of Jharkhand, a neighbouring state of Odisha, we can examine this group. Ramdayal Munda, a member of the Munda tribe of Chota Nagpur, highlights in his book _Adivasi Astitva Aur Jharkhand Asmitake Sawal (2018) how forced

conversions have led to a loss of their rich tribal identity. He discusses the practice of Adi Dharm among tribes and critiques how cultural hierarchies impose Hindu identities on the Munda people. His ideas on 'Adivasi Hindu Nahin Hain' remain relevant today, as tribal communities still struggle to affirm their true faith.

Similarly, Jacinta Kerketta, a member of the Oraon community in Jharkhand, has raised her voice against those who seek to destroy their culture, forcefully expressing this in her poems. Through her writings, she has fought for Adivasi rights and the development of their religious identity. In her book Angor (2016), Kerketta writes,

Leaving behind their homes,

Their soil and bales of straw.

Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask:

O, city!

Are you ever wrenched by the very roots?

In the name of so-called progress? (p. 27).

She protests against the atrocities inflicted on her community in the name of development, voicing her dissatisfaction with how her culture and religion, core aspects of her identity, have been exploited and destroyed. In her 2016 book, Angor, Kerketta discusses her community's struggles both within and beyond her province. She advocates for respect for all individuals and the freedom to practice their religion and culture openly. Through this, we see how people with a profound spiritual longing seek personal growth through their faith, expressed through their free actions.

Besides the poets from the Munda, Oraon, and Naga tribes, whose poems embody an intrinsic religious motivation in which faith is considered the most vital life goal and a deeply internalised core value, we now examine the Odia tribes. Unlike the previous groups, their motivation is extrinsic, using religion as a tool to attain personal objectives like status, self-justification, security, social support, and comfort. For instance, Padmashree awardee Haldhar Nag, praised by Gulzar as an 'Adivasi poet' (Virtual Bharat, 2019), has highlighted the religious rituals of tribes in western Odisha. He employs religious literature to express his grief over widespread social injustices such as untouchability, rather than merely discussing religious rituals in general. He writes:

Some untouchable Sabar woman.

Lying comes from somewhere.

Someone has bashed and thrown her,

Maybe for her misdemeanour.

Guru said, not a Sabar woman,

She is the white milky ocean.

In the same ocean, Lord Vishnu.

Dwells, making it His home. (Nag, 2018, p. 157).

He has also sought to promote the indigenous dance styles showcased at festivals across western Odisha. It makes sense that extrinsically religious individuals use products such as clothing, accessories, dance, or songs to express their identity and connect with others, especially since they don't view religion itself as a form of personal self-expression. Instead, they might see these items as tools for social conformity, emphasising the importance of social bonds. People practising extrinsic religion tend to place greater importance on goods that serve expressive and socially compensatory roles.

The study highlights inconsistencies in literary style while emphasising the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religion and spirituality, as well as the popularity of tribal studies, especially in Odisha. Poetry is essential because songs and verses have historically played a significant role in Odisha's tribal culture and history. Despite evolving times, groups like the Kondh, Koi, Munda, and others remain committed either to their traditional beliefs or to abandoning them in pursuit of social acceptance and broader objectives. Therefore, analysing poetry related to Odisha's tribal spiritualities can indicate the level of social development. In this context, the poems of Bhima Bhoi and Purnamasi Jani are chosen to illustrate the concepts discussed. Purnamasi Jani is celebrated for her passionate intrinsic religiosity, while Bhima Bhoi exemplifies extrinsic religiosity.

Despite their notable reputations, these poets often lack the academic recognition they deserve. Analysing the works of poets like Bhima Bhoi and Purnamasi Jani becomes increasingly important as tribal literature gains prominence and more of their writings are included in the literary canon. Discussions about the societies, lifestyles, and issues of tribal cultures have long been ongoing. To gain a better understanding of these cultures, it is crucial to listen to the voices of these communities. Exploring how changing times are depicted and how they influence is vital for providing unbiased knowledge and helping scholars and readers advance their understanding of their literature and culture.

An influential work, Feminist Research Methodology: Indigenous Indian Context, offers a strong critique of dominant Western feminist models and advocates for

an indigenised approach rooted in India's diverse socio-cultural realities. It emphasises that feminist scholarship in India must move beyond universalist Western frameworks to engage meaningfully with localised historical contexts, oral traditions, and community-specific knowledge systems. This methodology highlights the importance of integrating marginality and intersectionality, especially examining how caste, class, gender, and ethnicity interact to shape the experiences of subaltern women.

By promoting decolonising research practices within English studies and the broader humanities, it is a call for emancipatory frameworks that emphasise the voices and agency of marginalised communities rather than just theorising about them. His work makes a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion on contextualising feminist inquiry in post-colonial societies, encouraging research that is culturally sensitive and politically transformative.[9]

Another work from the same domain, which examines the intersection of class, caste, gender, and literature in the book Indian Social Discourse, centres on the evolution of feminist struggles in India, focusing on women's fight for existence, recognition, and empowerment. In this work, the author critiques the multiple marginalisation of Dalit women in classical and contemporary Indian Literature. [10]

Highlighting the march of progress for female writers from the First Wave to the Second Wave and from the Second Wave to the Third Wave, various attempts to influence the morphological glossary structure of writing were made ceaselessly. The newly devised gender-fair vocabulary was introduced [11]. The present study attempts to investigate these emerging phenomena and identify the factors contributing to the birth, growth, and development of gender-fair language, which indisputably remains a nascent variety becoming part of writing.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is crucial to the research design. The thematic study draws on both primary and secondary sources. As primary sources, Bama's autobiographical and collective narratives in Karukku (1992, English trans. 2000) [12] and Sangati (1994) [13] expose the interlocking oppressions of caste and gender within Dalit Christian communities, while Kerketta's poetry collections, including Angor (2016) and Land of the Roots (2018/2025 English editions) [14], foreground Adivasi

ecological knowledge, land memory, and resistance to developmental dispossession. Kerketta's poetry, as described in her bio note, is marked by strong feeling and offers creative accounts of her ongoing fight to address her people's pathetic conditions, a struggle highlighted at both the national and international levels and that brings her fulfilment and acceptance. She uses poetry as a powerful tool to voice the injustices faced by Adivasi communities at the hands of various institutions and agencies. Kerketta shares in an interview with Muralidharan that poetry helped her speak to herself when she was away from home for her education. In another interview with Groundzero, she admits that poetry provided her with a platform to communicate her concerns to people worldwide [15]. This shows the strong presence of education and its effect on life.

The secondary source utilises decolonial theory, which critiques ongoing epistemic violence beyond formal colonialism and indigenous Indian epistemologies. It treats these texts as active challenges to orientalist stereotypes and Brahmanical hierarchies. By emphasising testimonial storytelling and oral traditions, Bama and Kerketta turn personal and collective trauma into sources of epistemic agency, connecting with global decolonial movements while anchoring their resistance in local Dalit feminist and Adivasi perspectives. This underscores that the issue extends beyond recognising the neglect of colonialism within the tradition; the article argues that this neglect also implicates its categories of critique and normative claims, and that it must be transformed. Recognising colonial histories necessitates material reparations for the inequalities inherited from the past, but these reparations also require transforming understandings and acknowledging epistemological justice.[16]

Theoretical Framework: Decolonial Epistemologies and Intersectionality

Decolonial approaches in the Indian context extend beyond postcolonial critiques of British rule to explore internal colonialities rooted in caste and Brahmanical patriarchy. Indigenous knowledge systems, expressed through Adivasi cosmologies and Dalit lived experiences, provide alternative ways of understanding that emphasise relationships with land, community, and ecology over Western or upper-caste universalism. The prevailing narrative in South Asian socio-legal studies views caste and tribe categories mainly as products of colonial knowledge-building efforts by the British to reorganise Indian or South Asian society for control. This view has been

challenged by Adivasi, Dalit, and anti-caste scholars, who highlight the pre-colonial origins of caste and Brahmanical dominance in shaping these categories. Despite recognising Brahmanical epistemology's key role in constructing caste and tribal identities, South Asian socio-legal studies primarily focus on critiquing colonial epistemology, laws, and institutions rather than Brahmanical knowledge itself. This focus forms the basis of decolonial thought in the region, equating decolonisation with the analysis and dismantling of colonial epistemology and related structures. [17]

Dalit feminist theory provides a crucial intersectional lens. Sharmila Rege's articulation of a 'Dalit feminist standpoint' critiques both mainstream (upper-caste) feminism and Dalit male-centric politics, arguing that Dalit women's lived experiences generate unique epistemic positions that demand a transformation from their cause to our cause. Gopal Guru's earlier intervention on how Dalit women talk differently highlighted the necessity of recognising internal differences within subaltern groups, prompting Rege's response that standpoint epistemology must avoid narrow identity politics while foregrounding collective struggle.[18]

Adivasi Narratives looking beyond the prevalent Decolonial approach.

In Adivasi literature, decolonial reading combines ecofeminist perspectives with critiques of development-driven displacement, focusing on land as a site of memory, cultural sovereignty, and gendered resistance rather than merely a resource. These frameworks work together to challenge epistemic violence by affirming oral, testimonial, and speculative knowledge systems as valid. In Adivasi studies, the origins of grievances are largely linked to colonial times. Colonial rule, along with its epistemologies, laws, and governance, is criticised for stripping Adivasis of land and social autonomy and for labelling them as 'primitive', 'backward', and 'uncivilised', thereby affecting all groups categorised as 'tribes'. To address these injustices, it's necessary to move beyond colonial frameworks and their lingering influences in post-colonial India, which form the core of the decolonial approach in Adivasi studies. While the widespread decolonial approach reflects on the chaos and destruction caused by British colonialism in Adivasi society and South Asia overall, my ethnographic fieldwork with the Adivasi Munda community in Khunti, Jharkhand, revealed that this approach overlooks the Adivasi critique of Brahmanism, which

shapes their understanding of their historical and societal role in India. The following two oral historical narratives offer a different perspective from the dominant decolonial view. [19]

Bama's Dalit Counter-Narratives: Caste-Gender Hierarchies and Everyday Resistance in Indian English Literature

Bringing Dalit literature into English, though time-consuming, represents a significant act of courage and self-assertion. For generations, India's Dalit communities, once called untouchables, faced systemic caste oppression, with their stories often silenced or taken over by dominant groups. This study shows how Dalit writers use powerful literary expression to transform this reality, turning personal trauma into collective resistance and reclaiming human dignity. It specifically examines authors such as Omprakash Valmiki, Bama Faustina, and Meena Kandasamy, who use literature to challenge centuries of discrimination. Their works go beyond documenting suffering, blending traditional folk elements with modern literary techniques. Using English serves two key purposes: engaging educated Indian readers often disconnected from caste issues, and building global links with human rights movements. The movement's roots can be traced to Dr B.R. Ambedkar's ideas, especially his view of education as a tool against caste oppression. Special focus is given to intersectionality, notably to the layered struggle of Dalit and Adavishi women against caste and gender oppression. The study also assesses the literature's societal influence, including its role in shaping school curricula, sparking national conversations on privilege, and inspiring new generations. Bama Faustina Soosairaj's works, Karukku and Sangati, exemplify testimonial literature that gives voice to Dalit Christian women. In Karukku, Bama shares the experiences of Paraiyar women in Tamil Nadu, highlighting caste discrimination within the Catholic Church, separate training for Dalit nuns, dehumanising labour, patriarchal control, and village-level untouchability.

Writing itself becomes a political weapon: we have to bring about change in a society where all are equal. Bama's narrative shifts from victimhood to resilience, portraying Dalit women's hard labour, communal solidarity, and rejection of oppressive institutions, including her own exit from convent life. Sangati extends this to multiple voices, celebrating collective resistance to intersecting caste-gender violence while critiquing religion as a tool of control.

This study challenges colonial orientalism (natives as passive) and Brahmanical erasure by foregrounding Dalit women as knowledge producers. Through everyday survival strategies, education, singlehood as autonomy, and oral storytelling, Bama enacts decolonial reclamation, aligning with Rege's standpoint by transforming personal testimony into broader epistemic critique.[20]

Jacinta Kerketta's Adivasi Poetics: Land Memory, Ecological Resistance, and Indigenous Cosmologies

Adivasi memory in India is deeply entwined with the land, not merely as territory but as a site of cultural identity, historical continuity, and political struggle.[21] Jacinta Kerketta's poetry, often bilingual (Hindi-English) and rooted in the Oraon Adivasi traditions of Jharkhand, celebrates tribal cosmologies while protesting against land dispossession, mining-driven displacement, and cultural erosion [22]. Collections such as Angor (Ember) [23] and Land of the Roots (Jadon Ki Zameen) weave memory, ecology, and gendered agency into counter-narratives that challenge development as a form of neo-colonial violence. [24]

Poems such as those in *Loving Like a Tree* (recent translations) depict love as arboreal and relational: in 'When Love Becomes a Tree,' a lover stands firm like a tree, awaiting the bird's return, embodying indigenous epistemologies of interdependence with nature. Ecological resistance appears starkly in critiques of intermediaries selling land (What Will They Do?) and state violence displacing communities (People Running Scared from Elephants), where forests once offered sanctuary but now vanish under concrete jungles. Gendered dimensions emerge in portrayals of women's labour, migration trauma, and defiance against patriarchal and capitalist exploitation.[25]

Kerketta's speculative and testimonial modes, drawing on oral Adivasi traditions, oppose orientalist primitivism by asserting Adivasi agency, ecological wisdom, and sovereignty. Her work thus contributes to Indian Knowledge Systems by validating indigenous relational ontologies over extractive modernity.

Intersectional Analysis: Subaltern Women as Agents of Alternative Knowledge

The intersection of caste, gender, and tribal identities in Bama and Kerketta reveals subaltern women not as passive

victims but as active producers of decolonial knowledge. Dalit women in Bama's narratives navigate triple oppression (caste-gender-religion), using survival tactics and storytelling as forms of resistance; Adivasi women in Kerketta's poetry link gendered bodies to land memory, opposing displacement while reclaiming cosmologies that integrate ecology, community, and spirituality.

These counter-narratives oppose epistemic violence by centring oral traditions and speculative futures, Bama's communal testimonies, and Kerketta's ember-like poems that ignite resurgence. Together, they broaden the English literary canon, demanding inclusion of translated and indigenous voices beyond upper-caste dominance. [26]

Expanding Decolonial Epistemologies through the Regional Indigenous Voice of Haldar Nag

Apart from the female contribution, the renowned poet Haldar Nag effectively portrays their poetic sensibility, which has significantly influenced their poetic instincts by grounding their verses in the lived realities of rural Odisha. His work forges close links between poetry and daily life. His themes, covering nature, society, mythology, and religion, serve as powerful tools for social critique and the affirmation of human dignity, acting as new testimony to tribal communication, preserving their traditional worship practices, upholding ingrained religious beliefs, and rejecting anything that feels unnatural. Written solely in the Koshali (Sambalpuri) language, Nag's body of work centres on a resilient fighter who confronts personal hardships and advocates for social change. He is widely known as 'Lok Kavi Ratna' (People's Poet Gem) in Odisha. He embodies Gandhian ideals of 'simple living, high thinking,' as exemplified by his arrival barefoot and in modest attire to accept the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, from President Pranab Mukherjee in 2016. The research compares the poetry of Bhima Bhoi and Purnamasi Jani: Bhoi's poems reveal how Mahima Dharma developed from social, spiritual, and religious attitudes and practices, while Jani's poems show her dedication to serving Lord Jagannath (the tribal deity). The study focuses on the deep beliefs and experiences of the Kondh and Kui peoples, analysing their intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and spirituality in the selected poems, comparing and contrasting their belief systems, and providing insights into the diverse religious and spiritual practices in Odisha.

Nag's journey from a street hawker and child labourer to a celebrated poet and

Padma Shri recipient stands as a powerful example of subaltern resilience and decolonial agency. Born on March 31, 1950, in Ghens village, Bargarh district, western Odisha, he lost his father early in life. After dropping out of school in Class III to support his family, Nag initially worked as a dishwasher at a local sweetmeat shop for 2 years. Later, the village head arranged for him to serve as a high school cook, a position he held for sixteen years. During this time, he borrowed ₹1,000 to start a small stationery shop near the school and also hawked Raag Chanaa (spiced chickpeas), a modest livelihood he maintains alongside his shop. Despite personal hardships, including the loss of his parents and economic difficulties, Nag's love for poetry never waned. He composes orally, memorising entire verses and dictating them, and published his first poem in a local magazine in 1990.

Nag has created twenty epics and numerous poems over several decades, many of which have inspired doctoral dissertations and are included in the postgraduate syllabus at Sambalpur University. His unique style, influenced by folk idioms of western Odisha, has drawn comparisons to the renowned Sambalpuri poet Gangadhar Meher for its simplicity, rhythmic vitality, and humanism. Collections like Lokgeet, Samparda, Krushnaguru, Mahasati Urmila, and Veer Surendra Sai combine mythological themes with modern social issues, including Adivasi displacement, agrarian crises, and the decline of traditional ecological knowledge amid modernisation. His works highlight tribal worldviews, community unity, and resistance to social hierarchies, portraying the poet as an active force shaping collective ideas into lasting forms. As Nag notes, 'Everyone is a poet, but only a few have the art of giving them shape.'

Nag's poetry has been translated into Hindi, English, Kannada, Tamil, and Bengali, facilitating its reach in both national and international literary circles. Celebrated filmmaker and poet Gulzar paid tribute through a short film, calling him 'Son of the soil of Sambalpur, this Adivasi poet', highlighting how his Kosali verses resonate with the land's rhythms. In 2019, Sambalpur University awarded him an honorary doctorate in literature, recognising his role as a custodian of indigenous knowledge.

In this study, Haldhar Nag's work extends the decolonial counter-narratives explored in the writings of Bama and Jacinta Kerketta. Although his poetry is rooted in a regional indigenous language rather than English, its translation and

scholarly study highlight how Adivasi oral traditions challenge both Brahmanical and colonial erasures. By emphasising land memory, ecological wisdom, gendered and community agency, and resistance to developmental displacement, core themes in Kerketta's poetry, Nag contributes to Indian Knowledge Systems. His testimonial epics and folk ballads turn personal and collective struggles into forms of epistemic sovereignty, opposing the dominance of metropolitan English literature and elevating marginalised histories as essential to global decolonial efforts. Hence, Nag's progression from hawker to celebrated poet parallels the survival and resurgence stories of subaltern women previously discussed, emphasising that decolonial literature flourishes not only in English but through the revival of India's diverse languages and indigenous epistemologies. India's darker regions hold brighter gems; its less-explored regions contain valuable cultural treasures. [27]

Conclusion: Ethical Interventions and Decolonising the Canon

India's less-explored regions hold valuable cultural treasures; however, this study shows that significant progress is still needed to achieve the goal. Purnamasi Jani's writings demonstrate how deep-rooted religiosity can bolster the development of personal identity [28]. Her poetry reflects her respect for the customs and traditions of her Kui tribe while highlighting the rich heritage and practices of the Jagannath religion [29]. This research enhances our understanding of tribal societies by examining their religious beliefs and orientations. Additionally, it provides a framework for predicting future community development. It illustrates how religion can serve as a tool for evaluating societal progress and challenging prevailing assumptions, as articulated in Sharmila Rege's article, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' [30]. The works of Bama and Jacinta Kerketta serve as ethical interventions, promoting inclusive epistemologies that support equity, sovereignty, and indigenous resurgence. By counteracting inherited hierarchies, including colonial, Brahmanical, and developmental, they affirm marginalised histories as vital to global decolonial progress. English literary studies in India should incorporate these voices by updating curricula to emphasise Dalit-Adivasi literature and decolonial frameworks. Ultimately, these counter-narratives not only combat erasure but also actively reshape knowledge towards justice and diversity.

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