

Ecopolitical Injustice and Indigenous Resistance in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A Study of Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave*

Ayan Mondal*¹

ABSTRACT

This paper examines ecopolitical injustice in Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave*, focusing on the impact of extractive and urban-industrial development on the socio-ecological fabric of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It highlights how these forces disrupt the traditional human-nature relationship and threaten the indigenous way of life. Through characters like Harish, Seema, David, and Professor Kutty, Sekhsaria intertwines fiction with reality to portray environmental challenges and their repercussions. Drawing on bioregional, ecocritical, and developmental theories, the paper critiques anthropocentric developmental models rooted in ecological imperialism and proposes indigenous ecological knowledge as a pathway to addressing the escalating global ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS

capitalocene, climate crisis, ecopolitical injustice, environmental justice, indigenous resistance

1 | INTRODUCTION

Living in an age characterized by the uncertainty of precarious climatic conditions, caused primarily by an ecopolitical system “that destroyed the very conditions that make this planet liveable” (Hatzisavvidou 2), necessitates a critique of such “unjust nature of political processes and decisions” (2). Such systemic power asymmetries are responsible for creating what Yusoff and Gabrys refers to as “a generative space of unknowing” (qtd. in Hatzisavvidou 3) and a society deepened by the epistemic hierarchies that govern divergent futurities. This era, aptly referred to as the ‘Capitalocene’ by Jason Moore and Andreas Malm, highlights the pivotal role of capitalism in reshaping how we interact with the environment. It highlights the importance of examining the particular historical and economic frameworks that have shaped shifts in our ecological impact. In *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Naomi Klein examines how in moments of intense societal strain—such as economic recessions, natural disasters, and conflicts, the “corporate

* Research Scholar, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, ayan.tiru8@gmail.com

interests systematically exploit these various forms of crisis to ram through policies that enrich a small elite- by lifting regulations, cutting social spending, and forcing large-scale privatizations of the public sphere” (15), and the climate crisis also presents itself as a similar opportunity in the hands of the elite few.

Ecopolitical injustices in contemporary society are primarily driven by a profit-seeking agenda, with the socially vulnerable groups bearing the disproportionate burden of its consequences. The pursuit of developmental projects prioritizes economic growth and infrastructure at the expense of the rights, well-being and cultural heritage of the indigenous communities, as well as their surrounding ecology. Lacking in consent of the tribal population, this approach reflects a lopsided motif and disregard of the indigenous tribes’ concerns and rights with the interests of the rich and powerful taking precedence. The construction of large dams, such as the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, has led to the displacement of tribal communities without adequate compensation or rehabilitation. More recently, the Hasdeo Forest has seen felling of thousands of trees for the Parsa East and Kanta Basan (PEKB) coal blocks of Chhattisgarh (Nitnaware). The 170,000 hectares Hasdeo Forest, also known as the ‘lungs of Chhattisgarh’, is home to several indigenous communities, such as the Gond, Oraon, and Kunwar, who share a harmonious reciprocal relationship with their environment. With a “total of five billion tonnes of coal estimated to be sitting under the forest area”, “the coal ministry allocated four coal blocks to Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Utpadan Nigam (RRVUN), which has signed a mine development and operation agreement with the Adani group for mining activities” (Mohanty). The article “Activists allege thousands of trees felled in Hasdeo for coal mining” highlights that the ongoing deforestation will not only “displace and impact the livelihoods of 700 indigenous families from neighbouring villages in Surguja district of northern Chhattisgarh such as Sahli, Tara, Janardhanpur, Ghatbarra, Fatehpur and Hariharpur” (Nitnaware) but also “affect the river Hasdeo, increase human-elephant conflict and negatively impact the biodiversity of the region” (Nitnaware).

In the face of such adverse circumstances, the indigenous communities face a fate similar to those of many endangered species around the world. However, unlike many non-human species, they carry the agency to resist such injustices. In this light, it becomes essential in foregrounding their environmental activism as a mode of resistance against the ecopolitical injustices in attaining environmental justice. This paper calls attention to the ecopolitical injustices and indigenous vulnerability in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands through an analysis of Pankaj Sekhsaria’s novel *The Last Wave*. With the Great Nicobar Project looming large upon the Nicobar Island, which carries along with it a potential extinction of the Shompen tribe living in the island, the novel is significant in raising awareness about such megaprojects and the subsequent risk it carries. The paper also aims to instigate a sense of urgent resistance against such megaprojects, by foregrounding the insurgence of characters such as Harish, David, Seema as well as the Jarawa community.

2 | ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, nestled in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, is an island archipelago comprising over 500 islands (Mander). The islands serve as a vital hub for biodiversity, hosting a wide array of flora and fauna, and is home to numerous endangered plant and animal species such as *Ficus andamanica*, *Bentinckia nicobarica*, Nicobar

megapode and the Andaman spiny shrew. Harsh Mander in “Introduction: Contested Imaginations” observes:

The original residents of the islands the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa and the Sentinelese - have a history that dates back at least 40,000 years... if the real history of the islands is ever written, the British would be no more than a page and India could be only a paragraph. Yet in just the last 150 years, their population has been reduced from 5,000 to just 500, and today even these numbers are gravely threatened. The Great Andamanese have been reduced to only about fifty, and the Onge a little more than a hundred. (1)

Today, the islands stand at an emblematic crossroads with the rapidly decreasing numbers of the tribal people and “the modernist agenda brought in by colonial rulers” (1) has continued in the postcolonial era. According to Arundhati Roy, in order to make the incomprehensible comprehensible, the intangible tangible, there needs to be a fictional representation of the dispossession in order to bring the issues into the realm of common understanding. She calls for ‘a new kind of art’ that invites the readers to look beyond the arithmetic of monetary profit and loss, and to think more humanely and intimately about its irreversible human, cultural and ecological damages. In her book *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy propounds, “What is happening to the world lies, at the moment, just outside the realm of common human understanding. It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers, the filmmakers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding” (43). Inspired by Umberto Eco, Dana Phillips in her article “Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology” questions, “Does the truth of ecology lie in literature?” (578). Margaret Atwood in her essay “Literature and the Environment” observes:

We will weave “the environment” into our stories whether we intend to or not because storytellers have always been attached to their world – both physical and social – and their stories have changed as the world has changed, and our own world is changing very quickly... So our stories will inevitably reflect those changes... Perhaps it will be a talisman, to protect us, even a little. Perhaps it will be a list of dangers. Perhaps it will be a charm, to alter the way in which we see. Perhaps we will once more talk with animals, and be instructed by plants. Who knows what forms our metaphors will take? (167)

Pankaj Sekhsaria’s *The Last Wave* “depicts the profligacy of modern industrial society” (Biswas and Khakhlari 233) and weaves in the rich tapestry of local history, the Andaman’s rich ecological terrain, its colonial legacy, and the rapaciousness of capital into the narrative.

3 | ECOPOLITICAL INJUSTICE AND INDIGENOUS VULNERABILITY IN THE LAST WAVE

In his novel *The Last Wave*, Pankaj Sekhsaria illuminates urgent issues such as deforestation, animal poaching and wildlife trafficking, forest encroachments and the forced relocation of the Jarawa tribe. These issues highlight the consequences of anthropocentric and capitalocentric interventions on the island, underscoring the adverse impacts of human-centric and profit-driven approaches on the ecosystems as well as the indigenous communities. The narrative seamlessly blends reality with fiction and the story is unfolded through “the characters of Harish- a researcher, Seema- a local-born anthropology research scholar, David- a biologist surveying crocodiles in the Andaman Islands, and Professor Kutty-

a senior biologist who notices and warns about the islands' altering ecology due to excessive logging" (Biswas and Khakhlari 233). The imminent perils looming over the island are unveiled through Harish, Seema and David's interactions with characters like Biswas, Michael Ross, Shiva, Felix, and Tanumei (233).

In the "Prologue" to the novel, Sekhsaria vividly captures the mystifying enigma of the Andaman Islands through a description of a creek on the islands:

The creek, so pretty and welcoming by day, had acquired a completely different feel at night; the waxy green of the mangroves had now turned pitch-black. Dense, uninviting, its earlier enticements replaced by an ominous darkness. The mangrove revealed nothing of what lay beyond. The sky, juxtaposed, offered relief – studded with a million twinkling pinpricks, little windows to gaze into and see through to the other side of the great heavens. (1)

The "ominous darkness" (1) referred to is an integral part of the ecosystem of the Andaman Islands that in retrospect helps to preserve and sustain the ecology of the Islands and the tribal communities living there. The real 'ominous' side of the islands is reflected through the description of Port Blair upon Seema's return to the island:

[Port Blair] was far more crowded and chaotic than Seema remembered. There was an increasing restlessness – more vehicles, more speed, more movement, more action, more desire and greater ambition. The nights were longer, the shops bigger, the noises louder and the roads narrower. Garbage now accumulated on street corners and on the roads; dogs had multiplied in direct proportion to the spread of the dirt and filth. (33)

With "concrete replacing timber" (33) at an expeditious rate and population rising exponentially over the years, mostly consisting of labourers, traders, and petty businessmen from outside, Sekhsaria likens it to "an incoming tide that keeps rising, a tide that now refuses to turn back" (36). This description acts as a metaphor ominously foreboding the tsunami at the climax of the novel which would lead to one of the protagonists and multiple local inhabitants being "swamped into insignificance" (36).

Jason W. Moore in his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life* states that "the view of Nature as external is a fundamental condition of capital accumulation" (14) and "Capitalism's growing conceit is that... Nature is external and may be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth, social development, or some other higher good" (14). The hierarchy of the capitalist economic system establishes boundaries where "the big players" (Sekhsaria 200) elude responsibility for the exploitation and depletion of natural resources, and "the poor forest labour" (200) gets "the rough end of the stick" (200). The timber logging and forestry operations on one side of the Andaman Trunk Road created "small inroads into the impregnable forests. Small channels that grew step by step, day by day; channels that slowly sent in people, elephants and trucks and quickly sucked out everything – log by log, tree by tree, forest by forest" (191-192). Using the PT flowers as "a metaphor of the altering ecosystem" (Biswas and Khakhlari 235), Dr. Sreekumar Kutty highlights how the entire evergreen forest cover of the island is changing into deciduous because of the management practice. He explains how it is an important characteristic of the PT flower to need direct sunlight in order for it to bloom, and the side of the road that had seen "extensive timber extraction over the years" (Sekhsaria 188) had abundant growth of PT flowers as opposed to the other side of the road with no sign of the flower. This side of the road belonged to the Jarawa Reserve where "the Forest Department has never been

allowed to enter” (188). Hence, “the beautiful and enchanting pink orchid becomes a metaphor for a destructive transformation brought about by human interference” (Biswas and Khakhlari 236). During the course of Harish and Dr. Kutty’s fieldwork, they discover that the logging activities has spilled over into the boundary of the Jarawa Tribal Reserve which makes the ongoing extraction illegal. However, even with evidence, Dr. Kutty feels there is little hope for the Jarawas to survive over time. He remarks that the Jarawas are left in a precarious position, “Their future is like the present of the Great Andamanese and the Onge: if they get into the mainstream, they perish; if they don’t, then perish faster” (Sekhsaria 198).

With the acceleration of Anthropocentric and Capitalocentric practices, everything around the Jarawas is changing at an alarming pace, and with the felling of trees within the Jarawa Reserve, they are left exposed to the short-term profit-seeking schemas of the consumerist society. The Jarawas are left vulnerable and exposed to exploitation by the mainstream society, as exemplified through the episode surrounding Michael Ross, a photo-journalist on assignment with the Bangkok Mail. After David manages to fend off Michael Ross and the other local intruders from within the Jarawa territory, he narrates to Harish the manner in which the tribal men and women are exploited. He says that “Two years ago, there was this French guy, also a photo-journalist, who had come to the Institute. He told me he was interested in wildlife, forests and the tribal people on the islands” (152). After being denied permission by David, he went behind his back and clicked several photos of the Jarawas, mostly women. He tricked many of the Jarawa women into posing naked with one of the photos being “a wide-angled picture of a well-proportioned Jarawa woman reclining in the crystal waters of the coast, her head resting on her hand, her breasts thrusting into the camera” (152-153). In addition to this, he presented a “noble, untainted savage” (153) version of the Jarawa women to suit his commercial purposes and fabricated the narrative by adding a biographical note at the end of that feature, which stated that Henri was an “award-winning photojournalist who had not only risked potential attack by the dangerous Jarawas, but also taken his chances with the Indian law to get these pictures” (153).

Through the character of Mr. Biswas, Sekhsaria exposes how the exploitation is not limited to international poachers but is also appropriated by the local settlers of the islands. This becomes evident during Harish’s conversation with David where David reveals that the owner of the Biswas Super Store in town, Mr. Biswas, made his crores by illegal extraction of resources from the Jarawa Reserves. David remarks:

The guy has immense risk-taking capacities. He would regularly venture into places others would never dare to enter, like Bluff Island, like Spike, like the forests of Port Campbell. Shark fishing, diving for shell and sea cucumber, hunting turtles in the shallow waters, wild pig in the forests and more than the occasional crocodile. These crocodile skins fetch a huge price in the international leather market, and Biswas has at least three channels to smuggle them out of here. (134)

4 | RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE AGAINST THE CAPITALOCENE PREDATION IN *THE LAST WAVE*

In *The Last Wave*, Sekhsaria illuminates both the exploitation faced by the Jarawas and their remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. A Jarawa man speaking out against the abuse they have to face remarks:

The girls say, that the outside boys pressure them to do a lot. They pressure them with their hands and fingernails, when the girls get angry. They chase them under the influence of alcohol. They have sex with the girls... They drink alcohol in the girls' house. They sleep in the Jarawa's house. They smoke marijuana and then chase the girls. ("The Jarawa")

Through characters like Harish, David, Seema, and the Jarawa community itself, Sekhsaria portrays a narrative not just of predation and resource plundering but also of resistance and opposition to these injustices.

In the chapter "Murderous Jarawas Again", Constable Pillai of Bush Police Camp Tirur No. 1 is found with his "mutilated body" (Sekhsaria 83) and chopped off hands "beside the path that connects the village settlement to the police camp" (83). Initially, this caused an outrage against the Jarawas of Tirur as is evident from the local newspaper report: "The Jarawas of Tirur appear to be getting bolder with every passing day. While earlier they attacked only villagers, this time, their target has been a policeman... The Jarawas are becoming a serious problem" (83). However, the subsequent reality became evident later during Harish's interaction with the old man. During their conversation, the old man revealed that "Pillai had gone hunting deep inside the forests with two other policemen" (90) in the Jarawa territory during his three-days leave. He further stated that other policemen would often go into the forests to hunt "wild pig and deer" (91) and the Jarawas would never attack them. However,

Pillai had other interests too. At least thrice, we heard that he had destroyed some Jarawa huts. He enjoyed doing it and would often boast about this to others. Many months ago, we heard that he had cornered a Jarawa woman in one of their camps after firing in the air and scaring away the others. Can you believe this?' The old man turned his head and spat out in disgust, 'He forced himself on the woman and came back boasting of his manliness. Is it not strange that only Pillai was treated in this manner the other day and nothing was done to the others who had gone with him? See, the Jarawa never forget,' he repeated. (91)

Using his social status as a policeman, Pillai forced himself upon the Jarawa woman and also destroyed some Jarawa huts. This led to the brutal retaliation of the Jarawas, inherent in which is the message of the Newtonian third law of motion. Their rebellious act serves as a cautionary tale against the encroachment and exploitation undertaken by intruders within their territory and highlights the potential for resistance when necessary.

The characters of Harish, David and Seema also fight for the cause of the Jarawas and the ecology of the Andaman Islands to resist the Capitalocene predation on the Islands. David not only prevents Michael Ross from extending his stay in the Jarawa territory, but also threatens Shiva and Asit, the local guides, for bringing the foreigner without any permit. Following their intense interaction, "David and Michael locked eyes one last time. David stood his ground, and Michael Ross left in a huff. This had been an uneven match from the very beginning. This was David's territory – the Englishman didn't really have a chance" (151). Having witnessed the exploitation of the Jarawa men and women in the incident involving the French photo-journalist, David was adamant not to allow a repeat of such similar advantageous manipulation of the Jarawas.

The chapter "A Lifeline For The Islands" presents a scathing commentary on the narrow-minded perspectives and selfish motives of the politicians and such people in power. This is evident from the conversation between Harish, Seema, David, Justice Singh and

Samaresh Basu, a former Member of Parliament and a very powerful man. Mr. Basu's parochial attitude is noticeable in his opening remark to Justice Singh, "did you have some good Jarawa sightings?" (214). This reflects his outlook towards the Jarawas who are essentially reduced to endangered animal-like figures. The judge's reaction, "Yes, we saw seven of them" (214) highlights that he, too, shares Mr. Basu's myopic view of the Jarawas. Mr. Basu's later remarks highlight not only his paternalistic and elitist outlook of the Jarawas but also reflects himself as a political opportunist. He observes:

Naked people on the road is not good for us; it is not good for our image. What will the world say? That naked people roam on the roads in India, and the government is not doing anything about it?' Basu's was a well-rehearsed act. 'They live a very miserable life in the forest, sir, – no home, no proper food – moving around from one place to another, digging roots, hunting, fishing. Sir, we need to civilize them. We need to teach them how to live proper lives, wear clothes, make houses, do some agriculture, maybe bagicha, bring them into the mainstream so that they can live life normally, enjoy the benefits of civilization and modernization. So far they were very violent, but now they are changing. That is why they have started to come on the road. We now have a good chance.' (214-215)

This remark caused an outrage in Seema and Harish who had enough of Mr. Basu's belittling and shrewd remarks. Mr. Basu's suggestion to collect and take away "all the Jarawas – they are only about three hundred of them anyway" (215) to some other island forced Seema to vehemently resist his idea and defend the position of the Jarawas. Harish, too, joined Seema in taking the protest to Mr. Basu:

The problem then cannot be with the Jarawas. It is with the road and with your people. Mr Basu, your suggestion to move them to another island would amount to forcibly taking their land from them. There is a serious problem with that. The Jarawas were here much before we all came here. This is the forest and the land of the Jarawas. It always was. (216)

The final blow was dealt by Harish when he asserted that the forests that were being cut for timber by the Forest Department inside the Jarawa Reserve was an illegal act. This forced Justice Singh to speak up against the illegal timber extraction operation inside the Jarawa Tribal Reserve.

Harish's decision to stay back in the islands at the end of the novel despite having lost the company of Seema, who gets swept away by the Tsunami, underscores his dedication to the Jarawa cause. In the epilogue of the novel, Harish comes across Erema, a Jarawa man he had met before, and learns about his daughter's washout in the Tsunami and his son suffering from measles. Witnessing the "desolate smile of a grieving father" (281) fleeting away, Harish "felt a moment of unexpected liberation. His pain and his loss felt humbled in those few moments. How could he compare his loss to that of Erema's, the loss of his family, his way of life, his people?" (281). This moment of epiphany convinced Harish against going back to his home in the mainland and stay in the islands devoting himself to the cause of the Jarawas.

5 | CONCLUSION

Ecopolitical injustices manifest through the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and privileges, entrenched in systemic power asymmetries that marginalize vulnerable

populations. Within the climate crisis, these injustices are deepened by the epistemic hierarchies that govern differing visions of the future, where uncertainties and unequal access to knowledge determine whose needs and interests are prioritized in developing responses to the crisis. The indigenous communities living on the margins suffer the heaviest brunt of it. There have been very little efforts made to protect and preserve the ecology and the culture of the indigenous communities. Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* brings out these injustices inflicted upon the Jarawas in the Andaman Islands and highlights their resilient nature when confronted with adversity. Although a Herculean task, the novel encourages more people from beyond the tribal communities to fight for the tribal cause, as the dwindling population of the Andaman tribes needs solidarity and togetherness to survive extinction.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. "Literature and the Environment." *Burning Questions: Essays and Occasional Pieces, 2004 to 2021*, Doubleday, 2022.
- Biswas, Debajyoti, and Georgina Khakhlari. "Anthropocene and Ecoprearity: Indigenous lives in Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave: An Island Novel*." *Dogo Rangsang Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 27, Oct. 2022, pp. 230-238.
- Hatzisavvidou, Sophia. "Envisioning Ecopolitical Futures: Reading Climate Fiction as Political Theory." *Futures*, vol. 163, no. 103456, 2024, pp. 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2024.103456>.
- Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Mander, Harsh. "Introduction: Contested Imaginations." *Islands In Flux: The Andaman and Nicobar Story*, HarperCollins Publishers India, 2017.
- Mohanty, Basant Kumar. "Activists Flag BJP Government's Tree Cutting Drive in Chhattisgarh Forest for Mining by Adani." *The Telegraph*, 3 Jan. 2024, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/activists-flag-bjp-governments-tree-cutting-drive-in-chhattisgarh-forest-for-mining-by-adani/cid/1991150>.
- Moore, Jason W. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books, 2015.
- Nitnaware, Himanshu. "Activists Allege Thousands of Trees Felled in Hasdeo for Coal Mining." *DownToEarth*, 04 Jan. 2024, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/activists-allege-thousands-of-trees-felled-in-hasdeo-for-coal-mining-93718>.
- Phillips, Dana. "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology." *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1999, pp. 577-602. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057556>.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. Penguin Books India, 2002.
- Sekhsaria, Pankaj. *The Last Wave: An Island Novel*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2014.
- "The Jarawa." *Survival*, <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/jarawa>.