
<https://caravanmagazine.in/books/reading-list-ten-voices-adivasi-literature>

BOOKS / LITERATURE

Ten voices from Adivasi literature

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“People want Adivasi literature, not Adivasi writers,” a Koitur writer once told me. A quick web search for “Adivasi books” will show that most books about Adivasi communities have been and are still written by non-Adivasi, upper-caste writers. Adivasi—a term accepted by indigenous communities in peninsular India—communities have created oral archives of their histories and knowledge systems, in the form of songs, stories and mythologies, over generations. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, though, the communities have not exclusively used oral systems. Susheela Samad, among the earliest Adivasi writers, was the editor of the magazine *Chandni* from 1925 to 1930, and her two poetry collections were published in 1935 and 1948. Alice Ekka, also considered one of the first Adivasi women writers in Hindi, published several stories in the 1960s in the weekly magazine *Adivasi Patrika*. The writer Munshi Mangal Singh Masram first attempted to codify Gondi grammar in the 1920s, and these efforts were later published as a book in 1957. However, written Adivasi literature is mainly confined to a few larger communities and certain regions, while the majority of the Adivasi communities—especially belonging to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups—has not yet had any written literature penned by their own people. Moreover, their

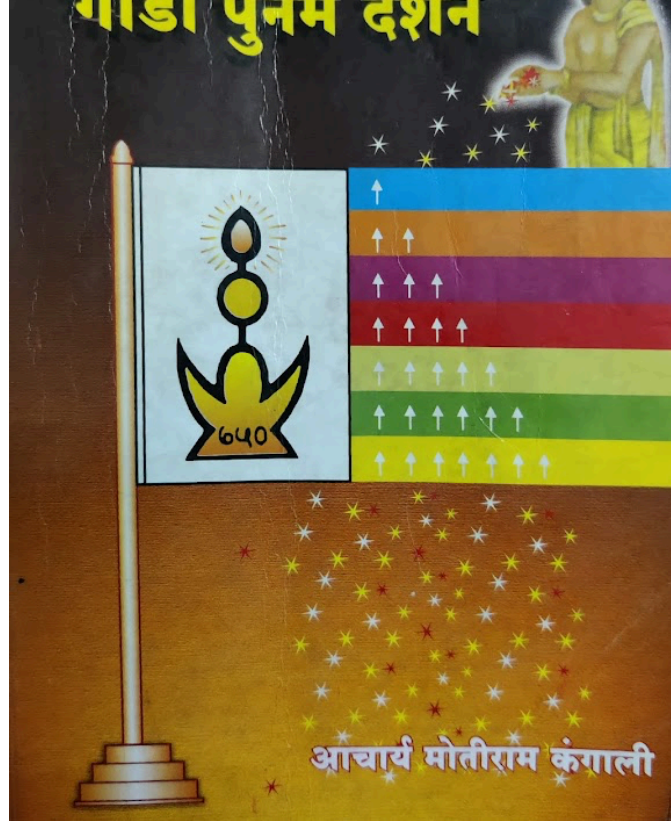
own indigenous languages have become vulnerable and endangered due to the lack of state recognition and support.

There are still very few English-language books by Adivasi writers, since English as a medium of education still remains the privilege of a few. There is also an urgent need for the translation of vernacular Adivasi literature into English. For instance, the Koitur community, made up of fourteen million people, has not had a single book published in English so far, although there are many writers who have published in Hindi, Marathi and Telugu. There are also books by Adivasi writers written in other vernacular languages—including Gujarati, Bengali, Odia, Malayalam and Kannada—as well as their own indigenous languages, such as Gondi, Kurukh, Santali, Ho and Bhili. Most of this writing in vernacular languages can mainly be found in jatras and annual gatherings of various Adivasi organisations. Moreover, the academic discourse on Adivasis, with very little representation from these communities, leaves little space for Adivasi voices from the linguistic margins.

In recognition of these voices, the list of books below—by no means exhaustive—by Adivasi writers in vernacular languages is a mixture of some of the “first” writings by people from their community. Some are older, some contemporary, but they are all deeply grounded in Adivasi politics, and contextualise social and historical aspects of issues faced by the communities in different regions. They address the questions of Adivasi-Indigenous identity; the havoc caused by the capitalist model of “development” on Adivasi land; the communities’ changing relationship with “*Jal, Jangal, Jameen*”; and the influence of outside religions and cultures. Some also contain the strong and assertive voices of Adivasi women against various forms of violence and articulate their views on Adivasi society at large. The poems and stories in these books are not from a victimised viewpoint. They put forward empowering narratives, grounded in the lived experiences of Adivasi writers.



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1. *Paari Kupaar Lingo: Gondi Punem Darshan* by Motiravan Kangali (Chandralekha Kangali Publications, 1989)

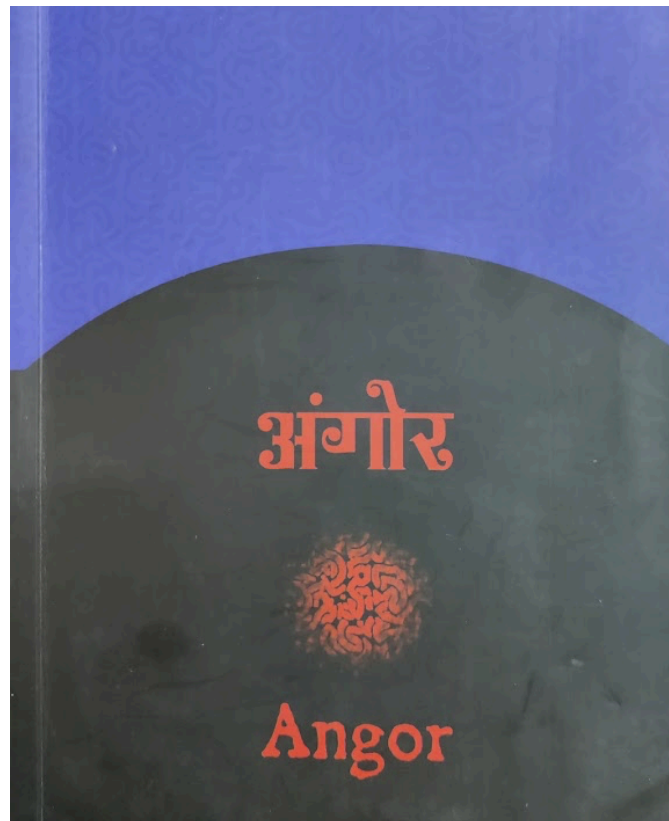
This book is a collection of historical essays, stories and songs discussing the philosophy behind Gondi or Koya Punem—the Koitur belief system and social structure—constituted by Paari Kupaar Lingo, a highly revered ancestral figure in the community. Kangali uses Gondi songs and stories as a primary source, substantiating them with Sanskrit texts and colonial archives, among other sources. In rewriting these histories, the book bridges a connection between the Koiturs, whose ancestral territory, Gondwana, is now divided into various new states, and provides them with a genealogy and common ancestry.

The philosophy of Koya Punem is contextualised through the oral

narratives of various ancestral spirits and historical figures, such as Fadapen, Kali Kankali, Jango Raaytaar—and expressed through the Koitur worldview behind Gotul, or the clan system, *rela pata* or songs, and dances, festivals and flags. The book is also one of the first documentations of the various assemblies of Gondwana Mahasabha between 1916 and 1945, through which one can witness the anti-Brahminical assertion of Koitur Adivasis in the pre-Independence era. I first read about the origin story of my people in this book. It was an eye-opener for me during my journey of navigating through my Koitur identity. Despite its various limitations, which Kangali himself acknowledged, the book can be easily considered the most thorough scholarly work on the Koitur community by one of their own.



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2. *Angor* by Jacinta Kerketta

(Adivaani Publications, 2016)

This book is a collection of 41 poems in Hindi, with English translations, by the Oraon journalist, writer and poet Jacinta Kerketta. She writes that growing up seeing domestic violence at her house, “something like a piece of ember trapped inside” started to take the shape of poems. Kerketta’s poems are reflections of her lived experience and observations of her surroundings.

The poems “*Jamuni, tum ho kaun?*”—Jamuni, who are you after all?—and “*Hamdardi*”—Compassion reflect on the violence against and exploitation of Adivasi women. The collection moves through various aspects of Adivasi life in villages, but the central theme provides us with a critical Adivasi perspective on the modern “development” model and its erosion of cultural and communitarian roots. For instance, in the poem “*O Shahar*”—O City—Kerketta writes, “*Bhaagte hue chhodkar apna ghar, puaal, mitti aur khapre, poochhte hain aksar, o shahar! Kya tum kabhi ujadte ho kisi vikaas ke naam par?*”—Leaving behind their homes, their soil, their 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?

Like many Adivasi poets, Kerketta uses metaphors from the forest and nature to depict the deep relationships Adivasi communities have with these. She recalls, too, the communities’ long history of resistance since the Santal Rebellion in the nineteenth century. Her portrayal of the community is not written as a victim’s narrative but an empowering story of survival and resistance. The simplicity of her language and the depth of her critical worldview resonate with many young Adivasis who are experiencing a similar crisis in their ancestral homelands.



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3. *Motyarin* by Usha Kiran Atram

(Muktarang Prakashan, 1993)

Originally written in Marathi, this collection of poems is the first book by the Koitur writer and poet Usha Kiran Atram. She is the first woman writer and poet from the community. The third edition of the book also includes Gondi and Hindi translations. Atram is also one of the editors of *Gondwana Darshan*, a magazine founded by her husband, Sunher Singh Taram, in 1985. The title of the book, “*Motyarin*,” is the Gondi term for a position given to a woman leader who supervises the overall activities in Gotul, which is considered the most important centre of knowledge in the Koitur community.

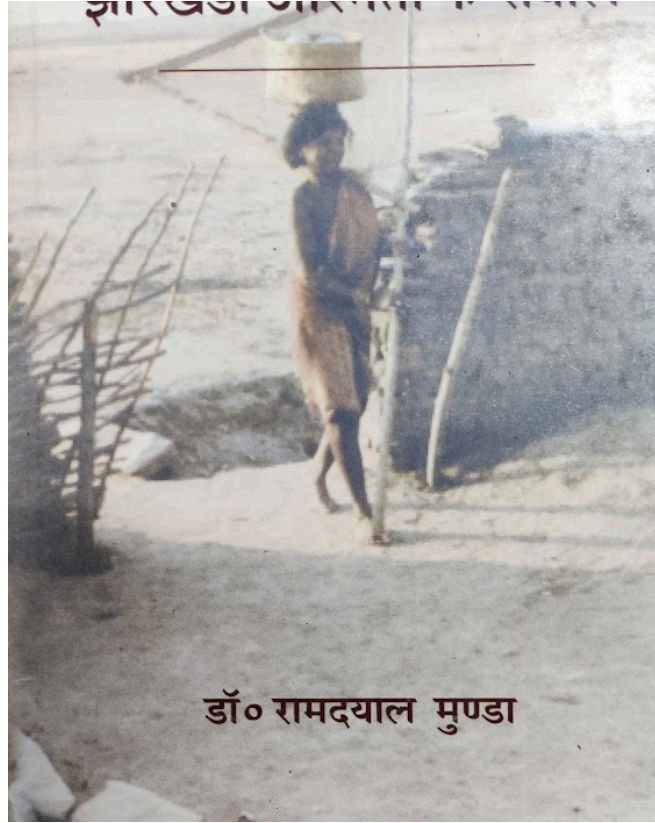
Atram narrates the resistance of a Koitur woman against injustice, violence and discrimination. The book begins with a hard-hitting poem that portrays abuse against Adivasi women within and outside

the household. She writes, “*Bata maan, main kiski hun? Baba-Bhaiya ki? Mere Shauhar ki? Sawkaar-Ranger-Patil ki? Jameendaar-Darzi-Sonaarki? Kiski hun main?*”—Tell me, mother, whose am I? Father’s or brother’s? My husband’s? Moneylenders-Rangers-Patils? Landlords-Tailors-Goldsmiths? Whose am I?

In the poems “*Nayika, hona to palash ki laal angaar ho*”—Heroine, become like the red ember of palash tree; “*Jangal ki Ketki! Ab buddhimaan Bano*”—Ketki of the forest! Be wise now; and “*Jakham*”—Wounds, she remembers Koitur women revolutionaries and leaders, such as Jango Raaytaar, Rani Hirai and Kali Kankali. She asks women to break the shackles of patriarchal norms and uses several metaphors from nature throughout the books, emphasising the close relationship between Adivasis and the natural world. She recalls the struggles of Birsa Munda and Eklavya, and asks the Adivasi community to fight together against violence, injustice, the loss of culture and the exploitation of Adivasi land. As one of the first collections of poems coming from the Koiturs, this book is extremely relevant for understanding a woman’s perspective and the community’s political articulation.



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4. *Adivasi Astitva aur Jharkhand Asmitake Sawal* by Ramdayal Munda

(Prakashan Sansthaan, 2002)

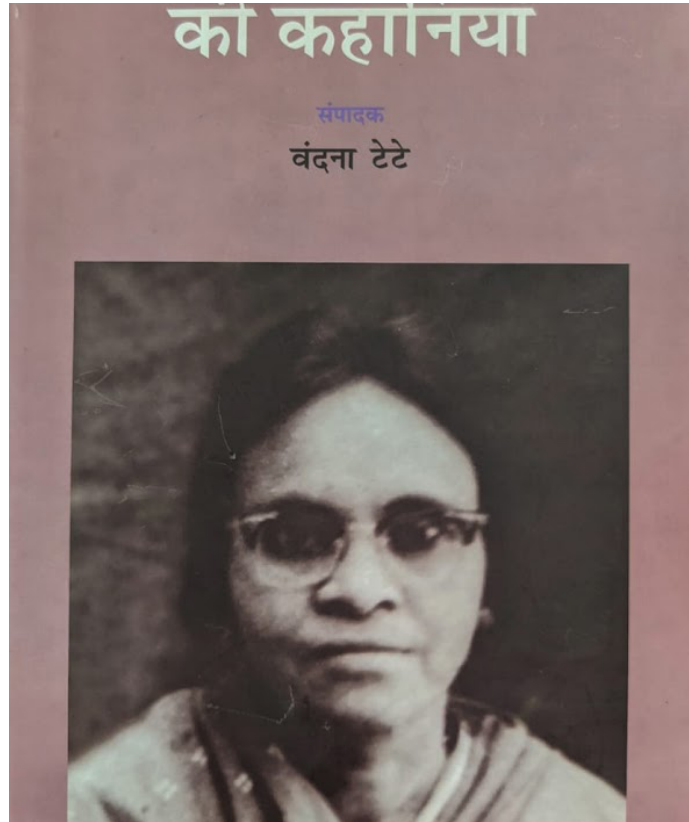
This book by Ramdayal Munda—a renowned linguist scholar and intellectual from Chhotanagpur, belonging to the Munda tribe—is a collection of six essays that discusses questions around Adivasi identity, culture, religion, politics, language, industrialisation and so on, in the context of Jharkhand as well as other parts of the country. Munda attempts to contextualise Adivasi history through Sanskrit texts, such as the Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata, in which non-Aryan communities were depicted as Asur, Nishad, Dasyu and Rakshas. “Indian culture is more a story of de-aryanisation of Aryans,” he writes, “than the sanskritisation of non-Aryans.”

The essays further discuss the historical transformation of Jharkhand

through various stages and the contemporary issues faced by Adivasi communities. Munda highlights various aspects of Adivasi identity in Jharkhand: the symbiotic relationship between culture and nature; their caste- and class-less existence; their co-dependent economy based on collective resources. He argues that there is an ongoing conspiracy against Adivasi communities, citing the refusal of states to recognise the term “Adivasi” in the Constitution, the division of various Adivasi communities and their ancestral territories into multiple new states, the non-recognition of Adivasi languages and belief systems, and so on. Munda argues that conversion to organised religions has led to the loss of Adivasi-ness, further critiquing the imposition of Hindu identity in the Census. He conceptualises “Adi-dharm”—the religious beliefs of the Adivasis—largely through the experiences of tribes of Jharkhand. Nearly two decades after the book’s publication, Munda’s reflections still resonate with the ongoing demand for a “Tribal religion” in the Census and the assertion “*Adivasi Hindu nahi hain*”—Adivasi are not Hindus. While some arguments made in the book could be a matter for scholarly debate, it remains one of the most insightful books for understanding Adivasi communities in the Chhotanagpur region.



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5. *Alice Ekka ki Kahaniya*

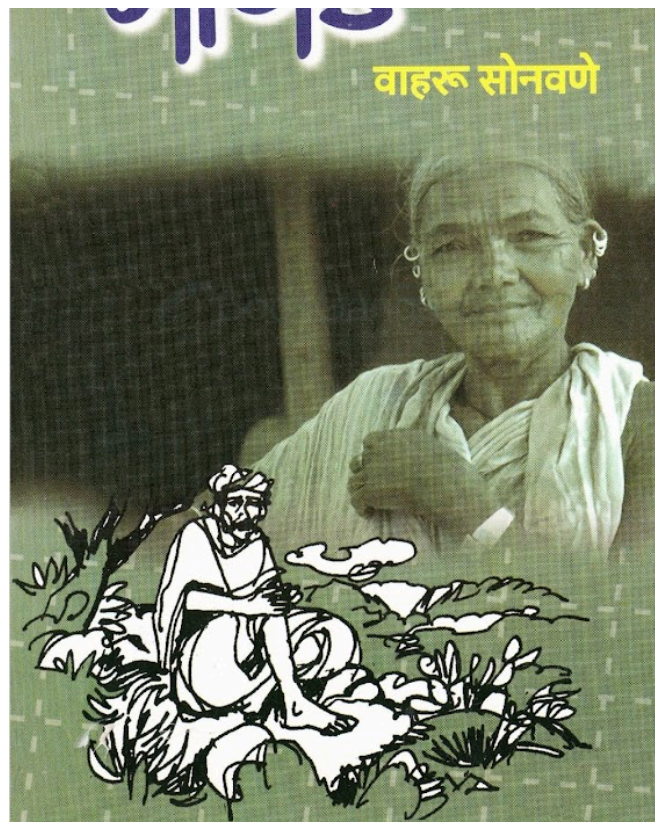
Edited by Vandana Tete (Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2015)

Alice Ekka, who belonged to Munda community, was a regular contributor to the weekly magazine *Adivasi*, which published several of her stories in the 1950s and 1960s. This collection of six short stories and five translations of Kahlil Gibran's stories were edited by Vandana Tete, a well-known Adivasi writer and poet from Jharkhand. All of Ekka's stories have Adivasi women as protagonists and focus on their co-existence and relationships with the surrounding natural world. These stories provide a holistic view of Adivasi society, including on everyday life, violence, deprivation, love, despair, hope as well as the growing influence of outsiders and the destruction of Adivasi land, which intensified after the independence. The stories appear to be inspired from real-life characters and use a mixture of regional languages, including Nagpuri, Khortha and Magahi.

The second story, “*Durgi ke bacche aur Elma ki kalpanayen*”—Durgi’s daughters and Elma’s dreams—stands out particularly as a moving tale of friendship between an Adivasi and a Dalit woman peeking into each other’s lives that also reflects on the casteism of Indian society. “Such difference between the children of same creator! Some swing on the carousel and some carry a bucket of filth on their head and go from house to house,” Elma says, “Is this justice?” The story “*Koyal ki Ladli Sumari*”—The cuckoo’s darling Sumari—is about a teenage girl named Sumari, who goes to the forest to get herbs for her ill father. A man from the city attacks and rapes her, following which the community blames and ostracises her. Sumari asks how she or her unborn child are at fault, adding that Adivasi people “have started to think like *dikus*”—non-tribals. A substantial addition to this volume is a chapter by Tete that engages with crucial and in-depth discussion on the mainstream and Dalit-feminist discourse, and their convergence and contradictions with Adivasi women’s perspectives.



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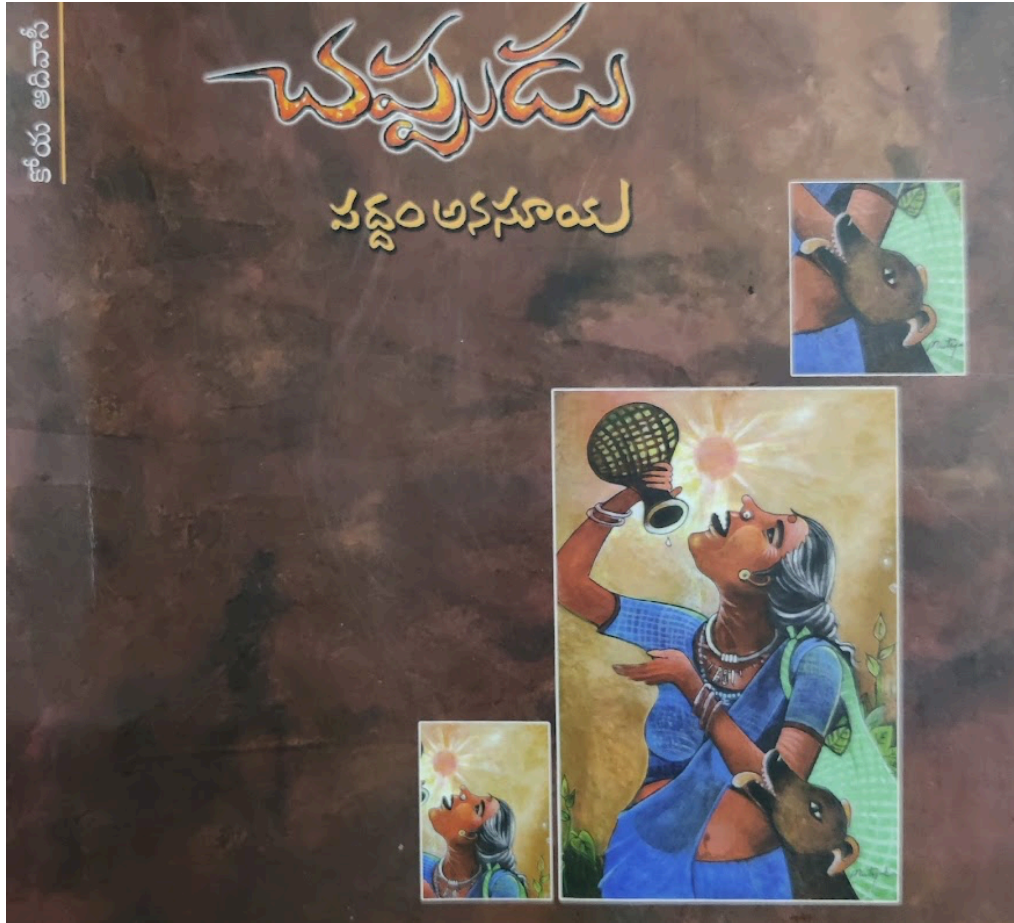
6. *Godhad* by Waharu Sonwane

(Sugava Prakashan, 1987)

This collection of poetry by Waharu Sonwane, an activist and writer from the Bhil community, consists of Marathi and Bhilodi poems. *Godhad* or *godhadi*—roughly translates to a torn rug or blanket. If one uses it as a cover, the *Chandoba*, or moon, is visible through its gaps. “Godhad,” here, is a reminder, for today’s generation, of the miseries of ancestors. Waharu expresses his thoughts concisely.

In the poem titled “*Aani*,” which represents the deprivation and poverty caused by the loss of land and exploitation of sugarcane factories in his native place, Sonwane writes, “People drank sugarcane juice, and [now], Sugarcane drinks people’s juice.” The satirical take on Brahmins in the poem “*Bamanchi Shendi*” is executed equally well—“the sins of seven generations of a Brahmin are washed away,” Sonwane writes, but his *shendi*, or tuft of hair, begins itching if he is not served ghee in his meal.

Sonwane has been an active part of the Adivasi Sahitya Movement and the Adivasi Ekta Parishad, among others, for over four decades, and his engagement with Adivasi movements, as well as his critical worldview, emerges coherently in his poems. The poem “Stage,” from this collection, had a long-lasting impact on me, ever since I first read it in college. A few sentences from the poem summed up the appropriation of Adivasi voices, which many Adivasis experience in the literary world and social movements: “We didn’t go to the stage nor were we called. With a wave of the hand we were shown our place. There we sat and were congratulated, and ‘they,’ standing on the stage kept on telling us of our sorrows. Our sorrows remained ours, they never became theirs.” Besides being a well-known literary work and one of the earliest books by a Bhil writer, the book represents the politics of the 1970s and 1980s, when the loss of Adivasi land and forests had further marginalised Adivasis and turned them into wage labourers.



7. *Chappudu* by Paddam Anasuya

(Sahiti Circle, 2019)

This new collection of four Telugu short stories is the first book by the writer and teacher Paddam Anasuya, of the Koya community. Koya and Gondi are the languages of the Koitur community, with slight variations, and Anasuya holds utmost respect for the language.

“Language is as important as a man,” she writes, adding that she finds it easier to write in her language than in Telugu.

The four stories deal with various themes, from inter-community marriage and death to the waning away of Koya culture. They explore the everyday lives of the Koyas and their relationship with the forest and animals; they evoke music, songs, rituals and *rela pata*. Anasuya argues that no one is better than her grandmother at telling stories in her language, and so, since the book is written in the first person, her

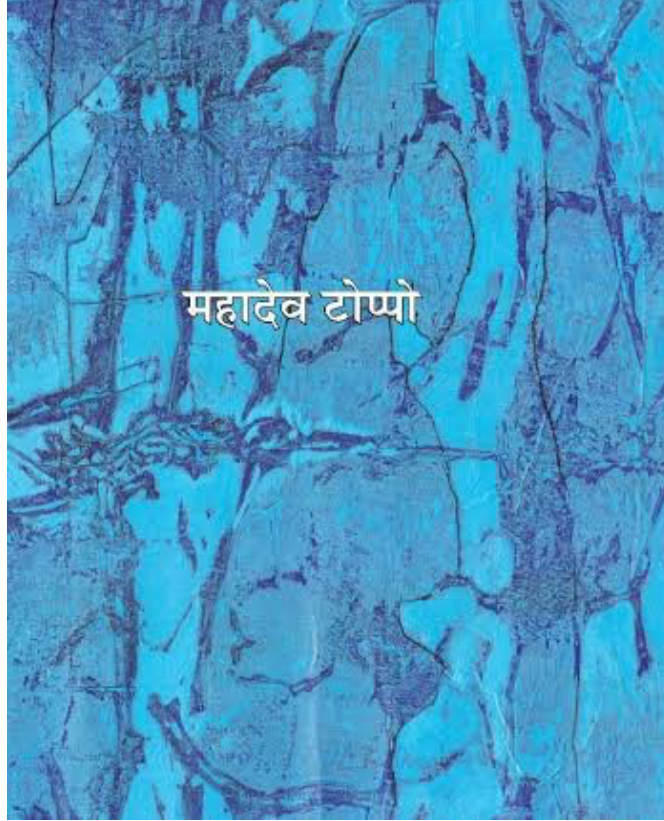
grandmother is part of all the stories.

Anasuya's acknowledgement of the growing influence of non-Adivasi society is extremely moving and painful. "In addition to education, job, influence of mainland, all these have taken me to their non-Adivasi culture," she writes. "I'm terribly struggling to come out of that influence. It's not easy to see the minute changes that Adivasis are experiencing without coming out of that non-Adivasi influence." This self-reflection acknowledges the honesty of her storytelling and the influence of organised religions in the Koya community.

In "Kakamma," Anasuya talks about how Koya youth have started to look down upon their own rituals as old and primitive, and are influenced by Brahminical rituals. In another story, she narrates how the conversion of a younger brother to Christianity leads to the "silence of sound," by ending the ritual of playing the *doll*, or drum. Anasuya mentions the death-ritual songs, such as the one in which the deceased person is believed to be lured, through offerings, to come back to life. She expresses the ritual in detail, recounting how the doll player sings the origin story of Koyas, the history of the deceased person's clan and their relationship with other clans. Doll-players are a central part of death rituals, and the sacrifice is first served to them. *Chhappudu*—Sound—is therefore an apt title for this collection of stories. Each of Anasuya's stories contains layers of Koya culture, with references to rituals and the spiritual world, and reflects upon ongoing transformations in the Koya community.



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8. *Jangal, Pahad ke Paath* by Mahadev Toppo

(Anuugya Books, 2017)

Mahadev Toppo's poetry collection is a really valuable contribution to Adivasi literature, notable for his insightful reflections on his life experiences; the stories surrounding the hills, forest, rivers and nature; and his bold and satirical commentary on the appropriation of Adivasi knowledge and voices by non-Adivasis.

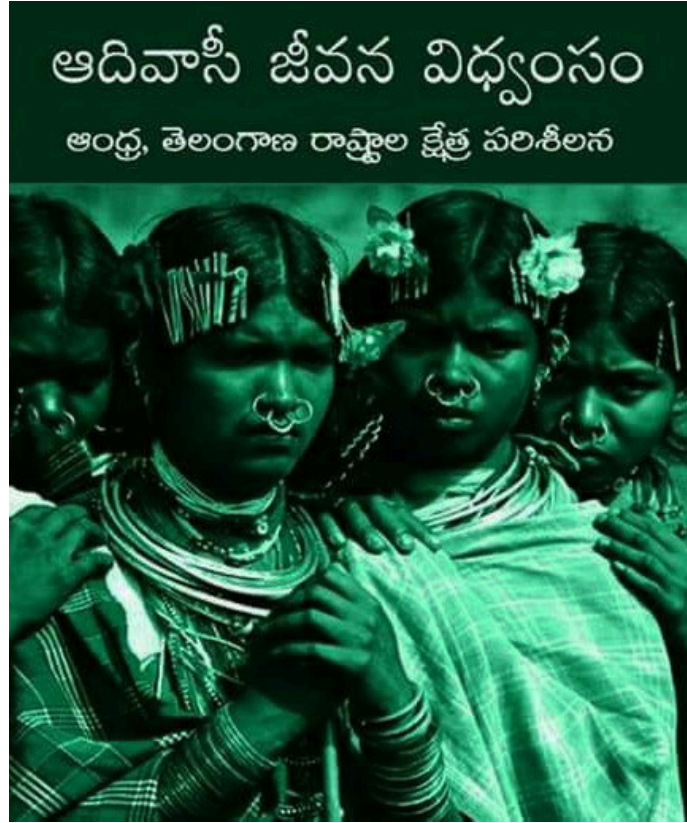
Toppo, who belongs to the Oraon tribe, criticises the primacy of written histories and the stigmatisation of Adivasis in the writings of non-Adivasis; the ugliness of English writers being unaware of Adivasi life and worldviews, who are honoured with awards and then explain to Adivasis aspects of their own traditions and revolutions; and tourists who feel good about themselves after spending time in Adivasi villages, while Adivasis are left with their deprivation.

The poem “*Rachane Honge Granth*”—Books will have to be written—is a call for rewriting Adivasi histories subsumed in trees, rivers, rocks and sacred groves. Before the non-Adivasi society describes them as animals, Adivasis need to define themselves as “human beings.” Toppo makes subtle, sarcastic allusions to the prejudices of his friends named “Pandey ji, Mishra ji, Singh ji” in the city. He also reminisces over childhood memories of his ancestral land, the songs, drum beats and festivals. Amid this turmoil, he expresses his struggle to protect his “Adivasi-ness.”

Toppo mocks “civilised” society by asking them to name trees, leaves, roots, ants and spiders—knowledge common to most Adivasis. He proclaims that when we die, we will all mingle into the earth, and then asks, “My brother, why do you laugh at us?” In the poem titled “In the Cell of Questions,” he notes several award-winning non-Adivasi scholars and activists who claim to be speaking on behalf of Adivasi rights. He thanks them, and then asks, “But why are we [still] helpless, Silent and boiling with anger?... Who will unveil the mystery of this question?” Each poem in the book is to be cherished, for its meaningful and satirical analysis of Adivasi and non-Adivasi worldviews, and the writer’s experiential reflections on rural and urban society. Toppo rightfully declares, “I am a poet of the forest, I would plant trees and poems too.”



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9. *Adivasi Jeevana Vidvamsam* by Maipati Arun Kumar

(Integrated Tribal Development Corporation, 2016)

This collection of field notes and essays in Telugu by Maipati Arun Kumar, a Koya doctoral research scholar at Warangal's Kakatiya University, is one of the most important scholarly contributions comprising historical and sociological reflections on Adivasi communities across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The book, whose title translates to "The Destruction of Adivasi Lives," is a result of extensive field work and documentation of oral narratives in various districts, such as Bhadrachalam, Khammam, East Godavari and Visakhapatnam—the chapters are divided accordingly. Maipati has been an activist since his teenage years and is currently the president of the Adivasi Writers' Association and the working president of the Adivasi Hakkula Porata Samiti. He writes against the misrepresentation and manipulation of Adivasi histories by non-

Adivasi writers over the ages. This book is an effort to document the diversity of tribal life and their histories and experiences of violence, as well as the conflicts they are facing, from an Adivasi perspective.

The book documents the history of many Adivasi rebels and historical figures, including Sarakka Saralamma, Madavi Tukaram, Ramji Gond and Marri Kamayya, who are barely known outside of these states and have not been documented in detail previously. The book critically engages with mainstream “development” discourse by looking at issues of land alienation and displacement brought about by the Polavaram project, tiger reserves, bauxite and open-cast coal mining, the ITC factory and so on. It also looks at the massacres of Indravelli and the infamous cases of rape of Adivasi women by security forces in Wakapalli. The book further touches upon aspects of Adivasi culture, such as distinct dance forms, jatras, hunting and rituals. I first came across the book when I met Maipati a few years ago in Hyderabad Central University and was a bit taken aback that such a scholarly work was not referenced anywhere, or known in Adivasi literary discourse. The book was my primary reference for writing one of the first English articles

(<http://adivasiresurgence.com/2016/10/16/komaram-bheem-a-forgotten-adivasi-leader-who-gave-the-slogan-jal-jangal-jameen/>) on a lesser-known Adivasi leader, KomaramBheem, who fought for Adivasi rights over Jal, Jangal, Jameen against Nizam rule in Adilabad district. For anyone keen to learn about the Adivasis of the two states, accompanied by critical reflections from a long-time activist and scholar, this book is a must read.



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10. *Baagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti* by Anuj Lugun

(Vaani Prakashan, 2017)

This book by a poet and writer from the Munda tribe, who is currently a faculty member at the Central University of South Bihar, consists of four long narrative poems. Lugun expresses his desire to learn Adivasi history and says that some historians told him to look towards the Vedas, some asked to dig into gazetteers, but no one asked him to return to our language, our songs, our forests and birds.

Lugun argues that Adivasi songs and stories are their histories, but only the “written” narratives of the rulers have found legitimacy and are considered “civilised.” The title of the book represents the protagonist Birsi—the sister of Birsa Munda—whose history, the writer says, is nowhere to be found. The metaphor of “bagh,” or tiger, is a reference to Mundari oral mythology, where it is believed that

some people, known as Kunuil, have the ability to turn into a tiger—they sometimes do so for their own good, and at other times to dominate, but regardless of the reason, the transformation has been depicted as violent. He writes, “*Jangal pahadi ke is or hai aur bagh pahadi ke us paar. Pahadi ke us paar rajdhani hai*”—The forest is on this side of the hill; the tiger is on the other side. On that side is the capital. (“Tiger” here is a metaphor for capitalist, colonial and dominant ideology.) While the group of tigers is scornful of the Munda community, seeing it as “uncivilised,” he writes, there are also Adivasi Kunuil looking for hunt, who have themselves become the propagators of “civilisation.”

Lugun makes it clear that humans’ relationship with the forest is of two kinds. One believes in the approach of “colonisation and exploitation” and the other believes in a symbiotic co-existence. He explores this contradiction throughout the book by bringing forth the Adivasi worldview and the destruction caused by capitalist, colonial ideology. The book is one of the sharpest and succinct commentaries on the conditions of Adivasis across the country. Lugun brings together the shared experiences of violence, exploitation as well as resistance among various tribes—the Santal, Munda, Bhil, Gond, Kondh, Koya, Paharia—from Abujmahd and Bijapur in Dandkaranya to Mangarh and Saranda in Chhotanagpur, and writes a broad perspective on their Adivasi-ness. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar for Hindi in 2019 for the book.

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AKASH POYAM (/AUTHOR/14937) is an assistant editor at *The Caravan*.

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