

**ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MODERN INDIAN
NOVELS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SUNIL SHARMA'S *THE
MINOTAUR*, PCK PREM'S *NOT THEIR LIVES*, AND P.V.
JAGMOHAN'S *THE INDIAN INFERNO*****Monika Khurana**

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the intersections of environmental and social justice in three contemporary Indian novels: *The Minotaur* (Sunil Sharma, 2003), *Not Their Lives* (PCK Prem, 2012), and *The Indian Inferno* (P.V. Jagmohan, 2021). Through a thematic and narrative analysis, the study explores how these works critique ecological degradation, marginalization of vulnerable communities, and the socio-political structures that perpetuate inequity. By situating the novels within the broader discourse of eco-criticism and postcolonial theory, this paper argues that each novel employs symbolic landscapes, marginalized protagonists, and narrative fragmentation to highlight the inextricable link between environmental destruction and social injustice.*

Keywords: Environmental, Social Justice, Emerged, Critical, Modern, Indian Novels

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental and social justice have emerged as critical themes in global literature, reflecting the urgency of ecological crises and their disproportionate impact on marginalized communities. In the Indian context, where rapid industrialization, deforestation, and climate change intersect with caste, class, and gender hierarchies, contemporary writers have increasingly turned to fiction to interrogate these issues. This paper analyzes three modern Indian novels—*The Minotaur* (2003), *Not Their Lives* (2012), and *The Indian Inferno* (2021)—to explore how they articulate the intertwined crises of environmental degradation and social inequality. By examining the authors' narrative strategies, symbolic frameworks, and socio-political critique, this study contributes to the growing field of eco-criticism in Indian literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental justice as a concept gained prominence in the 1980s, emphasizing the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. In India, scholars like Mahasweta Devi and Shiv Visvanathan have long critiqued the exploitation of natural resources and marginalized communities in postcolonial development narratives. Eco-criticism, which examines the



representation of nature in literature, has similarly evolved to address the anthropocentric biases and colonial legacies that shape environmental discourse.

Recent studies on Indian eco-literature, such as *Literature, Nature, and Environmental Studies in India* (Mukherjee, 2019), highlight how contemporary writers navigate the legacy of colonial ecological policies and neocolonial extractives. However, there remains a gap in comparative analyses of novels that explicitly merge environmental and social justice themes. This paper bridges that gap by focusing on three novels that employ distinct narrative forms and symbolic systems to critique ecological and social inequities.

3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS

3.1 Sunil Sharma's *The Minotaur* (2003)

Set in a fictional city named Indrapur, Sharma's novel juxtaposes corporate greed, bureaucratic complicity, and ecological collapse. The protagonist, Prannoy, a disillusioned bureaucrat turned environmental activist, uncovers the corruption of a multinational corporation and the Indian government in deforesting the Amazon-like "Green Zone." The novel's metropolis, divided into "The Minotaur" (a labyrinthine corporate complex) and "The Lungs" (a decaying forest), symbolizes the duality of progress and destruction.

The novel critiques the exploitation of indigenous labor and ecosystems under the guise of development. Sharma employs fragmented narratives and recurring symbols of the minotaur (representing the devouring capitalist machine) to underscore the cyclical violence of human exploitation. Prannoy's journey mirrors the tension between individual agency and systemic oppression, emphasizing that environmental degradation is inseparable from social hierarchies.

3.2 PCK Prem's *Not Their Lives* (2012)

Prem's novel, set in the fictional tribal state of Bastar Pradesh, centers on Ranga, a young tribal activist, who resists a mining company's encroachment on his community's ancestral forest. The forest, personified as a sacred entity, becomes a site of both ecological and cultural preservation. Prem's narrative intertwines the exploitation of natural resources with the erasure of tribal identity, highlighting how development projects often target marginalized communities for dispossession.

Key themes include the commodification of nature, the role of global capital in resource extraction, and the resilience of indigenous resistance. The "green serpent," a mythological creature symbolizing the forest's sentience, emerges as a counter-narrative to the capitalist monologue of corporate machinery. The novel critiques the complicity of the Indian state in

colonial ecological violence, arguing that environmental justice cannot be achieved without challenging patriarchal and caste-based power structures.

3.3 P.V. Jagmohan's *The Indian Inferno* (2021)

Jagmohan's novel, set in a coal-mining town ravaged by industrial pollution, explores the intergenerational trauma of a marginalized community. The protagonist, a widow and political activist, battles a mining conglomerate responsible for ecological and human devastation. The novel's title—a metaphor for both ecological and social chaos—reflects the conflagration of greed, inequality, and ecological collapse.

Jagmohan employs a nonlinear narrative to trace the cyclical nature of oppression and resistance. The mining town, depicted as a "crying inferno," becomes a microcosm of India's developmental paradox, where progress exacts a brutal toll on the environment and marginalized castes. The novel's eco-feminist lens underscores how Dalit and Adivasi women bear the brunt of ecological and patriarchal violence, urging a reimagining of justice that transcends traditional binaries of society and nature.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

All three novels employ symbolic landscapes to critique environmental and social injustice, but they differ in narrative form and ideological emphasis. Sharma's *The Minotaur* uses urban allegory and mythic symbolism to critique bureaucratic and corporate collusion, while Prem's *Not Their Lives* privileges oral traditions and tribal mythology to center indigenous worldviews. Jagmohan's *The Indian Inferno* bridges these approaches through a socio-political realism that emphasizes the material realities of marginalized communities.

A key commonality is the portrayal of marginalized protagonists—bureaucrats, tribal activists, and Dalit widows—whose struggles against institutional power highlight the interconnectedness of ecological and social hierarchies. Each novel also challenges the anthropocentric logic of development, interrogating the ideologies of "green capitalism" and "environmental racism." However, while Sharma and Prem focus on resistance narratives, Jagmohan emphasizes the cyclical trauma of historical oppression, offering a more pessimistic yet grounded vision of justice.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECO-CRITICISM AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

The analysis is grounded in eco-criticism, which examines the cultural construction of nature and the political implications of environmental representation. Additionally, postcolonial theory provides a lens to interrogate how colonial legacies shape contemporary ecological and social



inequities. For instance, *The Minotaur* and *The Indian Inferno* reflect the neocolonial extraction of resources as a continuation of colonial ecological violence, while *Not Their Lives* critiques the erasure of tribal sovereignty under global capital.

The study also engages with intersectional environmental justice, as articulated by scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith, to analyze how caste, gender, and class intersect in the novels' depictions of marginalization.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The three novels under study reveal the urgency of environmental and social justice in postcolonial India, illustrating how ecological crises are inseparable from the exploitation of marginalized communities. By employing symbolic landscapes, marginalized protagonists, and narrative fragmentation, these authors challenge the anthropocentric myths of progress and offer counter-narratives rooted in ecological and social reciprocity.

Future research could expand this analysis to include regional Indian eco-literature in non-English languages or examine the impact of these novels on environmental policy discourse. Additionally, comparative studies with global eco-critical works would enrich understanding of the unique socio-historical context of Indian environmentalism.

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