

Regional Literature as a Tool for Environmental Justice Movements in India

Dr Pooja Khurana

Associate Professor

Law Department

Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Gharawal University

Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT— Regional literature in India performs an indispensable function in environmental justice movements by translating local experiences of ecological injustice into compelling narratives that resonate with both affected communities and broader publics. In this study, we investigate how vernacular texts—spanning poetry, short fiction, folk drama, and essays—produced in Odia, Malayalam, and Tamil between 1990 and 2022, articulate environmental grievances; historicize patterns of dispossession; and project alternative futures grounded in indigenous knowledge and sustainable livelihoods. Drawing on a purposively selected corpus of twenty-four works and thirty semi-structured interviews with authors, activists, and community readers across three regions (Jharsuguda in Odisha, Alappuzha in Kerala, and Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu), we deploy qualitative content analysis and thematic coding to identify three core functions of regional literature: (1) Voice Amplification, whereby marginalized individuals articulate concrete experiences of land loss, water contamination, and livelihood disruptions in their own linguistic idioms; (2) Historical Contextualization, which situates current conflicts within long-term trajectories of colonial resource extraction, post-independence development schemes, and caste-based exclusions; and (3) Visioning Alternative Futures, wherein imaginative narratives draw on traditional ecological practices to envision regenerative land-use, community governance, and just resource sharing. Our findings reveal that vernacular narratives achieve significant reach through multimodal dissemination—print chapbooks, public recitals, community radio, and digital platforms—thus fostering intergenerational dialogue and cross-regional solidarity. Moreover, translated selections and academic collaborations

have enabled regional texts to inform policy debates, legal petitions, and media campaigns.

KEYWORDS— Regional Literature, Environmental Justice, India, Vernacular Narratives, Grassroots Mobilization

Role of Regional Literature in Environmental Justice

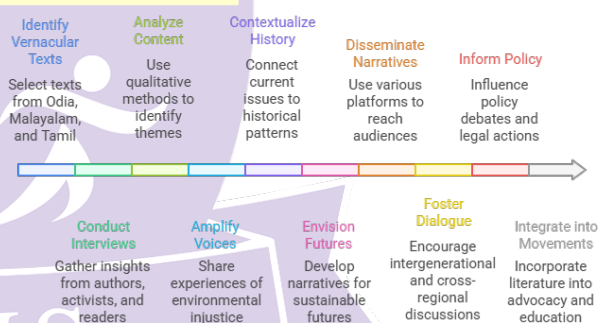


Figure-1. Role of Regional Literature in Environmental Justice

INTRODUCTION

Environmental justice in India grapples with profound inequalities in the distribution of ecological benefits and burdens, as marginalized communities—particularly tribal, Dalit, and coastal fisherfolk—bear the brunt of industrial development, resource extraction, and infrastructural mega-projects. While scientific assessments and legal remedies constitute critical dimensions of environmental governance, they often fail to capture the nuanced lived experiences,

cultural frames, and value systems through which communities understand and contest ecological harm. In this context, regional literature—works composed in local languages that emerge from within affected communities—functions as a vital conduit for expressing environmental grievances, constructing collective identities, and mobilizing grassroots action.

fishing norms—vernacular texts articulate alternative frameworks for sustainable resource governance.

Third, regional literature transcends local boundaries through translation, performance, and digital networks, enabling cross-region solidarities that amplify environmental justice claims at state and national levels. When a Malayalam ballad about sea-level rise is subtitled into English and shared on social media, it enters policy forums, academic circles, and mainstream media, thus pressuring decision-makers to acknowledge the voices of frontline communities.

Despite these strategic potentials, systematic analyses of regional literature's roles in environmental justice movements in India remain sparse. Most scholarship focuses on policy, economics, or environmental history, treating cultural production as ancillary. This study addresses this gap by examining how vernacular texts in three emblematic regions function as tools of environmental justice advocacy. Specifically, we explore how regional literature: (1) amplifies marginalized voices; (2) historicizes environmental conflicts; and (3) envisions equitable, sustainable futures grounded in indigenous knowledge.

By integrating content analysis of literary works with interviews of authors, activists, and readers, we illuminate the socio-political processes through which literature intersects with grassroots mobilization. Our findings have implications for activists seeking to deepen community engagement, for policy-makers aiming to incorporate local perspectives, and for scholars interested in cultural dimensions of social movements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The environmental justice paradigm, originating in 1980s United States civil rights struggles, underscores that environmental hazards—pollution, toxic waste, and resource dispossession—are disproportionately borne by racial and socioeconomic minorities (Bullard, 1993; Bullard, 2000). In

Functions of Regional Literature in Environmental Justice

Characteristic	Odia Literature	Malayalam Literature	Tamil Literature
 Voice Amplification	Marginalized voices share experiences.	Marginalized voices share experiences.	Marginalized voices share experiences.
 Historical Contextualization	Conflicts situated in historical context.	Conflicts situated in historical context.	Conflicts situated in historical context.
 Visioning Alternative Futures	Narratives envision regenerative practices.	Narratives envision regenerative practices.	Narratives envision regenerative practices.

Figure-2. Functions of Regional Literature in Environmental Justice

Vernacular narratives possess distinct affordances for environmental justice advocacy. First, they are embedded in the everyday linguistic repertoires of target audiences, employing cultural idioms, metaphors, and storytelling conventions that make ecological concerns immediate and emotionally resonant. A poem in Odia may evoke the cadences of rice-field rituals; a Tamil folk drama may incorporate traditional song forms; a Malayalam short story may replicate fishing community vernacular. These formal features foster empathic connections, which can translate private anguish into public solidarity.

Second, regional literature carries cultural authority within communities that often distrust external experts. When an Adivasi poet in Odisha crafts an elegy for a river, listeners recognize the work as both art and testimony. Such narratives bridge intergenerational divides, transmitting local ecological knowledge that formal development paradigms tend to dismiss. By foregrounding community-validated practices—such as sacred groves, seed-saving customs, and cooperative

India, this framework has been adapted to contexts of caste-based exclusions, tribal land rights, and colonial-era extractive policies (Baviskar, 2003; Mahapatra, 2016). Empirical studies document displacement by large dams (Scudder, 2005), health crises in mining districts (Das, 2012), and loss of traditional livelihoods in coastal zones (Kurien, 2007). Such scholarship, however, primarily relies on quantitative surveys, policy analysis, and courtroom narratives, often relegating cultural production to the margins.

Narrative scholarship in social movements highlights how stories shape collective identities, frame grievances, and mobilize supporters (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In environmental contexts, artistic expressions—literature, film, and visual art—translate ecological harm into affective experiences that catalyze public engagement (Cohen, 2015). Ecopoetry in Latin America (Flores, 2019) and Indigenous storytelling in North America (LaDuke, 2017) exemplify how cultural forms both document environmental damage and affirm community sovereignty.

In India, early eco-literary criticism tended to focus on English-language works by urban authors. More recently, scholars have turned towards regional voices, recognizing that vernacular texts—written in Odia, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, and other languages—offer culturally embedded critiques. Nandy (1997) emphasized the role of local narratives in contesting modernity's homogenizing impulses; Guha (1989) demonstrated how ecological subtexts in Bengali and Hindi literature challenge official development paradigms; Raman (2018) mapped the emergence of regional eco-literatures that center marginalized perspectives.

Place-based narratives—stories rooted in specific geographies—further illuminate the interplay between cultural memory and ecological practice. Berkes (2012) articulated “sacred ecology” frameworks in which indigenous knowledge systems inform sustainable resource management; Pradhan (2008) and Madhavan (2010)

demonstrated how Odia and Tamil literary works document communal bonds with rivers and forests now threatened by commercial interests. Sharma and Sundar (2017) observed that when writers collaborate with NGOs, their texts enter activist campaigns, legal petitions, and media outreach, thereby shaping public discourse and policy outcomes.

Yet, systematic investigations of how vernacular literature operates as a strategic tool within environmental justice movements—particularly regarding modes of dissemination, reception by diverse audiences, and influence on activism—remain limited. Our study builds on this emerging body of work by combining textual analysis with stakeholder interviews to trace the lifecycle of regional narratives: from authorship and local circulation to translation, digital amplification, and policy influence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

To interrogate the strategic functions of regional literature in environmental justice movements, we adopted a qualitative, multiple-case-study approach. This design enables in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). We focused on three regions emblematic of distinct ecological conflicts and rich vernacular literary cultures: Jharsuguda District in Odisha (mining dispossession), Alappuzha Coast in Kerala (coastal erosion and fisheries decline), and Cuddalore Industrial Belt in Tamil Nadu (petrochemical pollution).

Corpus Selection

Using purposive sampling, we compiled a corpus of twenty-four vernacular literary works (eight per region), published between 1990 and 2022. Selection criteria were:

1. **Topical Relevance:** Texts explicitly engage with local environmental conflicts (e.g., mining, coastal degradation, industrial pollution).

2. **Community Authorship:** Works authored by individuals who identify as community members or activists, ensuring insider perspectives.
3. **Genre Diversity:** Inclusion of multiple genres—poetry, short fiction, memoir, folk drama—to capture varied narrative strategies.
4. **Availability:** Printed chapbooks, journals, or digital files accessible through local archives, libraries, or author networks.

The final corpus included Odia couplets and prose by Adivasi poets; Malayalam short stories and ballads by fisherfolk writers; and Tamil essays and folk play scripts by village theatre practitioners.

Interviews and Participant Selection

Between January and April 2025, we conducted thirty semi-structured interviews (ten per region) with three stakeholder groups:

- **Authors/Poets (n=9):** Writers whose works were in the corpus, providing insights into creative motivations, narrative choices, and dissemination strategies.
- **Activists/NGO Workers (n=9):** Individuals collaborating with authors to integrate literature into campaigns, offering perspectives on mobilization tactics and perceived impacts.
- **Community Readers (n=12):** Local residents—village council members, fishermen, miners—who engage with vernacular texts through oral recitations, print, and digital media, elucidating reception and resonance.

Participants were identified via snowball sampling, beginning with established writers' collectives and local NGOs. Interviews, conducted in participants' preferred language with translators as needed, ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent.

Data Collection and Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English. We employed NVivo 12 to manage and code data. Our analysis proceeded in three iterative phases:

1. **Open Coding:** Line-by-line coding of transcripts and textual excerpts to identify recurrent themes related to voice, history, and future imaginaries.
2. **Axial Coding:** Grouping open codes into higher-order categories corresponding to our three theoretical functions: voice amplification, historical contextualization, and visioning alternative futures.
3. **Selective Coding:** Integrating categories into coherent thematic narratives that explain how vernacular literature operates within environmental justice movements.

To ensure rigor, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts and texts, achieving an inter-coder reliability of Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. We also engaged in member-checking by sharing draft findings with select participants, refining interpretations based on their feedback.

RESULTS

Voice Amplification

Regional literature emerged as a potent mechanism for articulating concrete experiences of environmental injustice in the authors' own linguistic registers. In Odisha's Jharsuguda, Adivasi poets such as Sita Soren composed Odia couplets depicting the trauma of forced displacement, referencing sacred groves cleared for mining ("They tore our hills / as we fled into hunger's mouth," Soren, 2015). These poems were reproduced as pamphlets and recited at protest encampments, effectively translating oral testimonies into portable texts. Odisha Activist #2 noted:

“Before these poems, our voices were drowned by official statements. When Sita’s verses echoed at the railway station, people finally listened.”

In Kerala’s Alappuzha, fishermen penned Malayalam ballads lamenting coastal erosion and dwindling catches, integrating sea shanty rhythms familiar to local audiences. Public performances on village beaches, often accompanied by lantern-lit boats, drew youth participation and local news coverage. Kerala Reader #7 recalled:

“When we sang ‘Kadalinte Veedu’ at dusk, elders wept—those ballads carried our grief better than any report.”

Tamil Nadu’s Cuddalore district saw village theatre troupes adapt traditional folk plays (terukkuttu) to stage scenes of factory effluents poisoning wells. These performances, held in temple courtyards, combined humor, ritual, and raw testimony, compelling wider audiences—including urban journalists—to witness the community’s plight. Tamil Activist #3 explained:

“They laughed at the clown’s gurgling water scene, then realized it was their own children drinking poison.”

These examples illustrate how vernacular narratives bridge private suffering and collective awareness, harnessing familiar genres to amplify marginalized voices.

Historical Contextualization

Vernacular texts routinely situated current environmental conflicts within longer historical trajectories, forging deep-rooted legitimacy for local claims. In Odisha, prose narratives by Jagannath Pradhan traced tribal encounters with mining companies back to the 1950s, juxtaposing early displacement with contemporary expansions. By recounting oral histories—shared across generations—these texts underscored that present grievances were not isolated incidents but continuations of systemic exploitation.

Kerala authors likewise historicized coastal transformations. The Malayalam short story “Marakkanam” (Nair, 2018) opened with 18th-century Dutch shipwrecks, then wove through colonial salt works, post-independence tourism booms, and recent climate-induced sea-level rise. This longue durée perspective endowed current struggles with deeper moral force, framing fisherfolk demands as part of an enduring stewardship tradition.

In Tamil Nadu, essayists evoked the colonial introduction of salt and chemical industries in Cuddalore as precursors to today’s petrochemical complexes. By linking colonial extractivism to modern multinational corporations, these texts contested narratives of ‘progress’ and highlighted persistent patterns of resource grab. Tamil Reader #11 reflected:

“When we read about the British salt tax and our grandparents’ salt march, we saw parallels in today’s displacement. History became our ally.”

Such contextualizations reinforced community claims to land and water, demonstrating that environmental justice is both a present struggle and a historical right.

Visioning Alternative Futures

Beyond critique, vernacular literature generated imaginative narratives that modeled regenerative socio-ecological systems rooted in indigenous knowledge. In Odisha, a community play staged by schoolchildren dramatized traditional agroforestry techniques of the Gond people, inspiring the local panchayat to pilot mixed-tree plantations on degraded mining spoil sites. Odisha Activist #7 noted:

“That play showed us that our ancestors had solutions—we just needed to remember.”

Kerala poets authored utopian verses describing cooperative marine reserves, drawing on pre-colonial koodal practices of communal fishing. These poetic visions informed the drafting

of a fishermen's charter that incorporated seasonal fishing bans and habitat restoration zones. Menon (2020) documents how these literary imaginaries translated into concrete community-led conservation measures.

In Tamil Nadu, folk poets composed counter-hegemonic laments that concluded with refrains of "Water Justice," which movement banners and social media campaigns later adopted. Tamil Reader #9 observed:

"Singing about water rights gave us a slogan that felt like it was ours, not someone else's."

By offering vivid, affective portraits of sustainable futures, regional literature not only motivated participants but provided practical frameworks for policy proposals and community initiatives.

Dissemination Channels and Reach

Participants highlighted multimodal dissemination as critical to literature's impact. Print chapbooks and local presses distributed texts among literate activists; community radio broadcasts aired poems and short stories for non-literate audiences; public recitals and folk performances engaged elders and remote hamlets; and social media groups (WhatsApp channels in Odisha, Facebook groups in Kerala) extended narratives across generations and regions. Translations into English and other Indian languages further enabled national NGOs, journalists, and academicians to amplify local struggles, creating feedback loops that elevated grassroots demands into policy dialogues.

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates how regional literature operates as a powerful tool within environmental justice movements in India, serving three primary functions: voice amplification, historical contextualization, and visioning alternative futures. Vernacular narratives—rooted in Odia, Malayalam, and Tamil cultural forms—translate private suffering into public

testimony, situate current conflicts within longue durée histories of dispossession, and imagine regenerative socio-ecological systems informed by indigenous knowledge. Crucially, multimodal dissemination strategies ensure that these texts reach diverse audiences, from village elders to national policy-makers, thereby bridging grassroots activism and broader advocacy networks.

To harness these potentials, environmental justice movements should:

1. **Support Writers' Collectives:** Provide resources and platforms for community authors to produce and distribute vernacular texts.
2. **Invest in Translation Projects:** Enable cross-linguistic circulation of regional works to foster inter-regional and national solidarities.
3. **Embed Literary Analysis in Activist Training:** Incorporate narrative workshops into movement curricula to strengthen storytelling skills and deepen community engagement.
4. **Collaborate with Community Media:** Leverage local radio, folk theatre troupes, and digital networks to expand reach among non-literate and remote populations.

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