



Reclaiming Adivasi History Through Verse: A Study of Select Poems of Anuj Lugun

Preeti Maurya

Assistant Professor,

Rameshwari Devi Government Girls College, Bharatpur.

preetimaurya9565@gmail.com

Prof. Deepak Kumar Singh

D.A.V. (PG) College, Lucknow.

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.43>

Abstract:

Through the poetry of Anuj Lugun, an Adivasi poet from Jharkhand, this paper delves into his unique historiographical approach. Traditionally, poetry in both Western and South Asian literature has been associated with imagination, romanticism, and artistic fancy. However, Lugun subverts these conventions by employing poetry as a medium to present the stark, grim realities faced by the Adivasi community and to testify to their lived reality. His poetry can be seen as a continuation and expansion of this effort, offering a deeply personal and community-centred perspective to history that challenges dominant narratives. Through selected poems of Anuj Lugun, this paper highlights the lived experiences, struggles, and resilience of the Adivasi people. His verses serve as a powerful medium of historical documentation, preserving oral traditions, cultural heritage, and social injustices that are often overlooked in mainstream historiography. Lugun not only preserves the Adivasi narrative but also reclaims their place in the historical discourse. His poems are an invaluable contribution to both literature and history. The present study aims to underscore the importance of integrating diverse voices and forms of expression in our understanding of the past. In this paper, Lugun's selected poems are examined within the broader framework of subaltern historiography, Hayden White's Metahistory, Gayatri Spivak's epistemic violence, and Miranda Fricker's concept of Epistemic Injustice.

Keywords: Historiography, Adivasi, Struggle, Subaltern, Poetry.

Article History: Submitted-05/05/2026, Revised-16/06/2026, Accepted-29/06/2026, Published-30/06/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

This paper explores Anuj Lugun's poetry as a form of historiography that resists traditional elite history-writing. This paper emphasises Lugun's role in chronicling and reclaiming Adivasi history, culture, and their experiences rather than viewing poetry merely as imaginative or aesthetic. Bringing out the voices of Adivasi communities and drawing attention to often-overlooked perspectives, Lugun's poetry emerges as a powerful tool of resistance and of preservation of Adivasi history, which is largely documented orally. This paper shows that Lugun's work is not only art but also an important historical intervention, enriching our understanding of subaltern historiography and bringing a new perspective into how we think about history within postcolonial and subaltern studies. Traditional historiography written by elites often sidelines indigenous voices and relegates their history to the periphery of national discourse. The marginalisation often stems from a focus on written narratives that neglect the oral traditions and knowledge systems that embody Adivasi experiences. The prevailing attitude has created a significant gap that impacts both the right to representation and the sustenance of Adivasi identity. This paper aims to fill this gap by questioning the assertion of objectivity in traditional historiography and challenging the perception that poetry is purely fictional. To achieve this, the researcher has selected poems from three of Anuj Lugun's poetry collections: "*Bagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti*," "*Aghoshit Ulgulaan*," and "*Pathalgarhi*."

A significant problem in historiography arose from its claim to absolute objectivity. The discipline of history emerged with the claim of objectivity and neutrality against poetic subjectivity, as is clear from Aristotle's remark on the difference between history and poetry. He argued that "the true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen" (Aristotle 33), as if history told everything objectively. Against this assumption, in reality, historiography involves imagination to a large extent. The historical incidents are recorded and presented by the historian

in a story form. As a phenomenon, history is nothing but many scattered incidents occurring simultaneously in different places. The discipline of history presents these stories with logical connections. This logical connection cannot be established without weaving it into a linear narrative. Hence, the historian's job is primarily to weave raw facts into a story. American historian and theorist Hayden White discussed the role of imagination in historiography through the concept of 'Metahistory'. Arguing against the so-called 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of mainstream historiography, he asked questions about "the structure of peculiarly historical consciousness?" and about "the epistemological status of historical explanations" (White 81). According to him, the facts of history cannot be told in their 'raw' form; rather, the historians create a narrative in a cause-and-effect sequence. In this process, a hierarchy is created, and this hierarchical narrative depends not on the facts themselves but on historians' interpretations and evaluations of those facts. As a result, the historians not only distort the facts but also eclipse the subalterns by mentioning only the dominant perspective.

The Subaltern Studies Group and its theoretical grounding, initiated by Ranajit Guha, marked a significant departure from Indian elitist historiography by foregrounding the experiences and voices of marginalised groups. Initially, the project focused more on presenting the history of the subalterns as helpless and marginalised, but later it shifted toward discourse analysis, taking a postcolonial turn. The latter part of the 'movement' focused more on presenting not the denial of agency to subalterns, but the politics of agency. Putul Sathe says the same: "the term 'new subaltern' invokes a fresh equation between subalternity and agency, where subalternity is not posited directly opposite to agency, but points to the manner in which agency is available and manifested in subaltern politics" (115). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised questions about the negative portrayal of subalterns in mainstream historiography in her seminal 1988 essay "Can the

Subaltern Speak?” In this essay, she introduced the idea of “epistemic violence.” She defined it as “the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (Spivak 76). Miranda Fricker, in her book “Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing,” elaborated on the topic and discussed two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. In the testimonial injustice the speaker “suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer’s part” (Fricker 4). Boaventura de Sousa Santos reconceptualized this in more intense words and called it “epistemicide”, the “extermination of knowledge and ways of knowing” (qtd. in Vaditya 277). Through his poems, Lugun addresses the same epistemic marginalisation and presents the true history of Adivasis, in which they are neither villains nor innocent, but conscious of their ways of life.

Anuj Lugun is one of the contemporary Munda Adivasi poets from Jharkhand who writes about the social, political, and historiographical issues that concern Adivasi lives. His poetry collections, “*Bagh aur Sugna Munda Ki Beti*”, “*Pathalgarhi*”, and “*Aghoshit Ulgulaan*” highlight the historiographical and epistemic violence, trace their struggle throughout history, and present their version of history. He celebrates not only the beauty that earlier Hindi poets focused on but also deeply connects with the Adivasis' struggle for rights over their “Jal, Jungle, and Jameen.” He wonders how he can sing the song in praise of his beloved when there are so many other issues to deal with. He turns poetry into a tool to fight the injustices and exploitations of Adivasis.

Adivasis' connection with nature is evident to all. Nature is not only the outer physical environment for them but also their living partners. Their life’s autonomy is intrinsic to nature. In the modern age, when the whole of life, even relationships, has been reduced to paper and data, Lugun’s poems talk about the coexistence and autonomy of life for both human beings and natural entities. History

has always been written by the powerful in the Western model of historiography. The two factors of mainstream historiography – 'writing' and 'power' have severely affected the Adivasi people of India. Post-independence India has followed the Western model of history writing, resulting in the denial of Adivasi history and literature due to their orality. Indian historian, environmentalist, and writer Ramachandra Guha exposed elitist historiography by defining it as: "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism— colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (Egyankosh 19). The capitalist notion of individuality gave rise to the writings by individual authors. It denied the existence of other forms of documentation that were not written or lacked a definite source. In the second part of his long narrative poem "*Bagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti*", which is entitled "Sugna Munda", Lugun presents the same idea of historiography:

सुगना मुंडा के सामने

जो दुनिया बन रही थी

उसमें लिखित ही वैध था

वही सभ्य और सांस्कारिक था

और लिखा वही जा रहा था

जो विजेता चाह रहा था (Lugun, *Bagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti* 38)

In the world that was being created

Before Sugna Munda

Only written was valid

Only that was civilised and cultured

And only those things were being written

That the winner wanted (my translation).

The above lines discuss the epistemic domination of a different worldview over the adivasi worldview of which Sugna Munda is a part. Lugun highlights the outer interference in the Adivasi worldview through terms such as *vaidh* (valid), *sabhya* (civilised) and *sanskarik* (cultured). Adivasis' symbiotic worldview celebrated the cultural, linguistic, culinary, social, and political diversity before they came into contact with the Britishers. The harmony of their life was disrupted by the introduction of the Britishers' 'standard' worldview. In this worldview, no difference was tolerated, and anything that did not conform to it was declared invalid, uncivilised, and uncultured. The poet's use of the word 'vaidh' suggests the non-negotiable nature of the British worldview, in contrast to the Adivasi worldview of symbiosis and tolerance. The inception of a different worldview also severed the relationship between Adivasis and nature, which they had preserved for centuries. Western individualism severely affected the symbiosis and communal solidarity within the Adivasi society.

The excessive exploitation of Adivasis under British rule continued in Post-independence India, resulting in movements such as 'Sarvodaya' and 'Bhoomidaan'. While historians praised the dream of Sarvodaya Samaj started by Acharya Vinoba Bhave as a "step for many movements based on the change of heart" (Dhiren Majumdar, qtd. in Rawat 27), the advocates of Adivasi rights argued that instead of benefiting them, these movements further exploited them by making them

bonded labourers on their own lands. Mahasweta Devi illustrated the practice of bonded labour in her short story “Seeds” and her novel *Doulati, the Bountiful*. She highlights the loopholes of the Bhoomidaan movement in the following words: “The gifting of land has many uses. Barren land can be eliminated. The recipients are bought over. One’s position with the sarkar becomes stronger. Above all, like a rasagolla after a meal, there is the added satisfaction of knowing one is compassionate” (qtd. in Trivedi 30). Forwarding Devi’s legacy, Lugun not only brings to light the grim conditions of laborers in India, but his sympathetic heart also wrenches at the sight of the exploitation of labourers around the world; be it in the Great Roman Empire or the Vedic civilisation of India. They are always “cheated and hungry on the spittoon of the civilisation” and “their dignity is peeled off” (Lugun, *Pathalgarhi* 48).

Lugun critiques governments and mainstream historians for neglecting the Adivasis' struggle against exploitation and for designating it as anarchic. The mainstream historiography highlights the violence and terror of these movements, but it often overlooks their underlying causes, reflecting an epistemic violence on the people involved. Activists who attempt to unravel these causes are jailed. Varavara Rao is one such activist about whom Lugun talks in one of his poems titled “Varavara Rao.” In this poem, Lugun questions the government, which “has thrown (him) behind the bars”/ and “branded (him) a traitor” (Lugun, *Pathalgarhi* 50).

Anuj Lugun, in *Aghoshit Ulgulaan*, questions the glamorization of the mainstream historiography of Eklavya cutting off his thumb and giving it to Dronacharya as ‘Guru Dakshina’. Reimagining Eklavya's history after this incident, he tries to reconstruct the history that mainstream historians never wrote about. He sees the legacy of Eklavya in the personas of Madra Munda and Kande Haram, evident in their archery styles. He resists the dominance of mainstream historiography, in which the history of Eklavya found no place before the history of Arjun and Dronacharya. Through

Eklavya, he presents the elitist mindset that never allows the “Other’s” history to be recognised.

In his poem “Dialogue with Eklavya,” he writes:

एकलव्य

अब जब भी तुम आना

तीर-धनुष के साथ ही आना

हां, किसी द्रोण को अपना गुरु न मानना

वह छल करता है (Lugun, *Aghoshit Ulgulaan* 25)

Eklavya

Now whenever you come

Come with a bow and an arrow

But, do not make Drona your teacher

He deceives (my translation).

The lines above suggest that Drona cannot be taken only as an individual but also serves as a representation of a distinct worldview characterised by the habit of deception. The bow and arrow become symbolic instruments for resistance against such deceptions. Lugun knows that it is not a one-time act of betrayal, but a civilizational difference that leads them to deceive others, one that does not change with the passage of time. For this reason, Lugun warns Eklavya, who represents the innocent Adivasi civilisation, to be more aware in the future. The use of the present simple

tense, “he deceives”, points to the habitual acts of deceiving. Recognising these habits, he seeks to counter it through his poems. However, despite these multiple warnings, the Adivasis often find themselves ensnared by the corporatism facing land alienation, dislocation, poverty, and identity crisis.

Anuj Lugun presents the history of his people, which never found a place in mainstream history. In epics and other religious scriptures, Adivasis were occasionally mentioned as people dwelling in forests, cut off from mainlanders. In many instances, they were designated by non-human epithets such as asuras and rakshas. Lugun rejects such a designation and asserts his people’s humanness in the following lines:

हम राक्षस कुल के नहीं हैं

दैत्य-दानव, बन्दर, रीछ नहीं हैं

हम मनुष्य हैं

और हमारा सम्मानित इतिहास है" (Lugun, *Bagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti* 88)

We are not of Rakshasa ancestry,

We are not demons-monsters, monkeys, and bears,

We are human beings,

Ours is a respectable history (my translation).

Adivasis were portrayed as having no social system, history, philosophy, or culture. In this way, the mainstream justifies its attempt to stand up for the marginalised. Adivasis are considered uncivilised because they live in the forests and are close to nature. Elite history has always been about kings and so-called high-caste/class people. Adivasis who were out of the varna or caste system were dehumanised and portrayed as animals. For the elite, the loss in the war was the only loss. They did not care if the entire way of life of Adivasis and their support systems, in the form of rivers, forests, and mountains, were lost. Lugun, in his poem, “Self-Declaration of a Guerrilla”, says:

वह मेरी प्रेम कहानी के बारे में कुछ नहीं जानता है

यह उसके लिए भी एक चुटकुला ही होगा

कि मुझे अपनी मुर्गियों से प्रेम है

जंगली लतरों, फलों और पहाड़ों से प्रेम है (Lugun, *Aghoshit Ulgulaan* 33)

He does not know anything about my love story

This would be a joke for him as well

That I love my hens

I love the wild vines, fruits, and mountains (my translation).

In his poems, Lugun also discusses the victimisation of Adivasis by the system. The constitutional provisions, articles, and schedules safeguard Adivasi rights, but even after more than 75 years of

independence, these provisions have not been implemented on the ground. Lugun describes the condition of Adivasis, who struggle to get their constitutionally guaranteed rights implemented. Their distinct identities are made invisible by the establishment to keep them at the periphery of mainstream society. The non-implementation of the constitutional articles enables the government and corporate companies to seize their land and resources easily. Lugun highlights these issues when he writes in “Self-Declaration of a Guerrilla”:

हमारी पहचान द्वीप में भटके-अटके नाविक की तरह हो रही है

बातें तो फैल रही हैं लेकिन क़ानून के उन अनुच्छेदों की तरह

जिनकी पुष्टि के लिए बार-बार न्यायाधीशों की जरूरत होती है (Lugun, *Aghoshit Ulgulaan* 38)

Our identity is becoming like a boatman lost on an island

Our issues are reaching there, but like those articles of law

For the confirmation of which judges are needed (my translation).

Anuj Lugun, through his poems, brings to light many events and life stories of Adivasi people that never found a place in mainstream history. He brings out the story of a starving person from his grave who would have been glamorised in pillars and stones if he were a king's son. In the same way, his heart also weeps to see the plight of those labourers who had to walk miles to reach their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to many popular writers and poets who focus on the charm of their loved ones or ponder life's deeper meanings, he chooses to explore the

struggles faced by labourers. His heart-rending descriptions of the miserable life of labourers can make anyone restless. In “The Death of Labourers Does Not Affect the Red Fort”, he writes:

मज़दूरों की मौत का सदमा लालकिले को नहीं होता है

केवल कुछ दिनों के लिए

सरकारी शव दाह गृहों से धुआँ उठता रहता है (Lugun, *Pathalgarhi* 37)

The death of labourers does not affect the Red Fort

Only for a few days

The smoke keeps rising from the government crematoriums (my translation).

Gangaram Kalundia, a soldier in the army who received a bravery award for his courage in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, does not find a place in mainstream history because he later led the struggle to save his ‘Jal, Jungle and Jameen’. Kalundia was shot dead while leading the demonstration of Adivasi people against the Icha dam Project on the Kharkai River in West Singhbhum in Jharkhand. Lugun equally raises the question of women. In his poems, women are not weak and dependent on anyone for their survival and rights. They fight for their rights and self-esteem with the same bravery as men. In his poem “The Women of Ulgulaan”, Lugun describes the bravery of women in these words:

वे उतनी ही लड़ाकू थीं

जितना कि उनका सेनापति

वे अपनी खूबसूरती से

कहीं ज़्यादा आक्रामक थीं (Lugun, *Aghoshit Ulgulaan* 95)

They were as much fighters

As their commander

They were more aggressive

Than their beauty (my translation).

Lugun exposes the epistemic violence and justification of the exploitation of Adivasis by mainstream society. They make laws and convince everybody that whatever the laws say is always right. Lugun questions the mainstream's attitude through the metaphor of the tiger. This tiger does not live in the jungle. This 'tiger' is the mainstream advanced industrial civilisation that is always ready to devour the whole traditions and culture of Adivasis. In Munda folktales, it is believed that some people know the art of becoming a tiger, which in the Mundari and Sahiya languages is called "*ulatbaggha*, *kunuil*, and *chaanar- baanar*". It is said that these people transform themselves to gain more wealth and power over others. They prey on their people when they do not get enough from outside. Mainstream society would mock such tales and dismiss them as myths, portraying them as the superstitions of the Adivasi people, but for Lugun, the transformation into *kunuil* is symbolic. These transformations highlight individuals within the Adivasi community who, under the influence of industrial and technological forces, begin to exploit and harm their own community members. The metaphorical Bagh in *Sugna Munda ki Beti* symbolises the

encroachment of the mainstream on every aspect of Adivasi life. He writes in *Sugna Munda ki Beti*:

जहाँ से वह छलाँग लगाता है

वहाँ के लोगों को लगता है

यह उचित और आवश्यक है

जहाँ पर वह छलाँग लगाता है

वहाँ के लोगों को लगता है

यह उन पर हमला है (Lugun, *Bagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti* 33)

From where it (tiger) leaps forward

There, people think

It is appropriate and necessary

Where it leaps upon

There, people feel

This is an attack on them (my translation).

The traditions and culture of the Adivasis are deeply rooted in their long-standing relationship with nature. This symbiotic bond has not only sustained their living conditions but also contributed to their mental well-being. Any disruption to this balance leads to the deterioration of both the

environment and the Adivasis' way of life. In the current era, the repercussions of this imbalance are evident in uncontrolled industrial development and the exploitation of natural resources. Such thoughtless exploitation has led to the earth's degradation and has caused significant issues for the Adivasis, including land alienation, poverty, and mental health problems. Many Adivasis have been enticed by industrial development, abandoning their more sustainable way of life. However, Adivasi poets and writers from across India are raising their voices and striving for a better future. Anuj Lugun is one such writer who openly addresses issues affecting Adivasis, people experiencing poverty, and the environment. His works not only focus on the injustices faced by Adivasis in India; he also writes about injustices worldwide, whether against Native Americans, Arabs, or Palestinians. Wherever there is injustice, Lugun uses his pen as a weapon to fight against it.

The close analysis of Lugun's poems demonstrates that his poetry becomes a tool to challenge the claimed objectivity of traditional historiography. He shows that, by taking sides with those at the periphery of society, poetry can ensure justice and resist the erasure of Adivasi voices. Through his engagement with the Adivasi practice of *Pathalgarhi* and the legacy of *Ulgulaan* (struggle), he attempts to reclaim marginalised histories and subaltern agency. The discussion shows that Lugun's poetry is both an artistic and a political act. His works bridge the gap between history and literature, exposing the limitations of the so-called objective historiography. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies and White's concept of *Metahistory*, the paper establishes that Lugun's poetry is an important intervention in exposing the continued impacts of colonial and postcolonial injustices. Lugun's poetry also contributes to a deeper and more truthful understanding of history and the process of history-writing.

Through his poetry, Lugun has significantly contributed to the preservation of oral traditions among Adivasis. While folkloric narratives have historically served as vital media for preserving Adivasi history, mainstream historians have often dismissed them as unreliable sources, resulting in testimonial injustice. In contrast, Lugun's work not only challenges this skepticism but actively revitalizes these traditions, as demonstrated in the writing style of his poem "*Bagh aur Sugna Munda ki Beti*." Additionally, works such as "*Pathalgarhi*" and "*Aghoshit Ulgulaan*" draw upon the rich legacy of resistance initiated by the Munda ancestors, further emphasising the importance of these narratives in reclaiming history, Adivasi identity, and understanding their struggle. This study is limited to reading Anuj Lugun's poetry, situating it within the broader context of the contemporary struggle for Adivasi land rights, and establishing poetry as an alternative medium of historiography. The current situation reveals a growing convergence between governmental authorities and corporate entities to exploit Adivasi people. The lack of their voices in the mainstream media underscores the urgent need for further scholarly investigations into other Adivasi expressions, such as poetry and prose by other Adivasi intellectuals.

Works Cited:

Primary Sources:

Lugun, Anuj. *Aghoshit Ulgulaan*. Rajkamal Paperbacks, 2023.

———. *Bagh Aur Sugna Munda Ki Beti*. Vani Prakashan, 2017.

———. *Pathalgarhi*. Vani Prakashan, 2019.

Secondary Sources:

Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Translated by S. H. Butcher, Macmillan, 1895. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/poeticstranslate00arisuoft/mode/1up>, Accessed 24 Sept. 2025.

Fricker, Miranda. "Introduction". *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford UP, 2007, pp. 01–08.

Rawat, Rajesh Kumar. "Vinoba Bhave's Conception of 'Sarvodaya'." *Peace Research*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2004, pp. 25–32.

Sathe, Putul. "Notes Towards Reading Adivasi Literature". *Contemporary Adivasi Writings in India: Shifting Paradigms*, edited by Dr. Rajshree Trivedi and Dr. Rupalee Burke, Notion P, 2018, pp. 107–25. Kindle Edition.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 66–111.

"Subaltern Studies". Egyankosh, unit 25. <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/44479/1/Unit-25.pdf>, Accessed 16 May 2024.

Trivedi, Rajshree. "Land and Labour as Metaphors in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction." *Contemporary Adivasi and Writing in India: Shifting Paradigm*, edited by Dr. Rajshree Trivedi and Dr. Rupalee Burke, Notion P, 2018, pp. 16–50. Kindle edition.

Vaditya, Venkatesh. "Social Domination and Epistemic Marginalization: Towards Methodology of the Oppressed." *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, vol. 32, no. 4, Routledge, 2018, pp. 272–85.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1444111>, Accessed 26 May 2024.

White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artefacts." *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, John Hopkins UP, 1978, pp. 81–100.