



Adivasi and the Atom: Exploring the transculturality of uranium mining in India

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Abstract

Boundaries of the mundane and the exceptional, sacred and profane, and natural and cultural, become blurred in Jadugoda, a small mining town in eastern India inhabited by indigenous Adivasi communities and their non-human kin. The radioactive waste and contamination that have configured life and its meanings around the country's oldest uranium mines, and the multi-scalar violences and ruptures unleashed in the process, offer the narrative fabric for ruminations by the Adivasi woman writer, Mahua Maji. Through an eco-critical engagement with Maji's semi-fictional novel, *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* (lit. *Marang Goda* turns blue-throated) we explore the forms of nuclearity that emerge along the variously entangled institutional, material, and socio-cultural lives of uranium extraction. In this paper, we triangulate the scholarly conversations around the nuclear mundane, the eco-critical affordances of Maji's novel, and secondary empirical studies. In doing so, we deploy *transculturality* as a post-colonial, indigenous, and eco-critical conceptual device, in conjunction with the emerging post-human frameworks in the Nuclear Humanities that attend to multi-scalar entanglements, hybrid existences of naturecultures, and situated negotiations of nuclearity.

1. Introduction

20 “‘Yes, son. In this whole country, only here, in our Marang Goda – these valuable stones are dug out of the ground – uranium!’ ‘Nowhere else?’ ‘Not until now’...The stones scattered in this area contain nothing but uranium. You can take it that there are millions, billions, trillions of rupees right under our feet.’ Jambeera would explain to his grandson. The grandson would beam, ‘Then we can dig in our house and fields to take out uranium, tatang! We can earn plenty of money selling it.’”¹

- (Maji, 2012, p. 104)

¹ This article draws on both the original Hindi novel by Mahua Maji (Maji, 2012), *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua: Vikiran, Pradushan va Visthapan se Jujhte Adivasiyon ki Gatha*, and its English translation, *The Toxic Tribal Land of Marang Goda: Tribal Struggles against Radiation, Pollution, Displacement and Neo-Capitalism*, translated by Rajesh Kumar (Kumar, 2022). All direct quotations from the novel are taken from the English translation.



30 In this exchange between an Adivasi² grandfather, Jambeera and his grandson, Sagen, protagonists of Mahua Maji's *Marang*
Goda Neelkanth Hua (lit. *Marang Goda* turns blue-throated), readers encounter the variously enchanted worlds of uranium
mining in central India. In *Marang Goda*, the fictionalised name of Jadugoda, India's oldest uranium mining site, the vibrant
onto-cultural itineraries of Adivasi indigenous lifeworlds emerge as a site of negotiations of nuclearity. In our explorations of
the nuclear mundane, both the modern Indian state and Adivasi communities configure, label, and sort specific nuclear
35 materials, processes, thresholds, labour, and institutional practices as exceptional or mundane in their own ways. As we
argue, at each of these intersections, the implicated choices are shaped by the spiritual-material continuities of Adivasi life
and the political-cultural enchantments of India's mainstream emanating from the extractivist economy, modernity, and
postcoloniality. In the process, an array of intimacies, affects, and agentialities are afforded to various actants through their
specific locations and itineraries. For our endeavour of thinking with the novel, *Marang Goda*'s historical and onto-cultural
40 situatedness offers promising opportunities to explore the heterogeneous nuclearities emerging at ground zero of the world's
sixth-largest nuclear arsenal.

The material-cultural negotiations constituting the variously entangled forms of Adivasi everydayness and nuclear mundane
appear in a non-linear fashion in Maji's novel. These aspects of Adivasi existence and uranium's social-cultural lives
45 alternatively come to be mundane and exceptional in profoundly emergent ways along the novel's narrative arc. In turn,
these negotiations remain embedded in the broader material-cultural practices through which Adivasi bodies have come to
inhabit the intersections of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial configurations of power, politics, and identity. A
diverse array of relational ontologies and attendee cultural practices affirming spiritual-material continuities have remained
pivotal to Adivasi ways of existing together with other human and non-human communities (Chandra, 2015; Fritsch, 2024;
50 Shah, 2010). In other words, specific material-semiotic arrangements and negotiations implicated in *becoming Adivasi*
(Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011), and *being nuclear* (Hecht, 2012) come together to produce the embodied forms of nuclear
mundane that we explore. For our endeavour of ruminating with the novel while simultaneously scaffolding the techno-
cultural lives of nuclear mining in Jadugoda within broadly historical contexts, we divide this article into **three broad**
sections.

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In the **first**, we lay out our research assemblage by introducing our literary, philosophical, and historical companions. We
begin by broadly identifying the methodological sensibilities, theoretical frameworks, and onto-political insights emerging
from recent scholarly meditations around the nuclear mundane, post-coloniality, transculturality, and Adivasi everydayness.
In addition, we outline the historical-cultural milieu within which *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* is situated. In describing the

² 'Adivasi' (literally meaning 'earliest inhabitants') remains a "middle-of-the-road term", emerging self-referentially at the cross-sections
of the colonial notions of tribe and savages, the Hindu-majoritarian postcolonial neologism of 'vanvasi', and the strictly legal category of
'janjati' adopted by the Indian Constitution (Chandra, 2015).



60 narrative, thematic, and stylistic textures of the novel, we discuss how the specificities of Maji's literary device appear to emerge from the embodied ethics surrounding Adivasi modes of place- and knowledge-making.

In the **second** section, our engagement with the novel and actual histories remains broadly focused on the colonial period, when Adivasi lifeworlds experienced the biopolitical, cultural, and ecological violence unleashed by the extractivist
 65 machinery of British rule in India. The pre-British, pre-industrial, and pre-modern everydayness of *Marang Goda* first appears as part of the backstory – through the life of Sagen's grandfather, Jambeera – and later recurs in the rear-view on multiple occasions, alternatively as referents for longing, grief, resilience, and resistance. As our meditations suggest, it is these fabrics of Adivasi lifeworlds that undergo ruptures, rifts, disfiguration, and expropriation – first, under the British regime, then through post-colonial Indian modernity's self-assumed custodianship, and more recently, under the economic
 70 and cultural axioms of neoliberal markets. In other words, this section sketches the overarching histories, enchantments, and entanglements shaping the itineraries of the Indian state and Adivasi communities as they emerge on the nuclear theatre.

The **third** section of the paper's narrative-theoretical practice attempts to illuminate the broader context constituted by the aspirations of the postcolonial Indian state and the pervasive middle-class consensus surrounding industrial and nuclear
 75 modernity. Here, our endeavour is to visibilize how political independence for much of India meant a continuation, and in several ways, an intensification of the destructive ruptures in Adivasi life that the colonial system had set in motion. Engaging *Marang Goda's* narrative arc alongside the historical establishment of uranium mining in Jadugoda and the institutional trajectories of the state-owned Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL), we attempt to capture the multi-layered and polyvalent encounters between bureaucracy and local communities at and around the mining site. To think about
 80 the material-cultural strategies through which Adivasi communities absorb, refigure, rework, and resist various exceptional and mundane aspects of the uranium mining's existence, we rely on the concept of *transculturation*, as deployed by indigenous and decolonial scholars in various literary, political, and ecological contexts (Denney & Cooke, 2021; Taylor, 1991). To unravel the forms of nuclear mundane emerging in Jadugoda, transculturation appears particularly promising as it entails unequal yet creative engagements on the part of local indigenous communities. In these discussions then, Adivasi
 85 bodies emerge as agents reconfiguring the material-cultural lives of uranium, often deploying the spiritual-material continuities available through their tradition, rather than as static recipients or passive victims of the structurally marginalizing conditions.

In the **concluding section**, we explore forms of the nuclear mundane emerging in the neoliberal phase beginning in the early
 90 1990s, when India opened its economy to global markets. In this phase, economic growth became the Indian state's *raison d'être*, and the dictum of ensuring 'ease of doing business' translated into a surreptitiously liberalised labour regime and the embrace of industry-friendly legal, safety, and environmental norms. This phase coincided with an intensified destruction, displacement, and disenfranchisement of Adivasi rights in and around Jadugoda. Against this backdrop, in the final chapters



of the novel, things take a dramatic turn with the Fukushima accident which throws up urgent questions of safety, sustainability, justice, and futures. Here, we engage in ethical speculations around questions with which the author pauses *Marang Goda's* narrative arc. In doing so, we underline how the author's ethical prism for making sense of accidents, accelerations, and precarities remains pivoted around the banalized violences, erasures, sacrifices, and risks around the uranium mines.

2. Section I – Uranium, the Adivasi, and our research assemblage

'Newness enters the world through acts of displacement', Dipesh Chakrabarty proposes in his ruminations on postcolonial 'belatedness' (Chakrabarty, 2018, p. 36). Careful modes of witnessing are required in *Marang Goda/Jadugoda* for paying attention to the ways in which newness surrounding uranium is rendered banal through Adivasi modes of place- and world-making. Not that the histories of uranium mining in the Singhbhum region have been devoid of big, dramatic material-cultural events, transformations, and ruptures. Uranium brought with itself massive infrastructures, extractive and polluting processes, institutions, bureaucracies, new forms of labour, and, nearly routinized accidents for which the UCIL is infamously known (Karlsson, 2009; Majumdar et al., 2025; Popli & Tiru, 2024; Sharma, 2010). However, to grasp the banalized ways in which uranium inhabits Jadugoda and Maji's fictionalised *Marang Goda*, we need to look beyond what Hecht labels 'nuclear rupture talk' (Hecht, 2002) – various essentialist and totalizing axioms around the atom.

In thinking of how newness is configured in the everyday life of Jadugoda, our endeavour finds resonance with the distinct set of methodological sensibilities, conceptual affinities, and material-temporal scalings that have come to accompany scholarly explorations of nuclear-related themes. In particular, Gabrielle Hecht's conceptual innovation of 'nuclearity' (Hecht, 2012) has inspired a series of *in situ* ruminations about specific histories, technological processes, institutional practices, sites, and human/non-human communities (Abraham, 2010; Hamidi, 2018; Kumaki, 2022; Mažeikienė et al., 2021). More broadly, recent scholarly investigations of the nuclear mundane and everyday have offered promising contemplations around the everyday operational rhythm of nuclear facilities (Russell & Vinsel, 2018), the slowness of violence in the atomic age (Hurley, 2020), the lingering sense of "infinite time" (Kohso, 2020), transgenerational trauma and resilience (Schwab, 2024), and multiple temporalities of atomic cities (Dawney, 2021).

For our endeavours, in addition to these intellectual sensibilities and orientations, scholarly investments accumulating around colonial and post-colonial itineraries and spiritual-material continuities accompanying indigenous life, remain especially relevant. Such works include investigations of nuclear colonialism in the Yucca mountains (Endres, 2009) and other contexts (Berthier-Foglar, 2011; De Pree, 2025), post-human ruminations on entanglements of landscapes, water, and nuclear (Hobart, 2021), and explorations of life and death around the Marshall Islands dome (Oh, 2025). For thinking about *Marang Goda/Jadugoda*, such works must be read together with scholarly investigations of colonial and post-colonial itineraries of power, technology, and politics in Adivasi landscapes. Historically, the Adivasi ways of relating with each other and fellow



non-humans predominantly remained either a subject of colonial gaze, being labeled pre-rational backwardness, or often fell prey to ‘inverted orientalism’ through exoticization and mystification (Inden, 1986). In this regard, Alpa Shah’s meditations on the spiritual-material continuities in Adivasi life (Shah, 2010) and Raycroft and Dasgupta’s explorations of *becoming Adivasi* (Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011), become key companions. In this regard, literary and artistic traditions of indigenous communities have served to reveal ‘the chorus of natural spiritual voices to be heard around us’ (Roothaan, 2019, p. 4), while simultaneously inviting us to comprehend spirit ontologies as ‘historical and locally varying ways of relating to the natural world’ (Filipova, 2021).

To illuminate the entry of uranium in Adivasi everydayness, the second proposition that Dipesh Chakrabarty offers seems particularly relevant. He suggests that we might be prone to seeing newness as repetition, and hence, deficient – ‘Newness is hard to distinguish from a simulacrum, a fake that is neither a copy nor original’ (Chakrabarty, 2018, p. 36). As a prominent post-colonial and subaltern thinker, Chakrabarty’s stakes include the configurations and refigurations that, in our case, constitute Adivasi lifeworlds in Jadugoda. In specific Adivasi contexts, we rely on the concept of *transculturation* which has regained scholarly currency in foregrounding Indigenous agentialities in the face of recent onto-cultural orientations. The process refers to the cultural and material strategies of selecting, reshaping, and resignifying modern forms that cannot be reduced to simple assimilation or hybridity. Although the concept of transculturation originated in the 1940s³, it experienced intellectual semiosis around the mid-1990s in Latin American contexts, when it came to refer to the literary techniques through which authors tried to incorporate elements of Indigenous cultures into their writing, while simultaneously ‘adopting and adapting the literary techniques from the European and US literary avant-gardes’ (Duno-Gottberg, 2011). Broadly proposed as a substitute for notions such as acculturation and assimilation, transculturation remained premised on the view that “no matter how asymmetrical the power situation may be, cultural encounters are multilateral and reciprocal exchanges between members of different cultures” (Krause, 2016). Tracing how the concept has traveled across various post-colonial contexts, Diana Taylor suggests that transculturation “affects the entire culture; it involves the shifting of socio-political, not just aesthetic, borders; it modifies collective and individual identity; it changes discourse, both verbal and symbolic” (Taylor, 1991, p. 61).

In the face of the paucity of scholarly works directly concerning nuclear infrastructures in Adivasi contexts, we were led to *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua*. Importantly, within nuclear culture contexts, Maji’s work goes beyond the dramatic themes of radioactive accidents and nuclear wars, and concerns itself instead with everyday life around uranium mines. Then again, Maji’s human protagonists consist of Adivasi bodies who undergo forcible dislocation only to be turned into casual workers in the mines. The everyday connections with uranium become further banalized for these Adivasi bodies relative to the full-time skilled workers and engineers directly employed by the UCIL.

³ The term was coined in 1940 by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, to refer to how the process “merging and converging are established when conquered people choose and select what parts of the dominant culture they will accept” (Duno-Gottberg, 2011).



2.1 Uranium, Adivasi everydayness, and an unconventional work of fiction

- 160 The title of the novel, *Marang Goda neelkanth hua*, translates to “*Marang Goda* turns blue-throated”. Here, blue-throated is an apparent reference to the mythological deity, *Shiva*, revered in Hindu and Adivasi traditions in their own distinctive ways. One version of the origin-mythology from within these traditions posits that during the great churning of oceans, while other gods received nectar and valuables, Shiva chose to ingest poison in a bid to protect the *Devas* (gods) and all life. This ingested poison that Shiva stores in the ‘pouch of his neck’ (H. Agrawal, 2022, p. 517) renders his throat blue for eternity.
- 165 Known simultaneously as the keeper and destroyer of all existence, Shiva is thus considered the guardian of cyclical mythological temporality. In Shiva’s mirror image, *Marang Goda* becomes the ‘ultimate pharmakon’ to borrow Derrida’s term from *Nuclear Criticism* contexts (Derrida et al., 1984), ingesting and containing the radioactive poison generated in the churning of India’s nuclear modernity.
- 170 Unravelling how uranium mining refigured Adivasi lifeworlds must have been an arduous enterprise for an Adivasi woman author who arrived at it with distinct political, cultural, ecological, and ethical commitments⁴. The nuclear drama in Jadugoda beginning in the 1950s, has continued to unfold over the past seven decades with altering political scenarios, economic dictums, ecological sensibilities, cultural milieus, and institutional and legal frameworks. In the process of capturing this historical arc through the novel’s textualities, a broad array of process-entities come to populate the theatre
- 175 that Maji sets. These include the materialities of uranium ore, tailings, dust and radioactive waste, the invisibility of radioactivity, the material processes of mining, milling, and transportation, various forms of labour, and the humans and non-humans implicated in the everydayness of a mining township. Moreover, these actants remain embedded within and operate relationally together with an even broader milieu of historical, cultural, and technological itineraries. An even larger variety of deeply invested agentialities, such as, urban anti-nuclear activists, global markets, and events like the Fukushima accident
- 180 occurring seemingly at a far distance, but impacting local configurations quite intimately, emerge later in Maji’s storytelling.

As a consequence, we encounter a piece of literature that stands out not simply for being one of the few works of Hindi fiction that engages with nuclear questions in India, but as a literary device, unconventional in intellectually productive

185 ways. *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua* is composed of an unusual narrative expanse and style, and non-linear textualities that render the novel a conceptually generative companion for thinking about the fabric of reality around India’s uranium mines. First, the book’s vast narrative expanse sets it apart even within the broad genre of historical fiction. Spanning over 400 pages and 33 chapters, Maji’s telling involves not just three generations of Adivasi people and the array of cultural-material transformations surrounding their lives. But in doing so, Maji critically reflects on the historical developments of roughly the

⁴ In a recent interview, Maji recounted her restlessness during the research and writing process for *Marang Goda*. The struggle to find a craft for what she wanted to say through literature eventually inspired her to join active politics to raise concerns surrounding Adivasi lives (Aaj Tak, 2022).



190 past three centuries. Second, Maji also engages in meticulous documentation, descriptions, and explanations of political, legal, and technological aspects. Such excursions include themes like radioactivity and its human-environmental impacts; resistance against uranium, nuclear technologies and atomic weapons in India, Hiroshima and beyond; institutional trajectories of mining companies; and environmental and labour laws, and indigenous rights. This enterprise of documentation and explanation appears pivotal to understanding the ethics of loss, longing, and resistance that the novel's
195 narrative fabric espouses. Maji's unusual literary techniques intrigued us to explore its reception within Hindi literary circles. Our research revealed some dismissive views that describe Maji's work as resembling an extended research paper rather than a work of fiction⁵.

Maji's departures from extant narrative conventions of the novel genre, however, seem to emanate from the vastly complex
200 and entangled realities she seeks to illuminate. In this sense, Maji's craft and positionalities resonate closely with the broader eco-critical concerns in the Anthropocene. In recent years, such reflexive considerations have increasingly rendered modern novels as inherently restricting cultural apparatus. "But the modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning," Amitav Ghosh observes in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh, 2017, p. 23).

205 2.2 The novel's narrative arc and Adivasi histories

Broadly speaking, Maji's novel offers a non-linear narrativization of the encounters of Adivasi bodies with the colonial regime, the Indian state, institutions, democratic activist groups who support Adivasi struggles, and global victims of uranium mining and radiation. As the novel culminates in 2011 with questions thrown up by the Fukushima nuclear accident, *Marang Goda* also affords us opportunities to think speculatively together with the author about the futures and
210 predicaments of *Marang Goda/Jadugoda*, place, ecology, humans and non-humans, their affective intimacies, and emergent nuclear futures. Thanks to its protracted temporal scaling, the novel becomes an appropriate literary device through which the author confronts questions of oppression, justice, solidarity, and ethics.

The everydayness surrounding Sagen's life, whom we identify as the main protagonist of Maji's novel, as his story spans
215 nearly its entirety, is characterized by various forms of the nuclear mundane, industrial modernity, and neoliberal precarity. The novel's storytelling begins, however, two generations prior, when readers learn how Sagen's grandparents meet, and the colonial and emerging post-colonial contexts around them that force an uncoupling with their ancestral forest lands. Through the multi-layered struggles of Sagen's grandparents, Maji's readers get vivid glimpses of the pre-colonial Adivasi life, even as it appears as but a fast-receding backdrop. This carefully crafted portrayal of Adivasi everydayness is constituted through

⁵ One such review bemoans Maji's 'constant interference with her characters through relentless commentaries and unending supply of facts', which allegedly robs the novel of emotional and creative sublimity that works of literature are supposed to possess (R. Agrawal, 2016).



220 a delicate assemblage of nature, humans, social interactions, beliefs, rituals, customs, magic, animals, and other non-humans, in their intricately entangled collective existence. This fabric of Adivasi life, in which humans and non-human forms exist together in a ritualized everydayness, serves as a crucial backdrop and recurring referent for the remainder of the novel.

The stories of the first generation of protagonists – Jambheera, Menjari, and later, Sukurmani – unfold along the transitional
 225 timelines of the 20th century, against the backdrop of the withdrawal of the colonial regime and the emergence of an independent India. As the story progresses, we encounter the untimely deaths of Jambheera’s first wife, Menjari and their first-born child – killed by an elephant – an animal otherwise read as a benevolent omen in Adivasi cosmology. This loss is followed by Jambheera’s migration to *Marang Goda* and his subsequent marriage to Sukurmani – Sagen’s *jiyang* (grandmother), with whom he builds a long and settled life in *Marang Goda*. Years later, Jambheera and Sukurmani die
 230 painful deaths in quick succession, purportedly due to radiation sickness. This progression – from harm interpreted through cosmological knowledge to extractive industrial risks – in our view, reflects the wider transformations that mark Adivasi life under India’s postcolonial nuclear modernity. Their deaths come as a profound shock to Sagen, and precede the later crises that shape the family’s trajectories. Rekonda – Sagen’s father – is compelled to take up work as a blaster in the uranium mine owing to financial distress. Subsequent experiences push the family into extreme poverty, leaving Sagen and his
 235 siblings dangerously malnourished. In the aftermath, Sagen is adopted by his *tau* and *tai* – Rekonda’s older brother and sister-in-law – who, amid the slow, accumulating harms, have been unable to have children of their own.

After a childhood spent in *Marang Goda*, Sagen lives out his adolescence and young adulthood alternating between his biological and adoptive families across West and East Singhbhum, where Adivasi resistance has intensified against
 240 expanding state control over forests, widespread disenfranchisement of Adivasis, their routine arrests and killings, and precarious wage-labour conditions. Sagen’s own lived experiences, and the stories of injustice, longing, and resilience inherited from his parents and grandparents, compel him to mobilize against uranium mining, and to forge solidarities with other Adivasi communities, emergent political formations pivoted on Adivasi identity, and Indigenous struggles globally. In Maji’s documentary fiction thus, the textures of Adivasi everydayness established in the early chapters gradually make way
 245 for specific forms of the nuclear mundane, configured as an embodied assemblage of labour, law, technology, bureaucracy, institutions, industrial modernity, and emerging forms of resistance.

3. Section II – Adivasi lifeworlds and colonial ruptures

250 “Don’t ever go beyond the third mountain in the west, hey!”, people from the Santhal community repeatedly warned of a particular hill in *Marang Goda* in East Singhbhum (Maji, 2012, p. 23). The *Bonga* (god) of the hill, they explained, was wrathful and capable of destroying pregnancies. For generations, women, children, the elderly, and those considered vulnerable, were urged not to venture there. The caution, seemingly passed down through generations, was also extended to



outsiders like the Ho Adivasi women, unattuned to the *Bonga*'s presence and power. In Maji's novel, the same hill later
 255 reveals itself as a uranium-bearing landscape. As the narrative arc of the novel progresses, this once-sacred, once-forbidden
 landscape is transformed into a zone of extraction, dispossession, and sacrifice. In the real world, similar uncanny beliefs
 persist among Adivasi communities living around Jadugoda. Oral histories and anthropological accounts record longstanding
 community prohibitions associated with terrains later identified as possessing uranium. This is often summarized in the
 Adivasi injunction to 'let the venomous serpent lie inside its hole' (Giffard-Foret, 2017; Shri Prakash, 1999) – a cosmology
 260 mirrored in *Marang Goda*.

Overarchingly, in Maji's novel, the landscape emerges as possessing a living, responsive, and profoundly relational presence
 in Adivasi world-making practices. Such more-than-human relations across actants such as, land, water, forests, animals, and
 seasons, come to acquire immanent ceremoniality woven into the everyday fabric of Adivasi lifeworlds. Often mediated
 265 through stories, rituals, taboos, and other forms of cosmological relationships, these embodied knowledge-, meaning-, and
 world-making practices render the landscape sentient and morally consequential. Such spiritual-material continuities
 surrounding uranium beneath the ground, inhabited by humans and non-humans sharing sacred relations and responsibilities,
 recur throughout the novel – first, as a ritualized form of care to protect the landscape, then as a referent of fear, loss, and
 longing, and simultaneously, as an embedded sacredness for scaffolding the collective resistance even as mundane aspects of
 270 justice and legal rights become part of the Adivasi struggle.

3.1 *Bir, Bongas, and non-human living companions*

Saranda, literally 'a forest (*Bir*) spread across 700 hills,' is the homeland of Sagen's grandfather, Jambeera. Concentrated
 largely in the West Singhbhum district of present-day Jharkhand, it has been home to Jambeera's Ho Adivasi ancestors –
 hunter-gatherers, who, over generations, forged a physical and metaphorical tandem with the forest: learning its rhythms and
 275 cultivating and inhabiting it, thus rendering the forest's perceived wildness familiar and mundane. Maji presents Saranda as a
 densely inhabited, more-than-human assemblage. The forest is revered as the dwelling of *Bir Bonga* (forest god), *Buru*
Bonga (mountain god), and a multitude of other *Bongas*. While *Sing Bonga* (Sun god) is regarded as the cosmic creator and
 supreme deity, numerous other spirits together constitute an intricate assemblage of Adivasi cosmology. *Bongas* are not gods
 in the sense that organized religions often imagine divinity, but spirits or presences embedded in the land, forest, hills, water,
 280 and ancestors, and propitiated in every major rite of passage. These are dual-natured beings – simultaneously protective and
 nurturing, yet capable of punishing excesses of human greed, injustice, and exploitation of land. In such instances, the
Bongas intervene through illness or ecological misfortune, thus asserting their agentic role in restoring equilibrium.

In the novel, the Ho Adivasis' relationships with non-human animal beings, marked by varying degrees of intimacy, are
 articulated through practices and belief systems that emphasize a negotiated coexistence. At one end of this spectrum are
 285 cockfights, where reared and trained birds are pitted against one another and used for wagering, and function as culturally



embedded performances of skill, social influence, and power. At the other end are encounters with formidable forest-dwelling animals, such as elephants, interpreted as omens indicating good fortune⁶. Yet, as briefly noted earlier, their capacity for fatal violence is also evident in the deaths of Jambeera's first wife, Menjari and their child by a rampaging elephant. While elephants are often approached through this omen-based framework, predators such as tigers, bears, and jackals are integrated into the community's everyday spatial awareness – their caves are recognised and mapped, habitual movements observed and remembered, and precautionary measures taken. Never demonized or rendered exotic, these animals are engaged through practical knowledge and vigilance.

Similarly, the forest also sustains long-standing subsistence and ritual practices that illuminate the relational terms on which Ho Adivasis engage with animals, and which are embedded in a larger ethics of attentiveness, signaling, and mutual responsiveness. *Sendra* (lit. 'to hunt'), undertaken after the spring festival of *Ba Porob* mostly by men and adolescent boys, appears as one such practice in the novel: a centuries-old, real-world communal hunt practiced by several Adivasi communities in parts of India (D'Cruze et al., 2024). The hunters sound the *sakowa*, a trumpet made from a wild buffalo horn, and beat the *dugdugi* (drum) to give the animals 'notice' and 'allow them a chance to escape' (Maji, 2012, p. 113), thus transforming the hunt into an encounter of shared risk and awareness. A comparable form of engagement occurs at naturally occurring salt licks near creeks, rivers, and springs — sites where animals gather to lick salt and drink water, and where Adivasi hunters wait in hiding, studying the animals' movements, and anticipating and reading cues to accomplish their hunt. In Ho cosmology, animals, birds, humans, and landforms together form an interconnected system of signs through which the forest and its inhabitants communicate with each other. Impending storms and other weather changes are read through more-than-human cues, with birds and animals often acting as early harbingers. This dense eco-semiotic world is supported by the Ho language itself, which contains precise vocabulary and nuanced descriptors for the forest's terrain, species, and ecological events.

3.2 Temporal-Material refigurations accompanying the arrival of uranium

The above-described relational ontologies remain crucial for the way Ho people experience time and temporalities. As Banerjee (Banerjee, 2023), referencing post-colonial thinker Shahid Amin, notes, peasant time is rarely linear, and is structured instead by overlapping rhythms of agriculture, ritual, and everyday life. In the novel, the Ho, transitioning from hunting-gathering to settled agriculture, also organize their lives around cyclical and ecological temporalities tied to seasons, rituals, foraging, and more-than-human relations. Maji subsequently traces how these non-linear rhythms are refigured by the homogenizing temporality of postcolonial modernity, particularly uranium mining, even as the Ho strive to sustain temporal rhythms intimately bound to their land, forest, and community.

⁶ As when the appearance of an elephant herd offsets the bad omens observed by village elders and allows Jambeera and Menjari's wedding ceremony to proceed (Maji, 2012, p. 44).



315 A clear temporal disjuncture in Jambeera's worlding emerges through his encounter with an Englishman, a geologist who
 lives and works by the clock – "Our Coldrate Soyeb (*sahib*) used to make us work with a clock placed on his table. He never
 forced us to carry on even a minute beyond eight hours," Jambeera would recount to an awe-struck Sagen decades later
 (Maji, 2012, p. 24). This seemingly innocuous adherence to linear clock-time reflects the violently enduring colonial order
 that had already begun to make deep inroads into Adivasi life. Through other such references in the stories of Jambeera and
 320 Sukurmani, Maji pieces together the traces and transfigurations of the previous few centuries, in which Adivasi lives become
 ravaged by not only raw imperial extraction but also the colonial modernity that dominant non-Adivasi sections of the
 country embrace with an equally violent zeal.

By Jambeera's young adulthood, British soldiers had already intruded into their everyday worlds, wrecking huts, burning
 crops, making arbitrary arrests, and flogging men in a bid to deter them from hunting and collecting forest produce. Oral
 325 histories passed down through generations record how the Ho people ambushed the local kings', zamindars', and later,
 British soldiers with their rudimentary bows and arrows when the demands for *lagaan* (tax) and claims over their ancestral
 lands began. Maji repeatedly invokes Ho warriors such as Poto, Nara, Berai, Pandua, Birsa Munda and others who emerged
 in resistance, and because of whom, despite repeated military campaigns, the British were never fully able to subdue the Ho.
 This history also shapes how the Ho are perceived by other Adivasi communities: in *Marang Goda*, the Santhal Adivasis
 330 imagine them as fearsome warriors endowed with extraordinary powers, capable of making British soldiers disappear
 through chanting *mantras* that transform them into 'butterflies and birds' (Maji, 2012, p. 23).

Where military domination failed, Maji reminds us, the British increasingly turned to extractivist and asymmetrical trade. Ho
 lands in Kolhan, comprising East and West Singhbhum and other Adivasi-dominant regions, were seized for railway
 construction, while Adivasis deprived of forest access and pushed into poverty were coerced into slave-like labour on tea
 335 plantations in Assam in India's northeast⁷. Maji underscores how with the arrival of British timber merchants and the
 expansion of mining, forests were felled to build roads and other infrastructure, and Adivasis were forced into serving these
 extractive projects.

In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, thus, the primary accumulation of capital in the form of these goods, often carried
 out by sections of non-Adivasi populations recruited for the purpose, remained pivotal to the expansion of the East India
 340 Company's commercial and political footprints in South Asia (Khanna, 2022; Shah, 2010). Alongside this material
 dispossession, colonial records continued to portray the Ho and other Adivasis as barbaric, violent, criminal and uncivilized
 (Khanna, 2022). In contrast with the institutionalized discourses of law, justice, and morality that increasingly became
 available to the rest of India, Adivasi populations remained locked in a relationship of perpetual violence and extraction. On

⁷ (Dasgupta, 2018) notes that Adivasis from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha forced into working on British tea plantations in Assam
 in the nineteenth century, remained disenfranchised even post-independence by being denied recognition as 'Scheduled Tribes' under the
 Indian Constitution.



the other hand, the non-Adivasi English-educated middle classes emerged, expanded, and consolidated as modern subjects as
345 a result of colonial presence and policies, while also gradually mobilizing themselves to resist the same colonial authority
using the institutions and material-cultural infrastructures supplied through it.

Colonial modernity, often characterized by peculiar forms of hybridity and mimicry, thus, became part of both the British
and nationalist agenda, and remained crucial in shaping the emergence of India as a modern nation. As a corollary, a wilful
and, if needed, a forcible, supplantation of modes of life that hindered the expansion of modernity acquired a nationalist
350 consensus and urgency. This, as Das Gupta notes, is a perpetuation of pre- and post-colonial narratives and chronicles “under
successive regimes – the Mughals, the British empire, as well as the post-Independence state, depriving Adivasis not only of
their land but also their identity, tradition and ethos.” (S. D. Gupta, 2025, p. 55).

In the face of such complex relationships with modernity and coloniality, transculturality has retained its conceptual
purchase in Adivasi contexts even as newer proposals for concepts such as heterogeneity and ‘contact zone’ emerged in
355 recent years. Moreover, as part of the ecocritical repertoire and new materialist sensibilities, transculturation has emerged to
offer newer ways to think about how things and objects exist in transcultural conditions, and how ‘nature’ comes into
existence through various place- and world-making practices. Transcultural ecocriticism, in particular, promises to offer ‘a
radical, decolonial theorization, where Western modes of conquest, categorization and extraction are checked in order to
embrace a multi-vocal array of complex expressions’ (Denney & Cooke, 2021). In fact, voices within decolonial and onto-
360 cultural scholarship insist that transculturation can be embraced as a ‘necessary concept to remove translation from its
linguistic conception’, given that the reductionist ‘alphabetic conception of language’ underwrites entire modernity (Mignolo
& Schiwy, 2002, p. 252). For us, transculturality thus opens up possibilities to grasp the complex and non-linear material-
cultural strategies through which Adivasi communities living in *Marang Goda/Jadugoda* attempt to live together with the
uranium mines and radioactivity.

365 It is within this expanding colonial-extractive landscape that uranium enters Jambeera’s world. The same Englishman who
works by the clock, once places a material under a microscope and invites Jambeera to take a look. Jambeera describes what
he sees as “a blazing ember, brightness filled with an unearthly glow. Sharply palish-palish! Awfully dazzling!” (Maji, 2012,
p. 27). Although left unnamed in the moment by Maji, the reader may infer that this luminous substance is uranium – its
uncanny appearance marking a rupture that will reconfigure land, time, and life in *Marang Goda*. Thus, uranium emerged as
370 a new mystified material through which the Adivasi communities affirmed and valorized the spiritualized connections they
possessed with their land.



375 4. Section III – Adivasis, uranium, and the postcolonial state

Uranium, as mentioned earlier, entered *Marang Goda/Jadugoda* at a liminal time when Adivasi lifeworlds were being refigured in response to colonial material-cultural transformations that intensified under the post-colonial Indian state. The almost reverential public life of nuclear technologies in India has been traced to the country's post-colonial aspirations. Following India's independence in 1947, the spiritual-material continuities defining Adivasi everydayness discussed earlier, were confronted with the totalizing impulses of the technopolitical behemoth that is India's nuclear establishment – a network of scientific institutions, personas, practices, and hierarchies of knowledge underlying them (Anderson, 2010). In post-independent India, through pursuing nuclear technology in particular, and other 'big' technologies such as space, hydroelectric, metallurgy, and pharma sectors – artifacts the country's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru famously termed 'temples of modern India', the leadership sought both economic progress and international prestige (Abraham, 1998). The organizational structure envisioned for India's nuclear establishment had at its core an exclusivity and secrecy both, for the nuclear programme and the scientific elite who would run it under the proposed Atomic Energy Commission (AEC).

In this backdrop, uranium prospecting began in the 1950s. Given the limited information available on uranium occurrences across the vast geography of India, early explorations focused on known mineral belts, drawing on global geological knowledge that uranium often co-occurs with copper and gold (R. Gupta et al., 2004; Ramana, 2012). The frantic search for uranium in the initial decades included deployment of planes, geological surveys, and announcing awards for citizens if they could prospect uranium ore grade of 0.4 percent or more (Ramana, 2012). In the explorations conducted under the Atomic Minerals Directorate (AMD), the oldest unit of the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), some sites were identified based on their proximity to copper mines, while others exhibited unusually high background radiation (Sinha, 2022). The exploration of the Singhbhum copper belt eventually led to the discovery and mining of uranium in the 1960s. Suitable reserves were found in Jadugoda, Bhatin, Turamdih, Narwapahar and Bagjata, located in the Chhota Nagpur plateau inhabited by the Ho, Santhal, and Gond indigenous Adivasi communities (Nayan and Vestergaard, 2015). Of these, Jadugoda has provided uranium for India's energy and weapons program for the longest period. With time, however, the ore quality in Jadugoda has decreased and other places like Turamdih and Bhatin have become attractive for the UCIL. An entity carved out of the DAE and tasked with uranium exploration and mining, the UCIL has its own history of posing as a mundane mining company while simultaneously deploying national security exceptionalism when it comes to accountability towards labour and communities or sharing information. Moreover, the UCIL has been notorious for its neglect of communities and environment, accidents, inefficiencies, cost-overruns, and secrecy.

The discovery and expansion of uranium mining in Jadugoda unfolded alongside and was enabled by profound transformations in forest and land governance. Broadly speaking, uranium mining developed during the decades when the post-colonial Indian state was extending its apparatus of control by nationalizing minor forest produce, curtailing traditional



Adivasi claims to *jal, jangal, jameen*⁸, and charging indigenous forest-dwelling communities with ‘unauthorised use of forest resources,’ primarily under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (Kodiveri, 2017). These transformations, in turn, had roots in the late 19th century, when the colonial administration began consolidating its control over forest land through a range of legal and bureaucratic mechanisms (Bhukya, 2013; Khanna, 2022). Under these regimes, Adivasi presence and traditional practices configured around the forests, including hunting, were increasingly criminalized (Khanna, 2022). In *Marang Goda* too, Maji notes how practices central to Adivasi subsistence, ritual, and memorialisation – gathering forest produce, communal hunting, introducing children to Adivasi heritage, maintaining their ‘sacred geographies’, and grazing cattle – are progressively restricted or rendered illegal. Parallely, the forest department, a colonial-era bureaucratic institution that persists into *Marang Goda*’s present, fells trees that are culturally significant for the Adivasis – “saal, mahuwa, kusum, karanj and tamarind trees” – and replaces these with the commercially viable teak and eucalyptus varieties (Maji, 2012, p. 196).

The government-run uranium-mining enterprise, mirroring the real-world UCIL, makes its first appearance in Chapter 7⁹ of the novel. *Marang Goda*’s earliest encounter with the mining company is one of coercive disruption – huts in a Santhal hamlet are demolished by armed police personnel, fields seized, and families displaced for the construction of the tailing dam. Yet this instance of violent intrusion is preceded by a slower, more innocuous appearance of uranium and its attendant apparatus. Jambheera’s own trajectories – from daily wage labour with a forest contractor to copper mine worker, agriculturist, handyman for geologists surveying *Marang Goda* for uranium, and finally uranium miner – condenses these overlapping everyday transitions. The arrival of geologists in helicopters in *Marang Goda* and the steady expansion of the mining infrastructure are initially met with curiosity, pride, and a sense of participation in something spectacular and valuable.

4.1 Pride and peril: Ambivalent nuclearities of uranium in *Marang Goda*

Forming and maintaining spiritualized co-existence with uranium through various rituals and everyday practices has emerged as pivotal in Jadugoda, often going hand-in-hand with the production of banal and exceptional nuclearities. Such non-linear transculturality of radiation appears to be composed of rather uneasy overlaps of cosmological interpretations of the world and the modern awe and fear surrounding things nuclear. In Jadugoda, the emergent sensibilities around harm, risk, labour, and everyday life as well as a distinct pride of belonging to the land that produces uranium appear to be embedded in the spiritualized existence that uranium has come to share with other non-humans and Adivasi bodies.

⁸ The phrase *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forest, land), central to many Adivasi movements, was coined by the nineteenth-century Gond Adivasi leader, Komaram Bheem to assert Adivasi autonomy and rights over land, forests, and water (Mishra, 2022).

⁹ बेशकीमती पीली धूल और बदलती दुनिया (Valuable golden dust and the transforming world)



Through the prism of Jambheera's routine life, Maji takes note of the ways in which the mines become sites of production of mundane and exceptional nuclearities. At the mine store, Jambheera's job is to fill large drums with yellow cake powder. Though this work earns him a higher wage than those employed inside the mine, he returns home each day coated from head
440 to toe in a layer of fine, golden dust. Jambheera's uniform – required by the mining company for conformity rather than protection – marks the substitution of his autonomy as a farmer with the regimented obligations of paid, contractual labour. The radioactive dust on Jambheera's uniform is simply brushed away, the clothes aired out and hung up to wear again the next day – much as he would ordinarily treat his clothes as a farmer or as a labourer felling trees. When Sagen asks if the dust hurts him, Jambheera replies that working in the fields also left him equally covered in dust and soil, and that the golden
445 powder was no different. In Jambheera's imagination then, the golden dust settles as harmlessly on his body and clothes as the soil from his fields once did, weaving extraordinary risk into familiar routines. At the same time, he underscores its exceptional value, explaining the extraction process and noting how each drum is escorted by armed police on freight trains, echoing his earlier explanation to Sagen of the 'millions, billions, trillions of rupees' buried right beneath their feet (Maji, 2012, p. 104).

450 By contrast, Sagen's father, Rekonda's job inside the uranium mine introduces a starkly different register of risk and danger. Mounting financial burdens push Rekonda into deeper dependence on mine labour, compelling him to take up work as a blaster. Unlike Jambheera's labour above-ground, blasting is seen as potentially lethal and acutely unpredictable. Rekonda narrates to Sagen the ever-present dangers of explosions and cave-ins – risks that Sagen internalizes viscerally, imagining blasts erupting beneath his bed and swallowing him up while crushing to death his father and other workers underground.
455 Crucially, Sagen does not fear Jambheera's work in the same way. The dust coating Jambheera's body appears innocuous and continuous with agricultural labour – Jambheera, after all, "does not have to enter the hollow mine." (Maji, 2012, p. 111). The risky ontologies of uranium are thus perceived unevenly – while blasting registers as sudden and spectacular, the slow, incremental, and invisible exposure through the radioactive dust remains unrecognized as perilous. This asymmetrical risk perception mirrors the broader normalization of uranium in everyday life. While the state treats uranium as exceptional –
460 guarded, securitized, and regarded as immensely valuable – it is rendered mundane through repetitive labour, bodily exposures, and its unhurried, surreptitious incorporation into routine life.

Such refigurations, however, extend beyond the mine. The tailing dam – 'white as snow' and breathtaking – visibly transforms the village landscape. It becomes a source of immense local pride with people traveling from far-off villages and nearby towns to witness the unusual spectacle of *Marang Goda's* 'white field'. The soft crust that forms on the pond's
465 surface appears safer and more pleasurable than the village's unpaved, stone-strewn paths, allowing children to play barefoot without bruising themselves. Similarly, farmers walk across it and cattle graze unhindered. Only much later do parents begin to notice lesions on their children's feet and exposed skin, still unable to connect these afflictions to the tailing pond. Stones excavated from the mines and strewn about without caution are repurposed into house walls, roofs, and fences, and even sold



by contractors beyond *Marang Goda*. For Sagen and his village community, these changes generate a mix of awe, pride, and wonder, as everyday life becomes saturated with the extraordinary presence of uranium.

4.2 Adivasi bodies and the uranium mines: Precarious work, pervasive risks

The establishment of the UCIL mines and township in Jadugoda marked the spatial inscription of India's nuclear modernity onto an Adivasi landscape, transforming a predominantly agrarian-forest region into an extractive zone. The Jadugoda township was built by "displacing five villages...47.1 percent of (whose population) were tribal" (Sonowal & Jojo, 2003). Nuclear townships in India have historically functioned as exclusive and prestigious enclaves (Bidwai, 1987), embodying the state's promise of technocratic guardianship. Such townships predominantly house skilled employees of the nuclear establishment – engineers, scientists, administrative and technical staff – and have been likened to 'immaculate' 'premium resorts' (Kaur, 2020) offering secure housing, medical facilities, schools, banks, and regulated infrastructure, as well as to 'military cantonments' given that these are heavily securitised (Bhadra, 2012).

By contrast, Adivasi villages and settlements of contract workers have remained outside such enclaves, often inhabiting spaces dangerously close to tailings and waste sites (Pandey, 2014). In these settlements, a range of chronic illnesses, including cancers, kidney and lung disease, infertility, spontaneous abortions and miscarriages, and congenital, physical, and cognitive disabilities, have been observed and reported (Pandey, 2014; Thakur, 2013). The long latency of radiological illness, combined with official denial and fragmented medical data, has meant that the harm has remained diffused and difficult to contest. The UCIL has long denied any link between radiation exposure and reported illnesses, dismissing such findings as "speculative" and "not based on scientific facts" (UCIL, 2015).

It is against this real-life backdrop of denial, spatial segregation, and radiation exposure that Maji offers a fictional reworking of these realities in *Marang Goda*. Faced with the sustained refusal of the uranium company to acknowledge the health impacts of mining, Sagen is driven by a desire to gather credible scientific evidence to make these connections visible. He invites a renowned Japanese nuclear scientist, Prof. Boyade to *Marang Goda* to conduct an independent investigation. The study reinforces Sagen's concerns regarding the substantively higher levels of radiation in the air, soil, and water near the tailings and mines in *Marang Goda*. The visiting professor is also alarmed by other aspects of the mining, such as, the immediate proximity of human settlements to the tailing dam, villagers walking barefoot across the tailing ponds without any cautionary signage or protective measures, and the detection of hazardous levels of Caesium-137, an element not typically associated with uranium mining. This leads Sagen to suspect that radioactive waste from other parts of the country is being dumped in *Marang Goda*, thus expanding his concerns regarding contamination due to localized company negligence to a systemic malpractice.



Studies document that over 90 percent of the mining labourers employed by the UCIL in Jadugoda are “residents of the villages surrounding the mines” (Sagar, 2018). Of these a majority belong to the Santhal, Munda and Ho Adivasi communities (Rahman, 2007). Even as these workers undertake some of the most onerous tasks associated with uranium extraction – underground mining, ore handling, and waste disposal – they often do so without adequate protective equipment or radiation monitoring¹⁰. Mainstream and independent media reports that have foregrounded lived experience, testimony, and evidence of dispossession and contamination have recorded how the UCIL has mostly employed Adivasis as cheap, contractual labour with large numbers recruited through contractors. For many, this employment is the principal means of survival, providing minimal economic security while entrenching long-term precarity, given that most contractual workers are paid “lower wages and excluded from medical benefits, pensions, housing in UCIL employee colonies, and access to UCIL-run schools for their children” (D’Mello, 2023). Further, on questions of occupational radiation monitoring, illness and fatalities, access to safety gear, and medical coverage, the UCIL has frequently distanced itself, shifting responsibility instead onto the contractors (Down To Earth, 2012). This produces a striking contrast of nuclearity – when uranium mining operations are framed in terms of secrecy, national security, and nuclear exceptionalism, labour within the mines becomes tightly regulated and surveilled. However, when demands are made for safeguards and accountability, the same labour is reclassified as ordinary industrial work, rendered non-nuclear, and left to contractors to address.

The structural dynamics outlined above are crystallised in the experiences in *Marang Goda*, where Rekonda – Sagen’s father – frequently agitates against the company leadership over two key issues: the lack of adequate protective gear for miners and the preferential hiring of *dikus* (outsiders) in the mines, even as local Adivasi families are driven off their farmlands and homes to build the mines, tailing ponds, and other related infrastructure. Rekonda’s intensifying agitation for workers’ rights, provokes hostility of the company superiors and non-Adivasi co-workers. Rekonda is eventually entrapped in a false case alleging the ‘theft and smuggling of uranium’. The offence is considered an act of treason and Rekonda is imprisoned without any legal or administrative support. The episode reveals a stark contradiction – while his everyday labour in extracting uranium is rendered routine and expendable, the material he mines – uranium – because of its exceptional status, justifies extraordinary punishment. Rekonda’s treatment closely echoes the punitive provisions and logic built into how India’s nuclear establishment governs nuclearity through its legal apparatus and institutional cultures (Ramana, 2009). In the context of labour in uranium mines, Hecht offers a similar juxtaposition where nuclear material, technologies, and work are labeled exceptional and mundane through negotiations of power and identity (Hecht, 2012).

¹⁰ Reporting on Jadugoda’s contractual workers, D’Souza notes that “all that the miners get to protect themselves against radiation and the highly carcinogenic radon gas (ra 222) is cotton uniform, a helmet and boots. Dosimeters, protective clothing and gas masks – basic safety standards the world over (and accepted by the DAE) – are unheard of.” (D’Souza, 2001)



In the aftermath of these experiences and his earlier initiation into political activism described previously, Sagen forms the *Marang Goda Adivasi Visthapit Berojgar Samgha*¹¹. Despite the Association's success in negotiating better compensation, increased employment for Adivasi youth, and improved working conditions with the uranium mining company, Sagen realises that these gains do little to arrest the ongoing destruction of Adivasi lifeworlds and the abhorrent illnesses that have gripped *Marang Goda*. India's 1998 nuclear tests at Pokhran, the celebratory nationalist rhetoric surrounding them, and calls to "scatter the dust from Pokhran across the country," serve as an inflection point, both horrifying him and further radicalising Sagen's political vision and resolve. After due consideration therefore, he renames the organisation *Marang Goda's Organization against Radiation* (MOAR), articulating a broader call to save *Marang Goda* and the world from "uranium mining and the evil effects of radiation." (Maji, 2012, p. 193).

Real-life Jadugoda, much like the fictional *Marang Goda*, has come to exemplify a form of slow, cumulative violence, where radioactive exposure is routinized, responsibility is obscured, and suffering unfolds across generations without remediation or closure. In the absence of any state accountability or redress, caregiving responsibilities have largely accumulated within the household, transforming it into the primary site where environmental harm is absorbed and navigated. Maji's novel abounds with instances where individuals – mostly girls and women – are suddenly thrust into unfamiliar caregiving roles after a family member has fallen sick or died due to unexplained illness. Sukurmani, despite her own failing health and an as-yet undiagnosed stomach cancer, continues to tend to a sickly Jambeera – "cleaning his mucus and blood, massaging her coughing husband's chest with warm mustard oil." (Maji, 2012, p. 114).

4.3 Spiritualizing radioactivity: Adivasi refigurations of uranium

"For years, people here have been facing the ordeal of a mysterious crippling disease and infertility. Most blamed it on evil spirits and consulted witch doctors," Amita Bhaduri quoted Adivasi father Chhatua Das, whose 13-year-old daughter died in 2012 after years of deteriorating bone structure in a radiation-born sickness (Bhaduri, 2018). In *Marang Goda*, radiation harm that appears in the form of bodily afflictions, and cannot be conclusively named, understood, or explained – miscarriages, infertility, deformities, illnesses, and unexplained death – is rendered intelligible through the idiom of witchcraft. In this instance, the object of suspicion is Sagen's *tai* (aunt) and adoptive mother, whose inability to carry pregnancies to term marks her as both, afflicted and pernicious, and she is labeled a *dain* (witch) by the village. The infertile body of Sagen's *tai*, mirrors the broader realities in Jadugoda, where women have carried the stigma and shame of uranium toxicity, often being derisively labeled *baanjh* (Hindi: infertile) and thus, deemed "unmarriageable" for their inability to uphold reproductive norms (Baba & Sarfaraz, 2025; Pandey, 2014). This recourse to witchcraft is not simply a misrecognition of nuclear risk and violence, but is a situated strategy of living in the rhythm of the new, transformed

¹¹ Association for the Displaced and Unemployed Adivasis of *Marang Goda*



everyday reality of *Marang Goda*. Even as uranium's slow violence intensifies older, gendered forms of scapegoating, it enables communities to absorb and refigure the imperceptible effects of uranium into familiar cultural and moral frameworks that make the harm less abstruse.

This mode of rendering bodily anomalies intelligible however, extends beyond accusations of witchcraft to other ritual practices that seek to contain and displace misfortune. When Jambeera encounters a young girl, whose tooth is growing above her gums, the abnormality is marked as inauspicious. It is decided to address this misfortune through a ritual marriage of the child with Sagen's dog, Gomor. The dog is then driven beyond the village boundary with the belief that it is carrying the child's misfortunes away, and thus, restoring her eligibility for marriage (Maji, 2012, p. 108). Such practices offer culturally available mechanisms to incorporate and domesticate nuclear harm within their everyday cosmological universe.

Read through the lens of slow violence (Nixon, 2011), these practices and rituals become attempts to comprehend and manage harm that is temporally delayed, spatially dispersed, and resistant to causal attribution. In this register, the priest of *Marang Goda* begins to experience uncanny dreams in which "peepul, saal, soso, and other trees" speak of their own sickness and warn that future generations – both human and non-human – are no longer forming in healthy ways (Maji, 2012, p. 193). These dreams prompt Sagen and others to keep vigil near the heavily guarded uranium mines, where they discover that radioactive waste is being transported from other parts of the country and dumped in *Marang Goda*. Far from being merely symbolic, the dreams function as a mode of environmental perception that make uranium's otherwise imperceptible slow and incremental violence intelligible and actionable. These alternative modes of perception are not limited to human experience alone. Even non-human actors respond to the altered environment: in the novel, elephants, when driven from the village, deliberately avoid the tailing pond, and Sagen attributes their behavior to an intuitive "knowledge" of its toxicity. In these instances, we encounter distinct forms of transculturality through which Adivasi bodies, radioactive material, and sentient non-humans come to mutually reconfigure space, risk, and practice, reconstituting distinctions between the mundane and the exceptional, and the ordinary and uncanny. Such 'change of directionality' effected through transculturation 'could help in thinking and moving beyond dichotomies, politically and ethically' (Mignolo & Schiwy, 2002, p. 252).

Broadly speaking, thus, the transculturalities surrounding uranium and radioactivity unfolded in the Adivasi everydayness through ways that served to resignify and refigure the relationships between the spiritual and the material under the new circumstances. To recap, these refigurations emerged in the form of ambivalences of pride and peril, a distinct everydayness constituted through postcolonial, industrial and nuclear modernities, and, often simultaneous practices of banalization and spiritualization of uranium and radiation embraced in order to live with the atom. In a sense, such 'patchwork' consisting of spiritual-ontological continuity does not emerge as simply a site of exoticized nostalgia or referent for resistance, but serves to embrace uranium as part of what Anna Tsing calls a 'non-secular cosmology' in which spirits assist in mapping and modelling the material-ethical cosmos (Tsing et al., 2019, p. 191). The novel's protracted narrative arc, and Jadugoda's



595 histories, however, include two more nodes which remain crucially pivoted around the lived everydayness of Adivasi bodies – the multivalent forms of resistance against radioactive harm, and, the precarities that the local human community and their non-human kin witness under the 21st-century conditions. Towards the end, it is important that we underline how these experiences remain anchored for the author in the Adivasi everydayness and the emergent forms of transculturation therein.

5. Jadugoda in the 21st Century: Precarities, uncertainties, and everydayness

600 In the last few chapters of *Marang Goda Neelkanth Hua*, Maji offers several montage-like descriptions of various onto-cultural processes and natural-technological disruptions. Here, the novel's characters engage more directly in polemical discussions around the unfolding news and events. These chapters directly quote long passages from policy documents and legislations, news reports and research papers, protest declarations and solidarity statements. Again, while purely literary critics have considered this as a shortcoming of Maji's fiction-writing, in our view, it seems more appropriate to read these
 605 portions as the author's fervent attempt to foreground the massive material-cultural escalation and precarity that have come to characterize our existence in the new century. In this endeavour, the large array of characters, places, events, technologies, observations, debates, and ruminations that swiftly appear and disappear from the scene have been approached primarily from the vantage and ethical frames of Adivasi everydayness, where the lived realities hardly change despite the intensifying precarity.

610 The overarching backdrop for these developments towards the end of the novel remains the decisive neoliberal turn that India's political economy took in the last decade of the previous century. The multiplicity of political, economic, and cultural disruptions that neoliberalism unleashed on Adivasi lives and ecologies included a declared shift in the state's role from an agent of welfare to a promoter of market-based growth, along with accompanying changes in environmental norms and civil rights. These shifts are reinforced by broader cultural transformations under neoliberalism, in which citizens come to be seen
 615 as entrepreneurs whose struggles are no longer understood as structural problems but reframed as personal failures.

In particular, Sagen's own career and life choices are crucially shaped by the neoliberal uncertainties, where even contractual work in the uranium mines no longer comes with stability, social security, and other meagre guarantees that existed earlier. For Sagen's generation of Adivasi people, in Maji's novel as well as actual Jadugoda, the questions emerging from the withdrawal of the state present themselves in a distinct acuteness. Yet these issues remain mundane and often escape being
 620 easily registered in the dramatic imageries of aggravating poverty in the region and even radioactive accidents in the uranium which increase in frequency owing to precarity of labour and successive dilution of safety norms. In such neoliberal contexts, contrary to the triumphant claims of obliteration of identities under a homogenizing global market-economy, transculturation can obtain 'a much more contemporary range' as per Roman De La Campa. Transculturality, after all, 'is not merely a descriptive device for the give-and-take of cultures in contact...but rather a complex strategy in which



625 deconstruction is not left in a state of epistemological arrest, but is driven to ongoing construction of social and intellectual challenges that position the critic as producer as well’ (De La Campa, 1999, p. 72).

Two nodes in *Marang Goda* emerge as profoundly compelling in this regard – the interactions Sagen and his documentary film maker friend, Adityashree have with the various activists and researchers visiting *Marang Goda*, and the Fukushima nuclear accident of March 11, 2011, with which the novel concludes. The first node becomes a site of provocative and polemical diatribes with the modes of thinking about Adivasi bodies and ecologies that India’s urban intelligentsia and civil society groups harbour. Maji spends several dozen pages describing the discussions Sagen and Adityashree have with the anti-nuclear and environmentalists visiting *Marang Goda* on behalf of a national network of activists. In these detailed conversations, the emerging themes range from various mainstream assumptions about politics and models of economic development to deeper questions of how Adivasi communities think about nature, culture, and futures. When not revealing the relative privileges and comfortable distance that urban activists enjoy, even as their intentions remain sacrosanct for the author and her characters, *Marang Goda* attempts to illuminate how the intensifying risk, precarity, and uncertainty cannot be comprehended and resisted through the largely modernist visions of liberal democracy and institutional justice embraced by urban activists. The prolonged and frequent conversations that Sagen and Adityashree have with the London-based anthropologist-researcher Pragya emerge as profoundly generative in this regard. Accompanying Pragya to various places, and introducing her to people and events, Sagen and Adityashree’s observations and conversations reveal the myriad ways in which the everydayness of Adivasi bodies and their non-human companions encountered at the beginning of the novel, have experienced mutilations, erasures, and ruptures.

The final node at which the novel concludes, emerges in the form of news headlines around the unprecedented nuclear accident in Japan and the waves of protests erupting internationally and in various places across India where local communities are mobilizing themselves against existing and newly announced nuclear reactor projects as part of the Indian government’s ambitious nuclear energy expansion plans. However, unlike the ‘this changes everything’ exhortations surrounding the Fukushima accident and nuclear risks, Maji remains firmly grounded in the banality of violence, denial, and injustice that surrounds *Marang Goda*. Despite being deeply saddened by the tragedy in Japan, the slow and banal destruction around him remains the fulcrum of Sagen’s vision of the human predicament – “even the Fukushima plant would not have leaked this much radiation, isn’t it Shree?,” Sagen asks his friend about the realities surrounding them. Importantly, the spiritual-material continuity underpinning the visions of nature in Adivasi everydayness emerges as the key value for Sagen, although this time mostly as nostalgia and an open-ended question.

In her fascinating work on transculturation in various colonial contexts, Regenia Gagnier underlines how opium emerged as a profoundly ambivalent object for Yan Fu and dissemination of liberalism in colonial China – ‘arguably a transcultural actant between British trade policy and a Chinese government too weak to resist it’ (Gagnier, 2018, p. 42). Experiences of Adivasi everyday around uranium in Jadugoda and *Marang Goda*, appear to possess somewhat similar promises of



transculturality. While producing myriad forms of slow violence, Adivasi bodies in *Marang Goda* are placed as potential agents of redemption, resilience, and justice at planetary material-temporal scales. In a letter addressed to activist friends in Japan and the world at large, Sagen invokes his (Adivasi) belief ‘to stop the annihilation of the whole living world, this earth, that let the dangerous snake in the form of uranium lie in its hole’ (Maji, 2012, p. 193). In the face of the deepening ecological crises in the 21st century, the Adivasi everyday lifeworlds of *Marang Goda* emerge as sites of indigenous cosmopolitics offering ‘new forms of minority rights and forms of ecological citizenship that are global and even planetary’ (John, 2020, p. 97). The Adivasi mode of co-existing with ecology, in Sagen’s words, ‘can save this earth and all the creatures’.

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