

## **Slow Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds*: Extractivism Across Global South Resource Frontiers**

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### *Abstract*

*This article explores Siddhartha Sarma's Year of the Weeds (2018) as a work that critiques extractivism and appeals for environmental justice in Devi Hills, Odisha, India. Using theories of extractivism, slow violence, and the environmental humanities, the study examines how the novel portrays mining as an extension of colonial dispossession through state–corporate collusion that marginalises the Gondi community in Devi Hills due to bauxite extraction. It also shows how toxicity functions not only as ecological harm but also as a political and cultural condition shaped by capitalist modernity. Through Korok's struggles and the recurring “weed” metaphor, Sarma highlights Indigenous resistance, ecological awareness, and the fight for environmental justice against extractive capitalism. Therefore, the article contributes to postcolonial ecocriticism and the environmental humanities by demonstrating how the novel reveals the interconnected dynamics of extractivism, slow violence, and Indigenous resistance in contemporary India.*

**Keywords:** Extractivism; Environmental Justice; Slow Violence; Indigenous Resistance

### **Introduction**

The rapid expansion of extractive industries across the Global South has led to environmental injustice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Mining, deforestation, and resource extraction activities have disproportionately transformed the Indigenous and rural landscapes into “sacrifice zones”, where environmental deterioration, displacement, and social precarity are normalised in the name of national development. All this is not new, but it extends the longue durée of colonial extraction into contemporary postcolonial governance, producing what is called “slow violence”—a form of harm that evolves gradually, unevenly, and is sometimes difficult to perceive (Nixon 3). Extractivism, on the other hand, can be understood as a cultural and epistemic formation, rather than solely an economic one, in which the “pollution haven effect” – generated by multinational corporations – inflicts localised damage that is detrimental and unbearable to developed nations (Buell 280). In Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds* (2018), toxicity becomes a symbol of environmental injustice, examining the effects of resource extraction on rural landscapes and indigenous populations. Furthermore, the extraction of resources, such as bauxite mining in Devi Hills, is based on an extractive logic which spawns socioeconomic disparities, ecological risks, and ecocide. The most intense extractivist pressures are focused on energy boundaries occupied by marginalised ethnic minorities or the destitute people.

Against this broader literary and theoretical backdrop, Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds*

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(2018) contextualises extractivism in the Indian postcolonial context. The novel revolves around the Gondi tribe, who inhabit the Devi Hills region (Odisha) of India, with a particular focus on expropriation for mining that occurs when the government partners with corporations to usurp customary forest land, transforming it into a derelict land. The nexus between the government and the corporation in this industrial project is depicted in the novel as: “The company excavated the mine and extracted the metal (bauxite). The government is looking for land for companies” (Sarma 47). This arrangement reflects what ecologists describe as an enclave economy: a resource-based economic model in which extractive activities operate as relatively isolated zones oriented towards external markets, generating wealth for corporations and state actors while creating few meaningful linkages with local communities (Barbier 39). Such enclaves are typically characterised by infrastructure designed primarily to facilitate extraction, the externalisation of social and environmental costs, and the concentration of benefits away from the populations whose lands are being exploited. In this sense, the proposed bauxite mine in Devi Hills functions as an extractive enclave, transforming Indigenous territory into a resource frontier whose primary purpose is to supply distant centres of accumulation rather than support local livelihoods.

The Gondi Tribe’s customary forest land is viewed solely as a resource (raw materials/energy) for corporate companies, reflecting anthropocentrism and the devaluation of the non-human world. This anthropocentrism is embedded throughout the novel, and its ensuing conflict is depicted through the journey of a young child, Korok, whose endeavours to see his imprisoned father encapsulate themes of poverty, family, and the intricacies of socio-environmental conflicts. This local dispute reflects an unstable political ecology, as centralised mining in India’s Fifth Scheduled Areas frequently occurs without the inclusion of indigenous populations, such as *adivasis*, in pre and post-extraction land-use decisions (Bose 6). *Year of the Weeds* (2018) illustrates the struggle around Devi Hills, emphasising the persistent extractivism characterised by its environmentally and socially harmful nature, rooted in a lasting (neo)colonial sociocultural framework. Thus, this article, through literature, shows how the toxic legacies and environmental injustice associated with postcolonial governance and corporate exploitation foreground how Indigenous communities disproportionately endure the repercussions of resource-based development and enclave economy, rarely benefiting from it. Overall, the primary aim of this article is to analyse *Year of the Weeds* as a critique of extractivism, which has consolidated itself as neocolonialism in postcolonial India. Specifically, the article seeks to: (i) examine how the novel represents extractivism as a political ecology rather than a neutral force; (ii) analyse toxicity and ecological devastation as forms of “slow violence” encountered by Indigenous communities; and (iii) show how Sarma’s narrative articulates resistance through Indigenous epistemologies and shared agency.

### **Extractivism, Toxicity, and Indigenous Resistance in *Year of the Weeds***

Drawing on the insights of energy humanities scholars such as Imre Szeman, Dominic Boyer, and Stephanie LeMenager, extractive industries can be understood not merely as economic activities but as systems that shape social relations, cultural narratives, and political institutions. Environmental humanities extend this perspective by examining how extractivist economies generate uneven ecological burdens that are often normalised and rendered invisible. Such environmental harm frequently unfolds gradually, exemplifying what Rob Nixon (2011) terms “slow violence”: forms of destruction that are incremental, dispersed across time and space, and thus difficult to recognise as violence despite their devastating consequences. Within this framework, Siddhartha Sarma’s *Year of the Weeds* offers a compelling literary exploration of how extractivism, toxicity, and state power intersect in the lives of Indigenous communities.

Set in the fictional Devi Hills of Odisha, the novel follows Korok, a young Gond gardener whose intimate knowledge of the forest contrasts sharply with the bureaucratic and corporate forces seeking to transform his homeland into a mining frontier. Alongside Korok are Anchita, the environmentally conscious daughter of a forest officer who gradually uncovers the political realities behind the proposed mine, and Jadob, an educated member of the Gond community who articulates the legal and historical basis of Indigenous land rights. Through these characters, Sarma reveals how environmental degradation is inseparable from questions of dispossession, cultural survival, and political justice.

### **Extractivist Logic and the Production of Sacrifice Zones**

At the centre of the novel is the customary acquisition of Gondi land for bauxite mining. Sarma depicts extractivism as a continuation of colonial processes, through which communal lands are redefined as exploitable resources for capitalist accumulation. Extractivism relies on the continual expansion of resource frontiers, turning Indigenous territories into zones of extraction and profit (Gómez-Barris; Kröger). In *Year of the Weeds*, Devi Hills becomes exactly such a frontier. Government officials and corporate representatives justify mining with familiar developmentalist rhetoric. The developmental promise offered to the Gonds reveals how extraction is framed as a benevolent project: “The Company will dig the bauxite from the hill ... They will clear these villages, build roads ... These people should be happy, they will get jobs. Jobs, understand?” (Sarma 156-57). These arguments exemplify what environmental justice critics call the logic of sacrifice zones, where local communities are expected to bear ecological and social costs in the name of national development. Rath’s remark that “someone had decided that Devi Hills was not a forest anymore” (47) reveals the arbitrary power through which the state reclassifies landscapes to enable extraction.

The novel further resonates with ongoing debates about green extractivism, a process through which land grabbing and resource extraction are justified using the language of sustainability, development, or environmental management (Setyawan et al.; Kinder and Szeman; Szeman). Although the mine in *Year of the Weeds* is not explicitly presented as a renewable-energy project, Sarma shows how extractive pursuits rely on similar stories of progress that hide their ecological and social impacts. Like many real-world projects that cite development and environmental stewardship while marginalising local communities, the mining proposal in Devi Hills uses promises of employment, compensation, and modernisation to gain consent. Such stories act as greenwashing, masking the long-term environmental costs of extraction while depicting dispossession as inevitable and beneficial. The community’s attachment to the hill is not merely economic but spiritual and historical, making state claims of development fundamentally incompatible with Indigenous understandings of place. Jadob challenges these claims by reminding officials that Devi Hills was long protected under forest laws and acknowledged as a sacred Indigenous landscape: “not only was the hill more important than any mine, the hill was also protected as a forest area by the sorkar itself, by an old Act made more than ninety years ago” (Sarma 49). His intervention highlights the conflict between Indigenous guardianship and extractivist governance. The situation echoes the *Niyamgiri* movement in Odisha, where the *Dongria Kondh* successfully opposed Vedanta’s proposed bauxite mine through legal action and appeals to the hills’ sacred status (Bose 8; John 98). Sarma’s fictional story thus reflects broader struggles over Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice across South Asia.

While Sarma’s narrative is rooted in Odisha, the mechanisms by which extraction proceeds echo those of resource frontiers across the Global South. Environmental justice scholars have shown that land acquisition for mining and plantation economies in the Amazon and Indonesian forests

often depends on what has been described as a “simulation of legality”, where governments reclassify protected or customary lands as developable territory (Howe 391; Kröger). A similar logic operates in *Year of the Weeds* when state authorities effectively remove Devi Hills from its protected status to facilitate mining. The novel thus locates local dispossession within a broader pattern of state-corporate collaboration, where Indigenous communities are formally consulted but substantively excluded from decision-making. Rather than participating in development, they are often regarded as obstacles to it, demonstrating how extractive governance normalises the conversion of customary territories into resource frontiers.

### Toxicity, Slow Violence, and Cultural Erasure

If extractivism represents the political-economic logic of dispossession, toxicity captures its lived and embodied consequences. Sarma depicts Devi Hills not simply as territory but as a sacred ecological world embedded within Gond cosmology. As Korok explains, “The hill was a goddess, but she had no physical form” (Sarma 94). The hill is revered as a goddess, while the *hanalkot* functions as a burial site where ancestral memory and community identity are preserved (John 107). Sarma emphasises that the hill serves as a living archive of ancestral memory:

This is the sacred spot on the hill where the villagers bury their dead. They call it the *hanalkot*. Look at the big stones at the entrance. This is very important for them. They have an interesting set of beliefs. They also have these little local gods, called pens. A lot of them can be found on this sacred hill. (Sarma 139)

As Korok explains to Anchita, the stones of the *hanalkot* are places where the memories of the dead remain present, linking the living to previous generations. This cultural ecology becomes threatened by the prospect of mining. The destruction of the hill would entail not only environmental degradation but also the loss of sacred sites, medicinal knowledge, and intergenerational memory. Korok’s expertise as a gardener illustrates this intimate relationship between people and place. He is introduced as someone who could identify medicinal plants almost instinctively and whose knowledge comes from generations of interaction with the landscape rather than formal education. Korok admits, “I know what we call them. I can’t read much” (23). His ability to identify medicinal plants by touch and to cultivate species gathered from the hill reflects forms of ecological knowledge that cannot be separated from the landscape itself. Mining therefore, threatens both biodiversity and cultural continuity, and the significance of this threat becomes clear in Korok’s description of Devi Hills: “They believed this was why there were so many medicinal plants on her...*hanalkot* here was the most important for many Gonds... two streams that flowed from the hill to Tel River were sacred water for the villages” (28). The hill here is portrayed as an ecological, spiritual, and material life world whose destruction would mean much more than just losing a resource base. The threatened destruction of Devi Hills also situates the novel within a broader landscape of extractive sacrifice zones. Across the Niger Delta, the Amazonian frontier, and numerous mining regions of the Global South, environmental degradation predominantly impacts Indigenous and economically marginalised communities, whose lands supply global markets with strategic resources (Kröger 95). Sarma’s portrayal of sacred streams, medicinal ecologies, and ancestral landscapes in peril echoes these transnational patterns, illustrating how extraction often targets territories that are both ecologically and culturally significant to local populations.

Sarma portrays extraction as a process that gradually transforms living ecosystems into toxic environments, i.e., villages become covered in “black dust”, forests are cleared, streams are polluted, and farming livelihoods become more fragile. Sarma repeatedly depicts environmental degradation not as a single catastrophic event but as a gradual transformation of everyday life,

making ecological destruction visible through ordinary experiences of contamination and loss. These cumulative harms exemplify Nixon's concept of "slow violence" because they emerge gradually and are often obscured by developmental narratives. Such processes are not exclusive to Sarma's fictional landscape. Similar forms of "slow violence" have been documented in the Niger Delta, where oil extraction has degraded wetlands and water systems over decades, and in the Amazon, where mining and deforestation have caused long-term ecological decline that rarely receives the same visibility as spectacular environmental disasters (Ayodele; Kröger). By highlighting drought, contamination, and bureaucratic neglect rather than sudden catastrophe, *Year of the Weeds* contributes to a broader Global South narrative of ongoing environmental harm, illustrating how extractive economies transform living environments into sacrifice zones for economic growth. Rather than depicting environmental destruction as a sudden catastrophe, Sarma foregrounds the everyday experience of ecological insecurity and governmental neglect:

But the rains did not come. People came, and politicians kept telling the villagers everything would change. But the government was silent. The Gonds heard of how other villages in the district got money to help them in the drought. But no help came to the Gonds. Jadob understood. He went to town and asked the government officials to show him the figures for the water table in and around Devi Hills. The figures showed everything was normal. Jadob knew it wasn't, but the government only believed what was on paper. (Sarma 95)

This reveals how slow violence operates through bureaucratic indifference and the invisibility of environmental suffering. Although the community experiences drought and ecological stress directly, official records continue to represent conditions as "normal", rendering Gond experiences politically unintelligible. Sarma therefore demonstrates that environmental violence is not confined to the physical act of mining but is embedded within administrative systems that deny, delay, and normalise ecological harm. Instead of presenting environmental disasters as sudden events, the novel emphasises the slow decline of ecosystems and the everyday suffering they cause for marginalised communities. Sarma's narrative makes this violence visible by focusing on drought, bureaucratic neglect, threatened displacement, and the gradual erosion of Gond ecological relations rather than on a single moment of environmental catastrophe. The novel's central metaphor of the "weed" captures these dynamics. Anchita explicitly compares extractive corporations to invasive weeds:

Companies like this, they are like weeds. You can't stop them if they want to takeover. They are united, determined, very powerful and have a lot of money, my father says. If they want your flower bed or your village or hill, they will get it. The government will make you move, and give them the land. (53)

The metaphor illustrates the invasive and expanding nature of extractive capitalism, whose growth seems unstoppable and relentless. However, Sarma also deepens this symbolism by highlighting Korok's ecological understanding of weeds. Unlike corporate actors who view landscapes as resources, Korok recognises the diversity and complexity of ecosystems. His observation that weeds do not simply "make conspiracies" but interact with environments in different ways implicitly critiques the reductive logic of extraction itself (42).

### **Resistance, Counter-Narratives, and Environmental Justice**

Although extractivism seems overwhelming, Sarma also highlights Indigenous resistance and challenges to dominant narratives. The novel shows that extraction relies not only on economic power but also on ideological and coercive tools that silence dissent. Legal processes, land acquisition procedures, and even consultation language become instruments to legitimise dispossession. In this context, the misuse of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) functions

less as a safeguard than as a bureaucratic trap that hides unequal power dynamics (Bose 8). The criminalisation of resistance is another important aspect of extractivist governance, as community opposition is often associated with Maoist or Naxalite insurgency, justifying surveillance, arrests, and extraordinary state measures. The collusion between state officials and corporate interests becomes explicit in Ghosh's strategy for suppressing resistance:

There won't be a Maoist group," Ghosh explained. "But you will announce that they came here because the villagers want to start a war against the government. You bring your men into the villages and arrest the leaders of the protests ... Then you throw them in jail. (Sarma 138)

This strategy can be understood through the concept of stochastic terrorism, a term used to describe forms of public communication that depict individuals or groups as threats in a way that makes violence against them statistically probable while allowing those responsible to deny direct guilt (Angove 23). Although the concept originated primarily in media and political communication studies rather than in political ecology, it is valuable for understanding how state and corporate actors foster suspicion toward environmental defenders. By repeatedly linking Indigenous activists with insurgency and terrorism, authorities foster a climate in which coercive intervention seems justified and public sympathy is diminished. Sarma thus shows how narratives become tools of exploitation.

The criminalisation of dissent depicted in the novel also reflects a recurring feature of extractive governance across India and beyond. In the Niger Delta, for example, community resistance to oil extraction has frequently been portrayed through media and state discourse as a threat to national security rather than as a demand for environmental justice (Wilson 245). Similar strategies of delegitimisation appear in *Year of the Weeds*, where the branding of protestors as Maoists transforms legitimate political opposition into a security issue. By exposing this discursive manoeuvre, Sarma reveals how extractive regimes often rely not only on economic power but also on narratives that portray environmental defenders as dangerous or anti-development. Against these forces, the novel presents a counter-narrative of resilience. The weed metaphor undergoes a significant transformation as Korok's political awakening unfolds. While Anchita initially uses the metaphor to describe the overwhelming power of corporations, Korok later reimagines it as a strategy of resistance: "A clever gardener would sometimes have to wait for a strong weed to eat up all the weaker weeds, and then uproot the remaining one. A clever gardener knew how to let the weeds defeat one another" (Sarma 179). The metaphor shifts from symbolising inevitability to expressing tactical pause and collective struggle.

Equally important is the epistemological foundation of this resistance. The Gond's view of Devi Hills as a living sacred presence challenges the extractivist notion that land mainly serves as a resource repository. In this way, the novel aligns with Indigenous environmental movements in the Amazon and the Andes, which promote relational conceptions of territory, often articulated through ideas like the rights of nature (DeLoughrey et al.; Kröger). These viewpoints reject reducing mountains, forests, and rivers to mere economic assets and instead endorse reciprocal relationships between human and non-human life. Sarma's novel thus portrays Indigenous resistance not only as opposition to mining but as a defence of alternative ecological worldviews.

The novel concludes with a legal victory when the Supreme Court recognises the Gram Sabha's authority to decide the future of Devi Hills. The Gond community strongly opposes relocation and mining, compelling the state to honour Indigenous decision-making. Although Sarma does not romanticise this outcome, the ending highlights the ongoing importance of local resistance, legal mobilisation, and collective action in challenging extractivist power. Through its depiction of environmental degradation, cultural loss, bureaucratic coercion, and Indigenous

resilience, *Year of the Weeds* shows how extractivism functions as an ecological, political, and cultural process. By making “slow violence” narratively visible, the novel reveals the unequal distribution of environmental harm while emphasising alternative forms of ecological knowledge and resistance. Sarma’s work thus questions developmentalist narratives that equate extraction with progress and reaffirms environmental justice as both an ethical obligation and a political necessity.

### Conclusion

Siddhartha Sarma’s *Year of the Weeds* shows how extractivism functions as an economic strategy, a political system, and an epistemological project simultaneously. By highlighting the “slow violence” experienced by the Gond community, Sarma reveals the persistent colonial logics embedded within modern resource extraction. The novel’s significance, however, extends beyond its immediate setting in Devi Hills, as the article demonstrates. It highlights the alliances between states and corporations that facilitate land acquisition, the criminalisation of environmental dissent, the creation of sacrifice zones, and the defence of Indigenous ecological viewpoints—all of which recur across extractive frontiers in the Global South, including the Niger Delta, the Amazon, and the Indonesian forest. These comparisons reveal a common pattern of extractive governance that transforms culturally and ecologically valuable landscapes into zones of extraction while marginalising the communities that reside there. *Year of the Weeds* thus contributes to a wider archive of Global South toxic fiction that chronicles the human and ecological toll of extraction and challenges the normalisation of environmental injustice. By connecting local experiences to transnational patterns of dispossession and resistance, Sarma’s novel underscores the significance of environmental justice and Indigenous knowledge in confronting the expanding frontiers of extractive capitalism.

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