

From Industrial Disaster to Climate Catastrophe: Ecological Concerns in Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract

Environmental crises have increasingly emerged as a significant concern in contemporary literature, reflecting the growing awareness of ecological degradation and its effect on marginalized communities. This paper examines the depiction of environmental catastrophe in *The Last Wave* by Pankaj Sekhsaria and *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha, emphasizing how these works represent the shift from industrial calamity to wider ecological and climate crises. While *Animal's People* reimagines the consequences of the Bhopal gas tragedy, highlighting corporate irresponsibility and the long-term suffering of affected communities, *The Last Wave* explores the vulnerability of coastal ecosystems and indigenous people in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the wake of environmental disturbances and climate-related incidents. Using an ecocritical lens, this research examines how the two novels highlight the experiences of marginalized communities significantly affected by environmental degradation. The narratives reveal the intersection of environmental injustice, socio-economic inequality, and political neglect, emphasizing how development-driven industrialization and climate change intensify ecological vulnerability. By comparing these works, the paper argues that contemporary Indian writing in English serves as a powerful medium for articulating ecological concerns and promoting environmental justice. This study demonstrates that literature not only documents environmental trauma but also raises critical consciousness regarding sustainable futures and ecological responsibility amid a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Climate Change, Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Industrial Disaster

Introduction

In recent years, environmental crises have become one of the most pressing global concerns in the twenty-first century, and their consequences have been studied not only in the domains of science and politics but also in literature. Contemporary literature increasingly engages with ecological issues such as climate change, industrial pollution, environmental degradation, and natural disasters. In Indian English fiction, writers have begun to explore the complex relationship between humans and the environment by highlighting the social, political, and ethical consequences of ecological destruction. These narratives often show how environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized and economically vulnerable communities. Through imaginative storytelling and realistic depictions of disaster, literature provides a critical space to question dominant models of development and to reflect upon humanity's responsibility toward the natural world.

Literature serves as a strong medium for documenting ecological disasters and exploring their social and political impacts. Unlike scientific reports or policy papers, literary texts capture the emotional, psychological, and cultural aspects of environmental crises. They humanize statistics by highlighting the real experiences of victims and survivors, drawing

attention to the injustices involved in these disasters. Through storytelling, symbolic settings, and personal accounts, literary works reveal how corporate negligence, government indifference, and social inequality shape environmental events. As a result, modern environmental fiction contributes to wider discussions on environmental justice, sustainability, and ethical responsibility.

Two important works that highlight these issues are *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha and *The Last Wave* (2014) by Pankaj Sekhsaria. *Animal's People* tells a fictionalized story about the aftermath of a disastrous industrial gas leak in the city of Khaufpur, echoing the historical tragedy of the Bhopal gas disaster. The novel is narrated by Animal, a young man whose body has been permanently harmed by toxic exposure. His perspective vividly shows the long-term suffering of victims, the irresponsibility of multinational companies, and the ongoing fight for justice by affected communities. By focusing on the physical and psychological trauma of survivors, the novel reveals the human cost of unchecked industrialization.

In contrast, *The Last Wave* explores the fragile ecological landscape of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the severe impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami on both people and nature. The story emphasizes the connections between island life, traditional knowledge, and the environment. It depicts how sudden natural disasters disrupt human settlements and delicate ecological balances that have developed over centuries. By placing its narrative within the unique geographical and cultural context of the islands, the novel sheds light on the vulnerability of coastal communities and the larger environmental challenges caused by climate change and ecological instability.

This study aims to examine how these two texts show different but linked forms of environmental disaster, industrial and climate-related, and how they highlight the experiences of vulnerable communities. By analyzing these works from an ecocritical viewpoint, the paper seeks to explore how contemporary Indian fiction addresses issues of environmental justice, human suffering, and ecological responsibility. Ultimately, the study argues that these literary representations play a key role in raising awareness of environmental crises and promoting critical thought about the ethical and social aspects of ecological destruction.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism has become an important approach in literary studies that looks at the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It explores how literary texts represent nature, environmental crises, and the complex interactions between people and the natural world. Cheryll Glotfelty, a key figure in this field, defines ecocriticism in his work *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). This perspective expands literary analysis beyond just aesthetic or cultural matters to include ecological views. By highlighting environmental themes, ecocriticism encourages readers to rethink how humans relate to nature and to recognize the environmental messages woven into literary narratives. This framework is particularly relevant in today's literature, where issues like climate change, ecological harm, and environmental disasters are central themes.

Another important scholar in ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell, points out in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) that environmental literature serves as a form of ethical reflection on humanity's bond with the natural world. Buell claims that environmental texts often show the nonhuman environment as more than just a setting for human actions; instead, it becomes "a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history"

(Buell 7). This view highlights the connections between human and ecological systems and fosters a deeper awareness of the environmental impact of human activities. With these insights, ecocriticism allows scholars to examine how literary works depict ecological crises and critique the social systems that lead to environmental harm.

The concept of environmental justice is closely related to ecocriticism. It focuses on the unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits among different social groups. Scholars in environmental justice argue that marginalized communities, often defined by class, race, or economic status, tend to face more environmental dangers like pollution, toxic waste, and climate-related disasters. Robert D. Bullard, a leading figure in environmental justice, notes in *Dumping in Dixie* (2000) that this field seeks “equal protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the decision-making process” (Bullard 4). This perspective emphasizes the socio-political aspects of ecological crises and points out the need to investigate how power influences environmental outcomes.

In literary studies, using the framework of environmental justice is especially helpful in analyzing texts that show the experiences of communities impacted by ecological disasters. Literature often demonstrates that environmental catastrophes are not just natural occurrences but are also influenced by political decisions, corporate actions, and social inequalities. By highlighting the voices of marginalized victims and survivors, literary works challenge dominant narratives that ignore or downplay the human costs of environmental destruction.

Additionally, literature can serve as a powerful tool for ecological advocacy by raising awareness about environmental issues and prompting ethical thinking among readers. Greg Garrard states in *Ecocriticism* (2012) that ecocriticism “explores the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production” (Garrard 5). Through storytelling, symbolism, and narrative perspective, literary texts can evoke empathy, critique harmful practices, and inspire greater environmental responsibility. In this way, literature not only documents ecological crises but also plays a crucial role in promoting environmental awareness and advocating for sustainable futures.

Industrial Disaster and Toxic Aftermath in *Animal's People*

Animal's People by Indra Sinha offers a strong literary depiction of the long-term effects of industrial disasters through the fictional city of Khaufpur, modeled after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in 1984. The novel reconstructs the social and ecological damage caused by a toxic gas leak from a multinational chemical factory. It shows how environmental disasters continue to impact affected communities long after the event. Khaufpur is presented as a place plagued by contamination, illness, and poverty, where survivors face both physical pain and social neglect. Through this setting, the story emphasizes how industrial disasters can change ecosystems and communities into areas of lasting ecological trauma. According to ecocritical scholar Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism examines “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii), and Sinha’s novel illustrates this connection by showing how environmental ruin directly influences human lives and social structures.

The story is told through the distinctive voice of Animal, a young man whose spine is twisted from exposure to the toxic gas. His physical deformity represents the long-lasting effects of industrial pollution on people and communities. Animal describes himself with a mix of tragedy and defiance, “I used to be human once. So I’m told. I don’t know if it’s true, but I do know this: I am not a man” (Sinha 1). Forced to crawl on all fours, Animal embodies the disaster’s enduring impacts. His raw and often cynical voice reveals the psychological and

physical trauma that survivors endure. Through *Animal's* eyes, the novel highlights the personal aspects of environmental disaster, showing how toxic exposure can alter identity, dignity, and social belonging.

The novel also depicts the shared struggles of Khaufpur's residents, many of whom suffer from chronic illness, poverty, and social exclusion decades after the disaster. Hospitals are overcrowded, victims receive little compensation, and the community lives in polluted areas. *Animal* reflects on the ongoing pain of the survivors when he states that the gas "killed thousands and left behind a city of sick and dying people" (Sinha 7). These portrayals stress the long-term effects of industrial negligence and how environmental disasters can create permanent challenges for vulnerable groups. This view connects with the idea of environmental justice expressed by Robert D. Bullard in *Dumping in Dixie* (2000), who states that environmental justice requires "equal protection from environmental and health hazards" for all communities (Bullard 4). In Khaufpur, however, victims do not receive such protection, highlighting the deep inequalities within global industrial systems.

The novel also critiques corporate negligence and government indifference. The multinational company responsible for the gas leak avoids accountability, while legal actions and compensation remain slow and ineffective. The victims' fight for justice becomes a key theme, revealing how political and economic powers often safeguard corporate interests at the cost of human lives. *Animal* reflects bitterly on the apathy of authorities and the prolonged delays in justice, showing how environmental disasters reveal the failure of systems intended to protect citizens. In this light, the disaster in Khaufpur is not just an accident but a result of systematic neglect and careless industrial practices.

Additionally, the catastrophe in *Animal's People* symbolizes the harsh reality of industrial modernity. The promise of technological progress and economic growth comes at a severe human and ecological price. Ecocritical scholar Greg Garrard points out in *Ecocriticism* (2012) that environmental criticism examines the conflict between modern development and ecological sustainability (Garrard 5). Sinha's novel powerfully illustrates this conflict by showing how industrial growth can lead to environmental damage and irreversible human suffering. Through its vivid depiction of Khaufpur and its resilient yet marginalized people, *Animal's People* ultimately critiques industrial systems that prioritize profit over environmental safety and human welfare.

Ecological Vulnerability and Climate Catastrophe in *The Last Wave*

The Last Wave by Pankaj Sekhsaria presents a strong narrative that highlights the ecological vulnerability of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It portrays these islands as fragile landscapes that are closely connected to human and natural histories. The story unfolds within the dense rainforests, coastal ecosystems, and culturally rich indigenous communities of the islands. Through detailed descriptions of forests, wildlife, and marine environments, the text showcases the region's ecological diversity while stressing its fragility in the face of environmental threats. Scholars of ecocriticism argue that literary texts often depict the environment not just as a backdrop but as an active element in human stories. As Lawrence Buell points out in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), environmental literature suggests that human history is linked to natural history. Sekhsaria's portrayal of the islands supports this idea by showing how island communities' lives are intertwined with their ecosystems.

The novel also examines the intricate ecological relationships within the island environment, especially through its depiction of wildlife and indigenous communities like the

Jarawas. The forests are shown as ancient ecological spaces that support a variety of life forms and cultural traditions. At one point, a character remarks on the significance of the Andaman rainforests, stating that “the Andamans have some of the finest rainforests anywhere” and warns that these forests represent a priceless heritage that is quickly being destroyed. (Sekhsaria 34) Such moments highlight the conflict between conservation and development, indicating that the islands’ ecosystems face constant threats from human activities like logging, settlement expansion, and infrastructure development. This concern aligns with the ecocritical view that considers how cultural narratives expose the conflicts between modern growth and ecological sustainability.

A key moment in the novel occurs with the depiction of the disastrous 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which dramatically showcases nature’s destructive power and the vulnerability of coastal areas. The tsunami sequence vividly portrays the fear and chaos experienced by the characters as huge waves consume the landscape. The narrative recounts how “a huge, solid mass of grey water came rushing in, engulfing the forest camp, lifting it and then tearing apart the fragile construction as if it were a house of cards.” (Sekhsaria 43) This moment underscores the overwhelming force of natural disasters and their capacity to change entire landscapes in an instant. The tsunami not only destroys human settlements but also devastates forests and wildlife habitats. As the waves hit the coast, the narrative captures the violent destruction of the natural environment: “the snapping of the trees around as the water first hit and then pulled away with brutal energy... a giant evergreen tree... snapped like a matchstick.” (Sekhsaria 54) These descriptions highlight the significant ecological impact of the disaster, illustrating how natural catastrophes can reshape both ecosystems and human lives.

The aftermath of the tsunami further reflects the fragile relationship between humans and nature. The disaster leaves behind a dramatically changed landscape filled with debris, fallen trees, and displaced communities. Harish’s struggle to survive among the swirling waters and floating wreckage symbolizes human helplessness against natural forces. The narrative describes the waters as “a twirling mass of grey and brown; leaves, vegetation and huge logs... banging against each other with sounds that roared beyond the crashing waves.” (Sekhsaria 76) This imagery shows how the lines between the human and natural worlds blur during ecological crises.

From an ecocritical point of view, these events expose the underlying ecological imbalance that fuels modern environmental issues. As Cheryll Glotfelty suggests in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), ecocriticism prompts readers to consider how literature reflects our relationship with the physical environment. In *The Last Wave*, the tsunami acts as a stark reminder of the fragile balance that characterizes natural ecosystems. The novel implies that environmental disasters are not just isolated incidents; they are part of a larger ecological reality in which human actions, environmental harm, and natural forces are closely connected. Through its vivid depiction of the Andaman Islands and the tsunami’s devastating effects, Sekhsaria’s work emphasizes the urgent need to acknowledge ecological vulnerability and pursue more sustainable ways to interact with the natural world.

Marginalized Communities and Environmental Injustice

Environmental disasters often reveal the deep inequalities within social and economic systems, affecting marginalized and vulnerable populations the most. In both *Animal’s People* by Indra Sinha and *The Last Wave* by Pankaj Sekhsaria, the stories focus on communities that bear the brunt of ecological destruction. Through their portrayals of victims of industrial pollution

and fragile indigenous populations, these texts show how environmental disasters intersect with social marginalization, poverty, and government neglect. Such depictions align with the principles of environmental justice, which stress that environmental hazards often disproportionately impact communities lacking economic and political power.

In *Animal's People*, the industrial pollution victims are primarily poor residents of the fictional city of Khaufpur, who suffer the long-term effects of toxic contamination long after the disaster. The gas leak kills thousands and leaves many others physically and mentally scarred, but the affected population receives little real help from either the government or the company responsible. Animal himself represents the harsh consequences of environmental injustice. His twisted spine forces him to move on all fours, prompting him to say, "I used to be human once." This statement expresses the deep alienation and dehumanization felt by disaster victims. The suffering of Khaufpur's residents illustrates how industrial pollution turns entire communities into neglected and marginalized spaces. Hospitals are overwhelmed, medical resources are limited, and the legal battle for justice drags on indefinitely. The novel exposes how global industrial systems exploit economically disadvantaged groups while avoiding accountability for environmental harm.

Similarly, *The Last Wave* spotlights the vulnerability of indigenous and island communities in the ecologically sensitive Andaman Islands. The story highlights the close relationship these communities have with their environment, especially the forests and coastal ecosystems that provide for their livelihoods and cultural practices. Indigenous groups like the Jarawas have historically relied on the forests for survival, maintaining a delicate balance with nature that sharply contrasts with modern development projects. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the ecological richness of the islands and the need to protect their vulnerable environments. As a character points out, the Andaman forests represent a rare ecological legacy that is increasingly threatened by external pressures such as road construction, tourism, and settlement growth. These developments often occur without considering indigenous rights or ecological sustainability.

The destruction caused by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami further highlights the vulnerability of island communities. When the massive waves hit the coast, both human settlements and natural ecosystems are violently disrupted. The narrative vividly depicts the tsunami's destructive power as it engulfs forests and camps, illustrating how the islands' fragile infrastructure offers little protection against such disasters. Characters witness trees snapping and shelters being destroyed as the waves surge through the forested landscape. While the tsunami is a natural event, the novel also suggests that ecological imbalance and unsustainable growth can heighten coastal communities' vulnerability.

From an ecocritical standpoint, these stories reveal how environmental disasters intertwine with social inequalities. As Greg Garrard notes in *Ecocriticism* (2012), environmental criticism often looks at how cultural, political, and economic factors shape environmental issues. In both novels, marginalized communities face not only the immediate consequences of ecological disasters but also systemic neglect and exclusion. The victims in Khaufpur seek recognition and justice, while indigenous communities in the Andamans confront threats to their environment and cultural identity.

Thus, the portrayal of marginalized communities in *Animal's People* and *The Last Wave* brings attention to the wider issue of environmental injustice. These narratives show that ecological disasters rarely impact all populations equally; instead, they tend to deepen existing social

inequalities. By amplifying the voices of those who suffer the most from environmental harm, both novels provide powerful critiques of the political and economic systems that enable such injustices to continue. In doing so, they also add to the growing body of environmental literature that calls for greater ecological responsibility and social equity.

From Industrial Disaster to Climate Catastrophe: A Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha and *The Last Wave* by Pankaj Sekhsaria shows how contemporary Indian fiction engages with various forms of environmental disasters while also highlighting the social and ecological impacts they create. *Animal's People* centers on a human-made industrial disaster inspired by the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, whereas *The Last Wave* examines the effect of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami on the fragile ecosystem of the Andaman Islands. Together, these texts reveal how environmental disasters, whether from industrial negligence or natural events, lead to lasting ecological and social effects. Through their stories, both novels broaden the discussion of environmental literature by connecting industrial practices with greater ecological vulnerability.

In *Animal's People*, the catastrophe is clearly human-made, stemming from corporate negligence and careless actions by a multinational chemical company. The toxic gas leak kills thousands and permanently injures many others, turning Khaufpur into a site of environmental despair and legal battles. Animal's deformed body itself becomes a symbol of the long-term effects of the disaster. His haunting statement, "I used to be human once... I am not a man" (Sinha 1), shows how the industrial accident has changed both his physical identity and social dignity. The novel emphasizes corporations' and governments' ethical duties to prevent environmental disasters and address their impact.

On the other hand, *The Last Wave* portrays a disaster that seems natural, the massive tsunami that devastates the Andaman Islands. The story vividly captures the tsunami's overwhelming force as it obliterates forests and settlements, illustrating the disaster's terrifying scale. At one point, the text describes "a huge, solid mass of grey water" (Sekhsaria 43). While the tsunami is a natural occurrence, the novel suggests that human actions like deforestation, infrastructure expansion, and poor environmental planning worsen ecological vulnerability. This way, the narrative links natural disasters to larger ecological imbalances.

Despite these differences, both novels share striking similarities in their portrayals of vulnerability, trauma, and ecological destruction. In both Khaufpur and the Andaman Islands, marginalized communities suffer the most from environmental catastrophes. Poor urban residents in *Animal's People* and indigenous island communities in *The Last Wave* lack the resources and political power to protect themselves from environmental harm. Their experiences highlight how disasters tend to impact those already socially and economically disadvantaged. This point aligns with the principles of environmental justice put forth by Robert D. Bullard, who argues that marginalized populations bear the brunt of environmental hazards (Bullard 4). In both stories, the suffering of these communities is made worse by institutional neglect and inadequate responses from authorities.

Another important similarity between the two texts is their critique of modern development and environmental neglect. Both novels question the prevailing belief in industrial and technological progress, exposing the hidden ecological and human costs that accompany such development. In *Animal's People*, industrialization relates to toxic contamination and corporate exploitation. In *The Last Wave*, development projects jeopardize fragile ecosystems and traditional ways of life.

The analysis of *Animal's People* and *The Last Wave* reveals that environmental disasters should not be seen as isolated incidents. Instead, they are deeply tied to broader socio-economic systems, development patterns, and ecological imbalances. While one story reveals the harmful

effects of industrial negligence, and the other highlights the destructive power of natural events, both texts stress human societies' vulnerability when ecological balance is disturbed. Through their vivid portrayals of suffering, resilience, and environmental harm, the two novels contribute to a growing body of literature that urges readers to rethink humanity's connection with the natural world and the urgent need for more sustainable and responsible development practices.

Conclusion

The comparative study of *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha and *The Last Wave* by Pankaj Sekhsaria shows how contemporary Indian English fiction powerfully engages with environmental crises and their human impacts. Both novels act as literary testimonies that document the suffering caused by ecological disasters, whether stemming from industrial negligence or natural events. Through vivid narratives and emotionally rich characters, these texts reveal the deep effects of environmental destruction on human lives, communities, and ecosystems. In *Animal's People*, the toxic legacy of an industrial gas leak continues to haunt the residents of Khaufpur years after the disaster, while *The Last Wave* illustrates the devastating force of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and its impact on the delicate ecological landscape of the Andaman Islands. By depicting these tragedies through personal and community experiences, both works highlight the lasting trauma that environmental disasters impose on marginalized populations. On a broader scale, these narratives stress the pressing need for ecological awareness and environmental justice in today's society. The novels show that environmental disasters rarely impact everyone equally; instead, they tend to harm communities that are already socially and economically vulnerable. The victims in Khaufpur fight for medical care, compensation, and recognition, while indigenous and island communities in the Andamans face threats to their environment and cultural survival. By highlighting the inequalities within environmental crises, these literary works encourage readers to critically assess the political, economic, and ethical structures that shape environmental policies and practices. Furthermore, both novels challenge the prevailing belief in unchecked development and technological progress. They reveal how industrial growth, environmental exploitation, and unsustainable development practices often result in ecological imbalance and human suffering. By emphasizing ecological vulnerability and the links between human and natural systems, *Animal's People* and *The Last Wave* encourage readers to rethink existing attitudes toward nature and development.

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