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Unscheduled tongues

Kanji Patel's monumental anthology gathers 365 poems translated from 126 Adivasi languages and written by 350 poets to reveal a worldview in which forest is body, language is milk, and hunger is inherited.

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Participants at the Adivasi Hunkar Yatra demand protection of their rights to *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forest, land) in Bhopal on November 17, 2019. Kanji Patel's anthology gives these movements a literary voice, gathering poems from 126 Adivasi languages. | Photo Credit: FARUQUI AM

In recent decades, indigenous literatures from North America, Australia, and Latin America have reshaped how we think about poetry—not merely as aesthetic arrangement, but as ceremony, ecological consciousness, and resistance. Writers like Joy Harjo have taught us that poems can be acts of sovereignty, reclaiming language from the jaws of empire. India, home to over 100,000,000 **indigenous people**, has remained strangely peripheral to

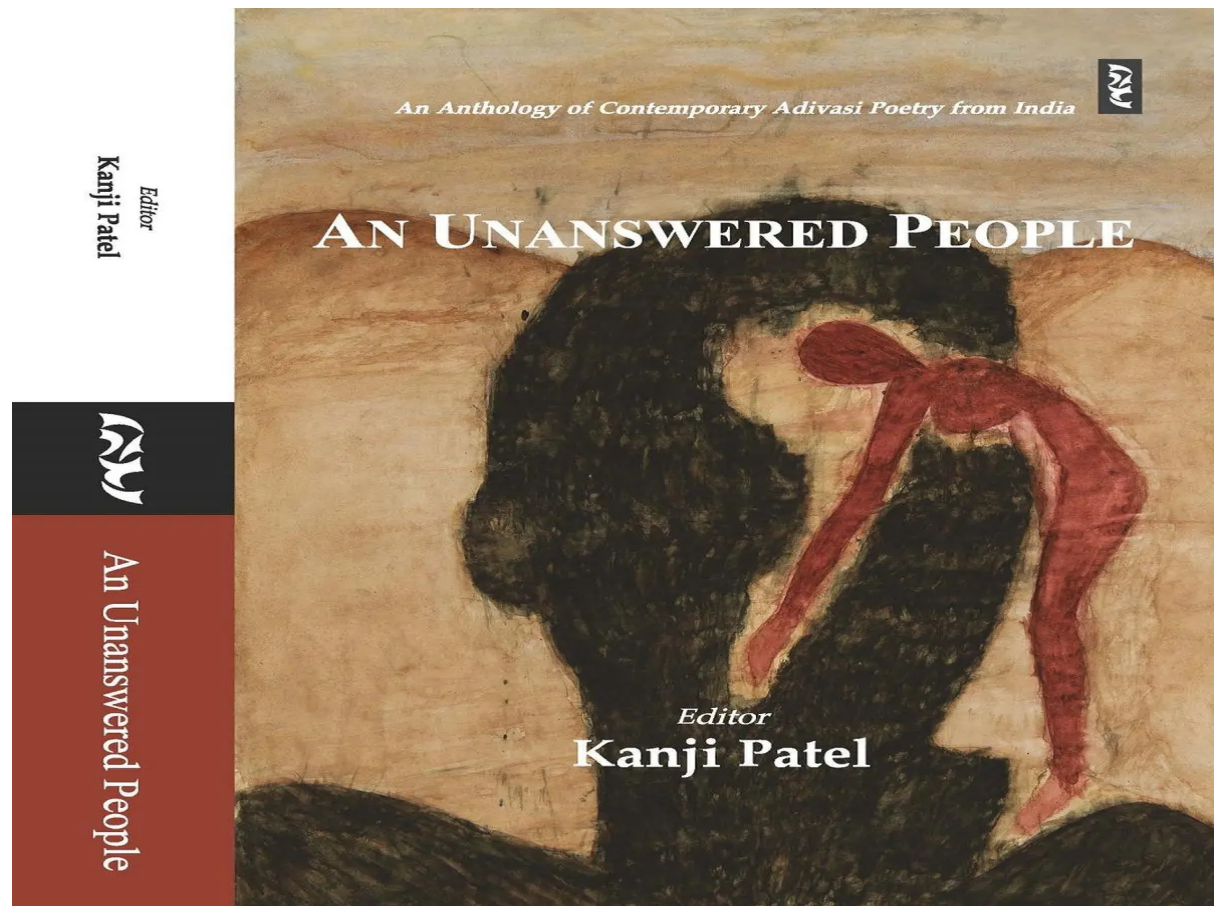
that global conversation. Kanji Patel's monumental anthology, titled *An Unanswered People*, insists that this absence be reconsidered.

An Unanswered People arrives as a final product of prior labour. In 2022, Patel guest-edited a special issue of the journal *Muse India* on Adivasi poetry, planting seeds that have now grown into this forest. That issue, co-edited with Gopika Jadeja, offered readers a rare glimpse into tribal cultural worlds; this anthology expands that glimpse into a panorama. Where the journal featured select voices, the book gathers 365 poems by 350 poets representing 126 Adivasi languages—Adi, Ao-Naga, Ho, Halbi, Kabui-Naga, Irula, Ahirani, Banjari, Baiga, and tongues most of us have never heard spoken.

The arithmetic of exclusion is staggering. Adivasis constitute roughly 8–9 per cent of India's population, yet their languages remain structurally invisible. None appears in the Constitution's Eighth Schedule, which recognises 22 languages. Even among the 24 languages recognised by the Sahitya Akademi for its awards, tribal languages find no place. Millions speak, sing, and compose in languages that possess neither state recognition nor publishing infrastructure. Few schools teach in these tongues; hardly any newspapers circulate in them. Yet poetry thrives—often orally, communally, and intimately tied to land and ritual.

Patel's editorial vision cuts through this paradox with mythic precision. His introduction frames the volume through the burning of the Khandava forest in the Mahabharata—that ancient conflagration where Agni, aided by Krishna and Arjuna, consumed an entire woodland to satisfy divine hunger. In Patel's reading, this becomes emblematic of a *longue durée* history of violence against forest-dwelling communities. He associates the epic fire with colonial forest laws, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, and

contemporary displacement caused by mining and dam projects. The result is a history of erasure and resistance stretching from antiquity to the present.



An Unanswered People is a polyphonic testimony to historical injustice, ecological grief, and enduring creativity.

“If there is a forest, every kind of life is possible,” Patel writes. He articulates a cosmology where mountains, rivers, trees, and animals are kin rather than resources. In his prefatory essay, the Kannada poet and playwright H.S. Shivaprakash describes the volume as revealing “an undocumented and unrecognised tradition of Indian poetry different from *marga*, *desi*, modern and postmodern.” The Hindi poet Anamika compares the anthology to a “great forest of Tribal Poetry”, emphasising the collaboration among poets and translators. The paratexts make clear that this

is not folklore rescued for ethnographic curiosity, but literature demanding critical attention.

An Unanswered People

An Anthology of Contemporary Adivasi Poetry from India

Edited by Kanji Patel

Setu Prakashan

Pages: 510

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The linguistic politics bite hardest in Kashral Kudada's Ho-language poem "Mother Tongue and the Eighth Schedule":

"Development will walk into that language
that the countrymen will agree...

It will be included in the eighth schedule..."

The poem culminates in a devastating question: "Is the Eighth Schedule above mother's milk?"

Here is the crux. Language is nourishment before it is policy. Constitutional inclusion is measured against maternal intimacy. The poem reframes recognition as survival rather than prestige—whether a child will inherit a tongue or watch it wither in their mouth.

Many of the anthology's most luminous poems articulate ecological belonging as relational ontology more than as pastoral nostalgia. **Mamang Dai's** "Floating Island" (Adi) captures this:

"The sloping mountain is trying to reach me
stretching down into the water.

Dear one, don't go away,
rest, rest on my shoulder.”

The mountain leans; water shelters; the self merges with the terrain. The poem concludes with immersion “into the sea green”. Nature is not backdrop but kin.

Similarly, a Banjari poem by Ramesh Karthik Nayak invites: “Let's enter the body of the forest. / Holding each vein, searching for particles of hunger.” The forest becomes anatomy; hunger is both ecological and bodily. Survival depends on intimate knowledge of terrain. Such poems resonate with global indigenous poetics while emerging from distinct Indian histories of extraction and displacement.

If land is one axis, hunger is another. Says Sunil Galkwad's “Starvation” (Ahirani):

“Hunger grips the adivasi child
Even in the mother's womb.”

The mother's aspiration is stripped to its core: “Son, do not dream of becoming an officer... / My wish is that you are born healthy and whole.” The restraint intensifies the force. Hunger is structural and generational.

Monalisa Changkija's sequence “Of a People Unanswered” (Ao-Naga) confronts the language of modernisation directly:

“I've seen our rice fields
turn into factories and mills
our green hills
reduced to barren brown...”

And then: “You tell me we are advancing rapidly/ into the 21st century.../
But I wonder why you remain silent/ When we say we are hungry.”

The unnamed “you” embodies state and nation. Progress is exposed as asymmetrical extraction.

Yet the anthology is not reducible to protest. The Irula poem “The Indam Flower” unfolds as sensuous address: “Like bees/ Swarming over buds,/ I hover around you,/ My Jamun flower.” Memory is “etched/ Like elephant footprints on a river bed.” Desire speaks through local flora and fauna, grounded and tactile.

In Poonam Vasam’s “God’s Death Is Certain” (Halbi), theology itself is reimagined: “God has not given us love/ we have given love/ to God.” Divinity is reciprocal, soil-bound, mortal. The sacred resides in Bastar’s earth, not in transcendence.

A collective epic

A 500-page multilingual anthology will inevitably be uneven. Some poems arrive in English with startling clarity; others feel plain, their force perhaps inseparable from oral or performative contexts the page cannot fully convey. Many originate in song and communal recitation. Their aesthetic criteria differ from those of the modernist lyric. This unevenness is not a flaw but a feature of scale and plurality. The anthology invites layered reading. On one level, the poems must stand as English texts. On another, they gesture toward linguistic worlds beyond translation. Readers are asked to expand evaluative frames—to consider poetry as ecological knowledge, ritual utterance, collective memory.

The sections “Poets on Poetry” and “Translators on Poetry” foreground mediation. Several poets self-translate, navigating not just vocabulary but cosmology. Translators describe listening—to cadence, silence, oral inflection. Anamika calls them “Lokani”, facilitators who help poems settle

in new linguistic homes. The translations often retain syntactic directness, preserving echoes of other grammars.

Adivasi languages lack media ecosystems; their literary production rarely enters metropolitan review circuits. Yet this volume marks a significant development in contemporary Indian letters. It assembles, at an unprecedented scale, poetic expression from communities long treated as subjects of anthropology or development policy rather than as creators of literature. For global readers attuned to indigenous resurgence, the anthology offers a crucial South Asian counterpart. It expands the imaginative geography of India beyond English and constitutionally scheduled languages. It reveals a worldview in which forest is body, language is milk, God is mortal, and hunger is inherited.

Lanbol Kabul's "Waiting for the Dawn" (Kabui-Naga) captures the emotional tenor: "Standing in the midst of darkness/ I do wait for the day break." The waiting is neither passive nor naïve. It is endurance, articulation, refusal to disappear.

What emerges most powerfully is the sense of a collective epic—a polyphonic testimony to historical injustice, ecological grief, and enduring creativity. Shivaprakash aptly describes the volume as an "epic narrated by an orchestrated voice of diverse tongues". Yet this epic is not monumental in the classical sense; it is dispersed, intimate, rooted in everyday speech.

The title, *An Unanswered People*, resonates as both lament and challenge. The poems ask: Who listens when forests burn? Who speaks for languages being silenced? Who defines development, and at what cost? By assembling these voices without subsuming their differences, Kanji Patel offers not a definitive answer but a necessary space of hearing.

As a literary event, this anthology marks a significant moment in contemporary Indian letters. As a cultural document, it preserves fragile linguistic and poetic traditions. As a political text, it insists that indigenous voices are not peripheral but central to any conversation about the future of the planet. The scale is both its strength and its challenge—its refusal of hierarchical organisation embodies democratic intent, though readers seeking regional or thematic mapping may find themselves overwhelmed. Brief biographical notes for each poet would have been invaluable; more consistent contextual information would have further assisted international audiences.

What Patel has achieved, however, outweighs these limitations. He has created something more than a themed collection of marginalised voices: a vast, multilingual archive of poetic expression that unsettles prevailing notions of what constitutes “Indian literature”. Forest, hunger, mother tongue, divinity, and resistance emerge as central poetic concerns rather than peripheral themes. For international readers, the volume offers more than documentation; it presents an alternative center of gravity, demonstrating that Indian poetry cannot be understood without these voices that have long spoken from its margins.

Kamalakar Bhat is a professor of the postgraduate department of English of Ahmednagar College, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. He is an award-winning bilingual writer, a columnist and a translator between English, Hindi, Marathi and Kannada. Most recently, he has edited and translated from Kannada Courtesy of Criticism: Selected Essays of Kirtinath Kurtkoti (Penguin India, 2024).