

Ecological Consciousness in Modern Telugu Novels

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Paper Received on 04-06-2026, Accepted on 05-07-2026
Published on 06-07-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.07.83

Abstract:

This paper examines ecological consciousness in modern Telugu fiction through a critical study of three significant novels: *Ontari* by Sannapureddy Venkataramireddy, *Moogavani Pillanagrovi* by Dr. Keshava Reddy, and *Adavi Batukulu* by Dr. Dilawar. Employing an ecocritical approach, the study explores how these novels portray the complex relationship between human beings and nature while exposing the environmental consequences of modern development. *Ontari* highlights the conservation of traditional millet varieties, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, and the healing power of nature through the transformation of its protagonist. *Moogavani Pillanagrovi* presents the emotional and ecological crisis of a farmer whose identity and livelihood are shattered by drought, emphasizing the inseparable bond between agriculture and the environment. *Adavi Batukulu* critiques deforestation, uranium mining, displacement of tribal communities, and environmental injustice in the Nallamala forests, underscoring the ecological and social costs of development. Collectively, these novels demonstrate that environmental degradation is closely linked with the erosion of cultural values, rural livelihoods, and human relationships. The study argues that modern Telugu fiction functions not only as a literary expression but also as a powerful medium for promoting environmental awareness, ecological ethics, and sustainable development. These works call for a balanced relationship between humanity and nature and advocate responsible stewardship of the environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Modern Telugu Novels, Ecological Consciousness, Sustainable Development, Environmental Degradation, Millets, Tribal Life, Drought, Biodiversity.

Introduction:

Just as changes have occurred in many spheres of the modern world, numerous transformations have also taken place in the environment. With the rise of mechanization, Nature is becoming increasingly polluted. Driven by excessive

selfishness, human beings have been distorting Nature and destroying the balance of creation. By exploiting natural resources indiscriminately, man himself has become a cause of environmental degradation. Responding to these issues, several writers have turned environmental problems into central themes of contemporary literature. In this context, the modern Telugu novel, with a sense of social responsibility, has played a significant role in portraying the need for the preservation of Nature and in criticizing the destruction of the environment carried out in the name of development. From this perspective, the novels *Ontari* by Sannapureddy Venkataramireddy, *Moogavani Pillanagrovi* by Dr. Keshava Reddy, and *Adavi Batukulu* by Dr. Dilawar occupy a prominent place. All three, in their own unique style, reflect ecological consciousness. The novel *Ontari* not only vividly depicts the disappearance of traditional millets and the struggles of the farmer, but also emphasizes the need to preserve them. Dr. Keshava Reddy's *Moogavani Pillanagrovi* portrays the anguish of a farmer who longs to bring barren fields—rendered uncultivable due to the absence of rains—back into cultivation. Dr. Dilawar's *Adavi Batukulu* (a tribal novel) describes the devastation of the land caused by uranium mining. These three novels, from three distinct perspectives, articulate ecological consciousness.

In this Novel *Ontari* Raghava is a renowned cardiologist who, like many others, is afflicted with diabetes. As part of his spiritual quest, he visits the ashram of Brahmangaru. After receiving divine blessings there, he meets a saint who tells him that the cure for his illness lies in consuming millets (arikelu) and leading a peaceful life with nature. However, these millets have almost disappeared since no one cultivates them anymore. Raghava then knows about Narsaiah, a farmer who has been living in close communion with Nature with the noble intention of preserving traditional millets for future generations.

Raghava visits Narsaiah and inquires about arikelu. Narsaiah shows him the preserved millet seeds stored in his attic and promises to sow them in his fields. Since it is a six-month crop, Raghava stays with Narsaiah's family during this period. Over these months, Raghava becomes a learner while Narsaiah becomes his teacher of Nature—introducing him to different trees, birds, and fruits. Raghava realizes that there are things in life which money cannot buy.

The arikelu crop grows well, but at harvest time, a flock of sheep invades the field and destroys the crop. Raghava is deeply disappointed. Later, with the arrival of rains, Narsaiah applies a dose of urea fertilizer, which revives the crop, and once again, the field yields abundantly. When it is time for Raghava to return, he finds himself emotionally attached to the village and unable to leave.

Meanwhile, due to financial hardships, villagers begin to sell trees from their lands. To prevent this destruction, Raghava himself purchases the trees with his own

money. As Dr. Thumuluri Rajendra Prasad aptly remarks, "The greatest threat to the environment is the thought of people that someone else will save it" (Prakrutini Rakshinchukundam, P. 8). Raghava embodies this principle. His six-month stay, which enabled him to understand the sanctity of Nature, not only enriched his spirit but also restored his health. This forms the central theme of the novel.

One finds man's transformative journey with Nature here, the novel "*Ontari*" portrays the life journey of an individual as a transformation in relation to the environment. The lives of a civilized professional and a farmer stand in contrast to each other. The farmer, who has made nature his very community, lives in harmony with it, while the urban man—driven by wealth and status—comes searching for the nearly extinct millet (arikelu) as a cure for his diabetes. In the process, he gradually learns to understand Nature and becomes a part of it. What money, power, and influence could not give him, Nature itself provides health. The novel '*Ontari*' thus conveys a truth and a warning: no matter how far man runs, in the end, it is only in Nature that he finds what he truly needs.

In between, the narrative deeply explores themes such as nature, rural lifestyles, and the destruction taking place in the name of development. The village trees and agricultural lands are not presented merely as physical resources but as an inseparable stream of human life. Under the mask of civilization, man is forgetting the value of physical labour and turning towards commercialized cash crops. These so-called modern crops bring nothing but debts to farmers and diseases to people. By contrast, millet crops are ancient and highly beneficial, ensuring robust human health. The novelist expresses anguish over the fact that today's society, unaware of this truth, has abandoned them.

When Narsaiah takes up the task of cultivating arikelu (millets), Raghava offers to bear all the expenses. But Narsaiah refuses, saying: "This crop does not demand heavy investment, sir. No need of phosphate... no need of pesticides... once it is sown, it just needs one shower to sprout and another shower to ripen—that's all" (P. 44). Through these words, the author emphasizes that millet crops require neither fertilizers nor pesticides, thus highlighting them as natural and toxin-free food. In reality, a farmer does not grow these crops merely for his own profit. Millets thrive even in barren soils. By the time they reach harvest, rabbits make burrows in the thickets, and birds build nests among the stalks. Farmers allow the crop to stand until the nests are vacated. In this way, birds and animals survive, and so does the crop itself. But today, farmers are unwilling to let even a single grain be eaten by any living creature. To protect every grain, they resort to killing birds and animals, leading to the extinction of species.

cultivates crops, do rabbits, deer, and birds enter the fields accidentally, or does he also grow the crop for their sustenance?" (P. 44). This conveys the idea that if farming is carried out in coexistence with birds and animals, environmental balance will not be disturbed.

As Srilata Sriram observes: "If we wish to live in Nature, it is not only about what we take from it but also about what we give back. We have made our struggle for survival easier by using numerous natural resources. Having gained so much, should we not preserve at least a part of it so that we can pass it on to future generations?" (*Ontari*, Sannapureddy Venkataramireddy, pustakam.net). If every individual were to understand this truth, we could preserve ecological balance; otherwise, we risk pushing the future into the edge of danger.

The farmer is a selfless being. He is the only one who dedicates his entire life to the welfare of others. Yet today, even the farmer is drifting away from agriculture, adapting to modern lifestyles. The lack of timely rains and unremunerative prices may be among the reasons. On the other hand, private companies, by introducing so-called "new hybrids," are destroying the traditional seed varieties. As a result, pure millets are becoming increasingly rare.

The words, "I cultivate this crop not for myself or for you, but for the sake of the millet itself... to ensure that its lineage survives on this earth... to see that the species of arikelu does not perish" (P. 64), reveal not only the pitiable condition of vanishing millets but also that their survival is possible only through the farmers' labour.

Cultivation of these millets brings immense benefits to the environment. Since they require no pesticides, they do not cause pollution. The food derived from them too remains uncontaminated, ensuring human health. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of every individual to encourage and to promote millet cultivation once again.

The author beautifully portrays the relationship between humans and animals. In one scene, a quarrel arises between a husband and wife. Because of her headache, the wife refuses to serve food to her husband. Yet, she takes care of all the work for the buffaloes and sheep. Narsaiah asks her you get headache to serve your husband, don't you get headache while serving and taking care of the cattle?

She replies: "Of course, Grandpa! They are voiceless creatures. How will they understand my pain? What else can they do other than crying out while they are hungry. I have to take care of them at any cost. But what about him? Can't he serve

himself a meal? Why compete with dumb animals? Do I have to look after him like these creatures.

This response clearly conveys that it is the responsibility of human beings to protect and nurture speechless creatures. The author's words echo the moral obligation to safeguard and sustain animals.

Seeing Narsaiah, his wife, and daughter working all day in the fields, Raghava used to offer them some fruit to eat every day. After four days, Narsaiah tells him not to give any more. He explains: "It dulls the mind, sir! Suppose she gets used to it for four days on the fifth day she will crave for it, cry for it. If you give a bullock an extra third meal of water after its regular two feeds for just a few days, it will refuse to drink unless it gets that third feed. It will struggle and resist for the sake of that extra portion" (P. 90).

Through this conversation, the author suggests that once man becomes accustomed to luxuries and comforts of civilization, he not only fails to look back at his roots but also becomes dependent on those habits. At the same time, the writer points out that there still remain villages and farmers who have not yet succumbed to such temptations of "civilization."

When the seasons arrive in order, the 'Chittakarte' appears in all its splendor. It embraces the beauty of Nature and displays all its wonders. In truth, all festivals are rooted in the rainy season; only when rains fall regularly can these celebrations flourish in their fullness. But today, rains have become uncertain. With trees being cut down and forests destroyed, the earth is heating up, and rainfall has diminished. As a result, the cycle of Nature is being disrupted.

Narsaiah remarks, "When storms rise in the sea, rains should naturally follow, but the seasonal rains have now disappeared" (P. 162). The reason, the novel suggests, lies in the ever-increasing clutches of pollution. The fact that today's generation is unable to witness the beauty of Nature once enjoyed in the past makes it evident that the root cause is none other than the reckless and distorted habits of humankind.

Protection of Nature is an Individuals' responsibility. In the region around Ontikottam, due to the absence of rains, there was no fodder for cattle and animals. As a result, a large flock of sheep completely devoured the ariake crop, leaving behind devastation. "Leaving just the stumps here and there... the sheep ate away the entire crop as though it had been cut with a sickle... What remained there? Over two hundred sheep, driven by endless hunger, by the famine itself... The famine came in the form of a flock of sheep and brought about total ruin... What remained there? Even the crops amidst the shrubs were not spared... Six months of hope were reduced to dust within three months... What remained there?" (P.167).

The philosophy hidden in the phrase “the famine itself grazed away” is profoundly significant. It reflects the unbearable intensity of drought. Just as the saying goes, “A tree can make a forest”, a single plant holds within it the potential to create a vast and dense woodland/forest. But when the villagers of Ontikottam, pressed by financial hardships, were forced to sell their trees, Raghava stepped in, gave them money, and adopted the trees himself to prevent their felling. Such a gesture reflects a progressive thought and can serve as an ideal for many. In a society where trees are recklessly cut down and hills are leveled, thereby inflicting harm on nature, this novel stands as a wake-up call.

Through the novel *Ontari*, the author logically questions society's negligence toward Nature and the misuse of development. It is not merely a social issue but also connects the deterioration of human relationships with environmental degradation. In the context of analyzing the ecological perspective in modern Telugu literature, this novel holds great importance and stands as a significant work.

Moogavani Pillanagrovi is the Saga of a Farmer's Death and Resurrection. This novel portrays the anguish of a farmer who loses his farmland, situating the farmer's life within the perspective of environmental issues. The author gives literary expression to how a farmer's self-respect is shattered and thrown into turmoil when agricultural land is lost due to drought. The village of Ontillu is vividly depicted through the surrounding natural landscape - mountain ranges to the east, a rocky hill to the south, a temple of the goddess on the tank bund to the north, and a small forest of fourteen acres to the west. This forms the holistic stage of the village's life. To highlight the living bond between Nature and human beings, the author employs this expansive geographical backdrop.

Bakkireddy, a farmer, dedicated his life to his land from the age of sixteen until fifty. Natural calamities such as lack of rains and dried-up wells pushed him into a situation where he lost his property. The anguish of being compelled to sell the land that his father had preserved like his complete life with his own hands drove his mental suffering to an irreparable state.

Along with the lack of rains, Bakkireddy also suffered losses by mortgaging his land in the hope of digging wells to secure water resources. In this novel, rain emerges as a vital symbol it is not only Nature's blessing but also the very lifeline of a farmer's livelihood. The fact that even when rains return, he no longer has land to cultivate reveals the profound depth of his love for agriculture and the masculine pride bound up with it.

Bakkireddy's words -"I am no longer a farmer," "I have sold my land," "I am a beggar"- reveal that for a farmer, agricultural land is not merely property but his self-respect and the honour of the entire village. Though he tried to awaken once more by seeing the rains that would moisten the fields, the absence of land restrained him. This signifies that whenever Nature provides the opportunity, the farmer is always ready to go the extra mile.

In the novel "*Moogavani Pillanagrov*", the story of Bakkireddy stands as a representative of the injustice that Nature inflicts upon farmers. It is not merely an individual's tale it embodies the collective saga of farmers within the rain-fed agricultural system. Through this narrative, the author tenderly and poignantly depicts the disasters brought about by climate change, the mismanagement of water resources, and numerous human errors.

Now a days Environmental protection, biodiversity, and the sustainable use of natural resources have today become crucial issues. Against the backdrop of large-scale destruction of Nature in the name of development, literature too has begun to share and express this pain. *Adavi Batukulu* (Forest Lives), a novel by Dr. Dilawar, is a powerful representation of this concern. It vividly portrays the lives of tribal communities caught in the whirlpool of modern development, the destruction of forests, uranium mining, and the looming threats to the environment. Through these themes, the novel emphasizes the indispensable need for human values and sensitizes readers to the urgency of ecological preservation.

The responsibility to preserve lush green forests rests upon all of us. Yet, in the name of development, forests are being cut down and the lives of indigenous communities are being erased. *Adavi Batukulu* (Forest Lives) is a powerful narrative that responds to such devastating consequences with a humanitarian perspective. At the center of this novel are the Chenchus, a tribal group whose lifestyle is deeply interwoven with Nature. For the Chenchus, the forest is the very foundation of their existence. They practice podu (shifting) cultivation, following traditional customs, treating Nature like a mother and using only as much as is necessary. However, government-driven development projects particularly uranium mining have torn apart this harmonious way of life.

Through the character of Ramanarao, the author examines and presents the Chenchus' way of life and their struggles in the society. The construction of the Nagarjuna Sagar Dam, the destruction of Chenchu huts, and the depletion of natural resources are vividly depicted in the novel. The government's actions turning lands cultivated by the Chenchus into waste dumps, depriving them of their traditional rights to practice podu (shifting) cultivation, and officials illegally selling valuable

forest resources express the author's deep concern over governmental corruption and its impact on indigenous communities.

It is a historical fact that hundreds of Chenchus lost their lives during the construction of the Nagarjuna Sagar Dam, and a large portion of the forest was destroyed. The government became the primary cause of the destruction of both the forest and the Chenchus. When the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi claimed that millions of acres would turn into fertile farmland, Ramanarao questions: "What is the purpose of the Nagarjuna Sagar Dam? To make millions of acres fertile. Who owns these millions of acres? You? Me? The poor Narayanas who toil to fill their bellies? Isn't it like plucking eggs only to feed the vultures?" (P.28). Through Ramanarao's words, it becomes clear that while officials and contractors gained from such dams, the Chenchus and the forests bore the cost of loss and devastation.

The destruction of forests does not only harm the trees; it also leads to the extinction of countless birds and animals that depend on them, thereby severely affecting biodiversity. "According to the directive principles in Article 48A of the Indian Constitution, state and central governments are required to protect wildlife. Under Article 51(A), it is the duty of citizens to conserve wildlife" (www.indiakanoon.org). Yet, as the author observes: "All greenery is vanishing. Wild animals, deprived of shade, are scattering in disarray. Due to drought, groundwater is depleting. Near dry tanks and ponds, animal carcasses are piling up in heaps. Some enter human settlements and are chopped into pieces in feasts. Big tigers, leopards, and bears float as corpses in irrigation wells... monkeys started to migrate long ago..." (P. 84–85). These words reveal the plight of forests and the countless species that depend on them, and they hint at the looming threat to human futures. Such disasters affect not only wild animals but also the lives of forest-dependent communities. Forest products like honey, medicinal plants, and timber are being lost. Just as a mother hen protects her chicks, a forest protects its young. Yet, as Dilawar points out, these "forest mothers" lack protection—a truth that is deeply distressing. Even if forests are destroyed, it would be beneficial to plant new trees and restore the lost forests—but such measures are absent. While there are slogans and calls for action, there are no governments truly implementing them. Everything is tainted with corruption. The author vividly depicts the hardships faced by the Chenchus: with forests destroyed, streams and ponds dried up, there is no water to drink and no food to eat.

Uranium Mining is another environmental threat. A key issue highlighted in this novel is uranium mining. To carry out uranium extraction in the Nallamala forests, officials forced the Chenchus to vacate their habitats. Uranium is an extremely hazardous metal; its radiation causes numerous health problems and is also used in the production of nuclear weapons. In the novel, Ramanarao, through a science teacher in his circle of friends, explains, the process of uranium extraction

and its devastating consequences, with great clarity. "The radioactive materials released from uranium waste remain in the environment for thousands of years. They cause genetic mutations. These harmful effects are observed in humans, animals, birds, plants, water, and soil. When these toxic substances enter crops, water, and soil, the crops may become poisonous or fail to grow at all" (P.101). This is exactly what we witness today. Even if crops grow, we couldn't eat due to the increase of pests. The writer explains that the stabilization of soil is due to extraction of uranium by drilling the soil. Such activities can trigger natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis, leading to severe land degradation. Uranium mining not only damages the land but also contaminates the body, DNA, water, and soil. The novel scientifically explains the resulting genetic mutations, crop poisoning, and water pollution. It warns that radiation can render the land toxic for centuries. Already, a hundred years ago, scientists like Arrhenius predicted that increasing atmospheric carbon would accelerate global warming. Even though James Hansen highlighted global warming in 1988, the first IPCC report confirmed it in 1990, and international conferences under the UNFCCC have been held, the results remain inadequate. Carbon levels in the atmosphere continue to rise. As Dr. Thumuluri Rajendraprasad notes in "Let's Protect Nature" (P.19), this is a stark reality. This serves as a warning to people who have forgotten the fundamental truth: "Health is the greatest wealth."

Environmental destruction continues under the name of development. Those who benefit are the wealthy, while the poor bear the brunt of its devastating effects. The Chenchus, practicing slash-and-burn (podu) agriculture, clear small trees from hills using axes and sticks, and burn the felled wood to enrich the soil for their crops. They do not use chemical fertilizers or pesticides, cultivating their crops entirely in natural way. This not only preserves the fertility of the land but also ensures that human health remains unharmed. However, government officials, in their greed to exploit forests, have destroyed the Chenchus' podu farming. When governments, tasked with protecting forests, engage in smuggling and destroy valuable aromatic trees, who else can be expected to protect them? Ramanarao observes, "Hundreds of acres in the forest are turning into barren land. The forest is deforming like the face of a girl attacked by acid. It is weakening like a patient suffering from AIDS. Its lungs are drying up like those of a tuberculosis patient..." (P.84). Through these words, it becomes clear how forests are subjected to destruction. The author mirrors the life of forest creatures as a reflection of the human heart, highlighting that this is not merely a story about Nature but also a profound question about human survival and responsibility.

At the end of the novel, the author questions the prevailing notion of contemporary development. The message conveyed is that in the name of development, the destruction of forests not only harms the environment but ultimately leads humans to destroy themselves. The cessation of the Chenchus' podu agriculture

and the forced alteration of their way of life serve as a strong critique of government policies. Through this novel, the author not only highlights the life of the Chenchus but also strongly emphasizes the need to protect Nature, which is the foundation of life for all. His critique of corruption among officials, plundering of resources, and the destruction of humans' livelihood in the name of development is expressed with deep commitment. "*Adavi Batukulu*" stands as a seminal work in modern Telugu environmental literature.

To Conclude while the novel *Ontari* expresses environmental change through the path of individual transformation, *Moogavani Pillanagrovi* shows how human life and self-respect are intertwined with environmental shifts, particularly drought in an agriculture-based society. *Adavi Batukulu* stands as a powerful scientific critique against the destructive policies of authorities that devastate forests. All three novels, in their unique styles, highlight the collapse of human relations, the destruction of Nature, and the erosion of cultural values in the name of development. Though they appear as three distinct narratives, collectively they raise the same fundamental question, "Development for whom, and at what cost to values?" Literature is not merely for telling stories but also for guiding society toward a meaningful path. These three novels perform that role with great distinction. As works of prose literature carrying a deep sense of social responsibility, they serve as guiding lights in awakening ecological and social consciousness among readers.

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