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An ecostylistic investigation of the online communicative practices within grassroots environmental activism in India

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Abstract A corpus of nineteen posts collected from the social media platform X was analysed using an integrated theoretical and methodological approach. By combining ecostylistics with ecolinguistics, multimodal critical discourse analysis and multimodal studies, the study investigates the online communicative practices of the grassroots environmental movement #SaveBuxwahaForest, in order to gauge their stylistic traits and communicative strategies, functions and effects. The contribution will also explore the link between environmental activism and protection of indigenous peoples' rights. The analysis shows that background knowledge about (post)colonial policies towards – or against – indigenous peoples in the Indian subcontinent is necessary to fully decode more than one text in the corpus; that verbal and non-verbal figurative language and non-conventional oppositions are major stylistic traits in the digital communication of this environmental movement; that engagement, mobilisation and persuasion are their main communicative functions; and that most of the strategies used are beneficial rather than ambivalent or destructive, as per Stibbe's ([2015] 2021) classification.

Keywords Ecostylistics; online communication; ecolinguistics; MCDA; multimodality; grassroots environmental movement; indigenous people.

1. Introduction

2024 was the warmest year in history and the first one above the 1.5 °C increase in global temperatures, which was listed in the 2015 Paris agreement as the threshold limit to contain the negative effects of global warming (see https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement and https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-2024-virtually-certain-be-warmest-year-and-first-year-above-15degc). At the same time, the most recent Conference of the Parties, the COP29 held in Baku, was dubbed as the "finance COP" (Hill & Mahat 2024): its major achievement was a commitment to climate finance which, however, binds governments to invest significantly less

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than studies show would be necessary. Results in other highly anticipated areas, such as a renewed and revised commitment to cut down greenhouse emissions, were not produced (ibid.). In addition, attempts were made by representatives of fossil fuel-producing countries to weaken the commitment reached at the 2023 COP28 to "transition away from fossil fuels" (Harvey et al. 2024), with the President of the host country, Azerbaijan, going as far as claiming that "oil and gas was a gift from God" (Hill & Mahat 2024). The situation around the environmental emergency is so critical that three new reports by the UN acknowledge that the 1.5 °C limit may be definitely out of reach and predict a trajectory that would lead to a 3 °C increase in the temperature of the planet (Doering 2024). The results of the recent presidential election in the USA, the consequent selection of many climate change deniers for the new cabinet and the claims of another imminent withdraw of the USA from the Paris Agreement (Milman 2024) are a further cause for concern.

Against this backdrop of urgency and uncertainty, it is not surprising that many people are invested in environmental action while simultaneously perceiving that other people and governments are not doing enough (Richtie 2024) or that, when governmental policies are put in place, they are still too focused on making ecological transition profitable rather than swift (Bernards 2021). This, in turn, has led to the proliferation of grassroots environmental movements, which have proved to be extremely successful in terms of sociopolitical mobilisation and ability to counteract top-down ineffectiveness with bottom-up pressure (Horton 2010; see also Grasso & Giugni 2022). Some of these have an international reach, such as #FridaysforFuture or Extinction Rebellion, while others stay focused on a local, regional or national scale, such as the Mikoko Pamoja project to protect mangroves and provide clean water in Kenya (https://mikokopamoja.org/about-us/), or the Swayam Shikshan Prayog project in India to promote women's empowerment through sustainable agriculture (https://swayamshikshanprayog.org/whoweare/#mission). By the same token, their strategies are varied and multifaceted and have evolved in time thanks to technological advancements in communication modes and channels. Indeed, besides 'traditional' strategies such as civil disobedience (Khan 2010), or media campaigns, marches and protests (Horton 2010: 318), online activism has become a staple of what Staggenborg (2020) has termed "grassroots environmentalism" in recent years (see also Kavada & Specht 2022).

The online communicative practices of these grassroots movements are of great interest for communication scholars. On the one hand, the missions of these initiatives are of the utmost environmental, social and political

importance. On the other, communication plays a key role in their ability to mobilise, raise awareness and put pressure on top players, such as governments and corporations, thus reiterating the global significance of digital environmental activism as social practice in today's society.

This is why this article focuses on the communicative strategies adopted in the online campaign of the localised grassroots environmental movement #SaveBuxwahaForest. More specifically, an integrated approach based on ecostylistics (Virdis 2022a; Goatly 2022; Zurru 2021), ecolinguistics (Fill & Mühlhäusler 2001; Fill & Penz 2018; Stibbe [2015] 2021; Zurru, 2022), multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA; Ledin & Machin 2018; Machin & Mayr 2023) and multimodal studies (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021; Pérez Sobrino 2017; Zurru 2024) will be adopted. This interdisciplinary approach will be functional to achieving the analytical aim of the study: to explore the discourse of resistance to nationalist attacks and capitalist demands of the diamond-mining project threatening the environment and indigenous peoples in the Chhatarpur forest area. This will be accomplished by collecting and qualitatively analysing a corpus of texts from the online campaign mentioned above, in order to gauge any emerging stylistic patterns and their communicative functions.

The second, theoretical aim of this research is to advocate for a closer cooperation between language- and communication-based eco-disciplines such as ecostylistics and ecolinguistics and research on (post)colonial and/or indigenous settings from the Global South, with a focus on environmental (in)justice. While other eco-disciplines have explored the connection between indigenous peoples and environmentalism (Berkes [1999] 2018; Etchart 2022; e.g. Monani & Adamson 2017; Thornton & Bhagwat 2021) and, to a degree, the connection between (post)colonial history and environmental (in)justice (see DeLoughrey & Handley 2011; Dhillon 2022; Huggan & Tiffin [2009] 2015; Nesmith et al. 2021), ecostylistics and ecolinguistics are yet to put this crucial topic front and centre, even though a number of studies have recently focused on a few liminal issues (e.g. Adami 2022; Amideo 2024; Prastio et al. 2023; Virdis 2022a; Zurru 2017).

Since this contribution adopts a critical approach, section 2 will briefly discuss the socio-historical background of this initiative, as context is a fundamental aspect of critical discourse studies, especially when social movements are being investigated (Flowerdew 2018). Section 3 will focus on theory and methodology and Section 4 on analysis and discussion. The final

section will be devoted to some concluding remarks and reflections on limitations and future research.

2. Socio-historical background

In his critically acclaimed non-fiction volume *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Ghosh 2016: 145), the internationally renowned novelist and environmental activist Amitav Ghosh claims that, due to an eminently Eurocentric discourse on global warming, most voices in the conversation focus on capitalism as a primary driver for climate change. According to the author, this view underestimates at best – and dismisses at worst – the role imperialism played (ibid.). In addition, another major aspect often being sidelined is Asia's centrality within the climate crisis, due to both sheer numbers and the fact that the majority of the most threatened regions are Asian (ibid.: 147).

In agreement with Ghosh's stance, this contribution intends not only to step away from a purely Eurocentric focus and investigate an environmental movement from Asia, but it also aims at exploring the hypothesis that, in this particular case, (post)colonialism might be a key factor in the environmental threat this movement had to face. Indeed, as Gosh himself points out, the connection between (post)colonialism and current environmental circumstances often falls under what Fill and Penz (2018a: 439) labelled "silence in environmental discourse", to indicate those aspects of a certain environmental issue which are not often discussed or questioned. In the last decade, however, this connection has started to gain increasing attention in a number of eco-disciplines, and also, more recently, within ecolinguistics (see Amideo 2024).

This choice is also in line with calls in most recent ecolinguistic research for studies on societies from all over the world which emphasise the interdependence between human and more-than-human world (see, e.g., Stibbe [2015] 2021: 211; Fill & Penz 2018a: 442; Bortoluzzi & Zurru 2024: 260). Indigenous societies, for example, are a clear source of beneficial environmental discourses, given their millennia-long ability to co-exist harmoniously with the habitats that host them (Stibbe [2015] 2021: 27). Notably, quoting Everett and Neu (2000), Stibbe ([2015] 2021: 247) points out that indigenous people are often among those "erased" in the discourse of environmental modernisation, which discusses environmental issues as solvable through technology rather than structural changes in society. This is clearly a direction many people and countries are choosing to follow, and which

inevitably leaves traditional and indigenous societies behind. And while solar panels, energy-saving batteries, and electric cars can help, it is undeniable that the wisdom indigenous peoples exhibit in their relationship with their habitats might offer precious insights for the structural changes we all *need* to make as a society. Incidentally, Stibbe ([2015] 2021: 15) defines "erasure" as "a story that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration", which links indigenous voices and plights to a key aspect often backgrounded in a Eurocentric discourse on the environmental emergency: environmental (in)justice.

While issues such as the economic cost of the environmental transition never fail to be discussed in the Global North, the massively negative impact of the environmental crisis on the ecosystems of the Global South – and consequent threats to human and more-than-human life – are not as frequently discussed. This was aptly demonstrated by Bevitori and Johnson's 2022 study on the occurrences of RISK and RESILIENCE in a corpus of texts about environmental issues collected from mainstream press from around the world. Notably, the study revealed that RISK is more frequently mentioned in the Global North (GN) and RESILIENCE in the Global South (GS) and that financial risk is typically connected to climate change in the GN corpus, while it is virtually absent in the GS corpus. Interestingly, risks of displacement and migration are absent in the GN corpus, and resilience does appear in the GN corpus in later years, but framed as "adaptability", namely the ability of infrastructures and urban areas to face environmentally related risks (Bevitori & Johnson 2022: 565-566).

Conversely, studies show that the environmental emergency is most definitely intersectional with matters of social injustice in the Global South (Nesmith et al. 2021), where they are often connected to colonialism (ibid.: 39-43), and that the very notion of 'environment' was reshaped thanks to the movement for environmental justice to include aspects previously excluded from the discussion, such as racism, poverty or sexism (Pezzullo 2022). More specifically, indigenous environmental movements have traditionally been on the frontline in the protection of the environment (Etchart 2022) and are still spearheading many initiatives to counteract environmental injustice as a form of decolonisation (Dhillon 2022), in fields such as energy production and distribution (Partridge 2022) and safeguarding land, water and air quality (Martínez-Alier 2023).

With its long imperial history being deeply interwoven with the negative impact the environmental emergency is having on its territories and peoples,

India is a glaring example of what has been discussed so far. Indeed, the subcontinent is a place where ecological matters are often intersectional with issues of nationalism, displacement and political agendas, which are, in turn, linked to the colonial past of the country. Centuries of colonisation, followed by a sudden departure of the British colonisers, have also generated a profound social, political and religious instability, which resulted in the dramatic Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and communal violence over the decades, which still echoes in the polarisation of religious, ethnic and social groups in the subcontinent in the 21st century (Dalrymple 2015; see also Adami & Roy 2023). India's independence also implied that the new postcolonial government had to learn how to manage an incredibly vast territory, characterised by extremely rich biodiversity and agroclimatic conditions (Bhandari & Ghai 2010: 105). In time, this led to a number of governmental initiatives aimed at protecting the environment that would often clash with intersectional matters such as poaching due to extreme poverty or occupation of forest land due to displacement[1] (ibid.: 106). Remarkably, many environmental regulations in India were inspired – if not actively forced through courts – by environmental movements (ibid.: Liu & Gu 2010: 4-5) starting from the 1980s.

The case study selected for analysis is situated within this socio-historical context. Indeed, despite the 2006 Forest Rights Act, which "recognizes the rights of the forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for a variety of needs, including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs" (tribal.nic.in/fra.aspx#:~:text=The%20Act%20encompasses%20Rights%20of,Pastoral%20community%2C%20access%20to%20biodiversity%2C), a deforestation project that threatened trees, land, water, air and indigenous people was greenlighted by the Hindu nationalist government in 2021. Indigenous peoples' rights, in particular, have been consistently under attack by the government in recent years, because the lands and forests they inhabit are rich in natural – and economically profitable – resources (Shankar 2024) and because those rights

[1] The latter case is at the centre of Ghosh's award-winning novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), which recounts the long-forgotten massacre of thousands of Bengali Hindu refugees in 1979. After decades of displacement due to the consequences of the 1947 independence, these refugees settled in Marichjhapi, one of the islands in the Sundarbans archipelago. The government justified their forced eviction and consequent slaughter – which was mainly based on communal hatred – with the need to protect the royal Bengal tigers in the area, leaving the survivors to think they were no better than 'tiger-food' (Jalais 2005). This is but one of the historically-grounded episodes which show the intersectionality between (post)colonialism, environmentalism and socio-political polarisation in the subcontinent.

are not a primary concern of the Hindu nationalist party. The diamond-mining project in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, would have required felling over 2-lakh – approximately 200,000 – trees in Buxwaha forest, forever altering its biodiversity. This would have also increased water and air pollution, as well as negatively impacted on 8,000 dwellers from nearby villages (Dabral 2021). While mainstream media sided with the government and proved to be in favour of diamond mining being initiated (Zulfie, Sukarno & Wahyuningsih 2023), the nationwide #SaveBuxwahaForest online campaign was launched in 2021 to raise awareness about the environmental risks connected to this venture and contributed to garner enough support to stall the project (Sarin 2023).

The reference to the 2006 Forest Rights Act above allows us to better place this case study within the wider context of Indigenous studies. The latter is a term used primarily in US academia to define an interdisciplinary approach to the exploration, recollection and fostering of Indigenous peoples' histories, traditions and customs, as well as education, language revitalisation, political and social rights, in settler colonies such as Canada and Australia, or former colonies such as the USA or Latin America (Salomón Tarquini & Abbona 2017). Even the recent *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (Hokowhitu et al. 2021) sets out to offer "a wide-ranging overview of the field of Indigenous Studies scholarship informed by the lived conditions of Indigenous peoples *in the first world*" (ibid.: 26; my emphasis), and attributes the difficulty in the international systematisation of such a discipline to the mismatch between the terms "international" and "indigenous", which necessarily implies a localised focus (ibid.). It should also be pointed out that the term "Indigenous studies" is also used in different settings all over the world, possibly with similar approaches, but with a different focus and/or goal(s) (Salomón Tarquini & Abbona 2017). In the specific case of India, the very term "indigenous" needs clarification. It is interesting to start from the quotation above and notice that the terminology used is "forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers". "Tribal" and "traditional" are, together with "Scheduled Tribes (ST)", administrative terms used ever since the postcolonial period started (Sen 2018: 3-4). Their origin is linked to the use of the term "tribe" during colonialism, first employed to indicate colonised 'races' or 'peoples' and from the 1860s onwards to distinguish the native tribes from those included in the caste system. In opposition to the administrative term "Scheduled Tribe(s)", members of the ethnic communities in India – later supported by many academics – advocated for the use of the term "adivasi", literally "native or indigenous peoples of India" (ibid.: 5). This

term was suggested not only to reject the negative undertones linked to the colonial origin of the terms "tribe(s)" and "tribal", but also to voice these peoples' claims to certain rights, such as political autonomy and the rights to their ancestral lands. In this contribution, the term "indigenous people" will be used, since, as we shall see, the Hindi term "adivasi" is not employed in our corpus and it is not universally accepted by all native peoples (Burman 2009).

Having briefly outlined the socio-historical background of the online environmental campaign under scrutiny, the following section will focus on the theoretical and methodological segment of the study.

3. Theory and Methodology

As mentioned in the Introduction, an integrated theoretical and methodological approach was used in this study. This was necessary because of the multifaceted nature of both the topic and the text types explored.

The environmental emergency is such a global threat, but with so many specific and localised aspects, that it is extremely difficult to both process and communicate. Lakoff (2010) coined the term "environmental hypocognition" to express the lack of appropriate frames in the human mind to properly grasp the extent of this global threat, especially as economic factors and threats to other intersectional basic aspects of human life, such as food and shelter, are more immediate and easier to frame (ibid.: 76-77). This complexity is also demonstrated by the variety of studies and approaches which have investigated the multiplicity of communicative strategies used across genres and text types within environmental discourse, and their (in)effectiveness over time (e.g. Bortoluzzi 2024; Culloty et al. 2018; Nocke 2014; Rebich-Hespanha & Rice 2016; Penz 2022; Virdis 2022b; Walsh 2014; Zurru 2024).

Research also shows that the strategies used in environmental communication have become increasingly visual and multimodal (e.g. Dancygier 2023; Hahn & Berkers 2021; Hansen 2018; Rodriguez-Labajos 2022), with new text types developed within digital communication, such as social media posts, memes or gifs (Bhattacherjee & Sinha 2023; Cozen 2013; Zurru 2022) being utilized alongside more 'traditional' means like pictures, posters, adverts or videos. Additionally, the ever increasing pervasiveness of technology-mediated communication has amplified the means and spaces for the creation and use of non-verbal equivalents of figurative language, such as visual and multimodal metaphors or multimodal hyperbole (see Bolognesi et al.

2018; Ferré 2014; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009; Forceville 2020; Koickakudy & Karakunnel 2023), which are also widely employed in digital environmental communication (e.g. Hidalgo-Downing & O'Dowd 2023; Pérez Sobrino 2013; Meijers et al. 2019; Zurru 2024). Therefore, the methodological framework for this investigation had to integrate a multimodal lens, in order to be able to analyse all the meaning-making and communicative strategies used in the case study selected.

Besides including means to investigate figurative multimodal communication, the theory and methodology also needed to integrate a critical approach, in consideration of the key role the communicative phenomenon under scrutiny plays in a vitally important arena: the survival of human and more-than-human life. Indeed, while nobody can claim that effective communication can singlehandedly solve the environmental emergency, it is undeniable by now that this emergency is of an anthropogenic nature, that the one species that needs to take urgent positive action is homo sapiens, and that communication is one of the means humans rely on to bring about change in the world.

Within Critical Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough [1989] 2013; Fairclough, Wodak 1997; van Dijk 2008) traditionally focuses on exploring the relation between language, communication, texts, ideology and power. By doing so, CDA focuses on determining how these elements interact with each other to shape our societies, by supporting or challenging existing power structures and/or maintaining or creating new ones. A recent development is represented by Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA; Ledin & Machin 2018; Machin & Mayr [2012] 2023), which has an explicit social approach and is interested in analysing which semiotic resources are used in communication and discourse to construe and convey ideological stances, in a world where interaction is scarcely ever monomodal and has an ever increasing social significance.

A critical lens is, therefore, necessary in this study, in order to analyse the texts under scrutiny in the broader context of environmental discourse and intersectional issues (politics, economy, history, society, religion, etc.), and establish which communicative and stylistic traits characterise them, also based on the expectations generated by this broader context and the genre they fall under. Indeed, communication is, by its very nature, situated, and no communicative interaction can be interpreted properly outside of the setting and context in which it occurred.

In this regard, the notion of "genre" is salient and requires clarification. Among the many definitions of this concept, this contribution adopts the one by Swales (1990: 45-58): a set of communicative events which share one or more communicative purposes and which can be more or less prototypical. This, in turn, delineates how acceptable or appropriate a contribution to the genre is in terms of content and structure. Interestingly, Forceville (2020) maintains that genre acts as an "interface" which narrows down the number of possible interpretative paths greatly, by setting up expectations in the minds of those involved in a communicative exchange. In turn, deviations from these expectations will inevitably bring about a communicative effect, which will depend on the specific context, including genre, of the exchange. Unsurprisingly, Leech (2008) identifies deviation as one of the main avenues to achieve stylistic foregrounding, namely one of the strategies able to generate the most significant communicative effects.

In this study, the genre under investigation is environmental communication, but with a specific focus on one of its sub-genres, namely the environmental communication practices of grassroots movements on social media, which is clearly different from other sub-genres, such as the environmental communication practices of institutional bodies like the EU, of mainstream press, of large international non-profit organisations such as the WWF, and so on.

A detailed analysis within this genre and sub-genre, therefore, does not only require the theoretical and methodological tools to tackle multimodal communication and its critical and ideological stance. It also necessitates the means to evaluate which environmental communicative strategies are destructive and should be challenged; ambivalent and should be reframed; beneficial and should be promoted, as per Stibbe's ([2015] 2021) nomenclature. As the scholar himself underlines (ibid.: 21), these three keywords do not identify clear-cut notions, and a detailed analysis is necessary to establish whether a certain text promotes a beneficial, ambivalent or destructive discourse. Generally speaking, linguistic, communicative and textual practices which encourage the destruction of life-sustaining ecosystems will be classified as destructive; those which promote the respect and preservation of ecosystems will be classified as beneficial; those promoting both attitudes at once will be classified as ambivalent. In this study, and in consideration of its aims, of the socio-historical background of the case study, and of the specific genre analysed, those stylistic and communicative practices which foster positive environmental action, activism, environmental protection

and the respect of indigenous lives and habitats will be classified as beneficial; those which hinder or fail to encourage active participation or environmental protection, or promote the destruction of indigenous habitats or the violation of indigenous peoples' rights will be classified as destructive; those which show a combination of the two previous stances will be classified as ambivalent. The overarching aim is to identify which stylistic traits those communicative practices which mobilize, raise awareness and result in positive action have, in order to further expand the catalogue of beneficial strategies that can be used within online grassroots environmental communication.

Integrating multimodal studies and MCDA with ecolinguistics and ecostylistics provides the necessary theoretical and methodological framework to achieve this goal. What these disciplines have in common is a critical approach to the investigation of the link between language, communication and social practices; they are also interested in demonstrating that damaging practices can be recontextualised, e.g. by exposing destructive and ambivalent linguistic and discourse patterns and promoting beneficial ones (Amideo 2024; Ledin & Machin 2018; Stibbe 2018a, 2018b, ([2015] 2021; Virdis 2022a, 2022b). Indeed, ecolinguistics investigates the connection between the language we use to talk or write about ecological and environmental matters and our attitudes – and consequent actions – towards those same issues (Stibbe [2015] 2021). Ecostylistics focuses on linguistic, textual, discursive, communicative style(s) as an indicator of the ideological stance of texts and, what is more, of how that ideological stance is construed and conveyed (Zurru 2017; Virdis 2022a). The combination of these perspectives provides the analyst with an extensive body of scientific literature and a toolkit comprising, among others, verbal, visual and multimodal metaphor studies (e.g. Goatly 2022; Zurru 2022, 2024); multimodal studies (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021; opposition analysis (Jeffries 2010; Virdis 2022b); and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen [1985] 2014). These tools combined will allow us to analyse each individual text in and of itself, to situate it within its wider genre, to identify which elements concur to its meaning-making process and to unveil which communicative and ideological standpoint(s) it conveys. In turn, the analysis of all the texts in the corpus will make it possible to explore whether common stylistic traits and communicative functions can be identified.

In terms of data collection, hashtags were used as the main parameter to select the texts to be analysed. This decision was made for a number of reasons. Research shows that, besides being used with their original purpose of indexing and searching tools, hashtags have acquired various pragmatic functions,

including evaluation, affiliation, value construction and negotiation, censoring and mocking (Zappavigna 2018; Zappavigna & Martin 2018). With regard to the communicative practices of social movements, the term "hashtag activism" has been coined (Altahmazi 2020; Xiong et al. 2019). Indeed, studies have concluded that hashtagging is a means for social movements to foster communing affiliation around shared ideas, while also legitimising the claims associated with the hashtags in a collaborative process of meaning-negotiation by a group of individuals sharing common values (Altahmazi 2020). Xiong et al. (2019) also stress that engagement and co-creation of meaning is inherent to hashtag activism, since not only do the parties involved agree with the goals of the movement, but they are also actively engaged in information sharing and consumption, which also includes the creation of hashtags as a shared effort between organisations and the public. Starting from Tilly's (Tilly 1999; Tilly & Wood 2013) notion of WUNC – worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment – in relation to social movements, Freelon et al. (2018: 994) also confirm that hashtags represent the main means to measure the "unity" of a movement on social media. Therefore, collecting posts containing the main hashtags of the campaign allows us both to identify texts which actively engage with the aims and scope of the environmental movement under investigation and to analyse how those hashtags are used in the co-creation of meaning in its online communicative practices. The analysis was carried out based on the theoretical and methodological framework outlined in this section and it will be presented in the following section, along with the discussion of results.

4. Analysis and discussion

The texts analysed were collected from the social media platform X on 30 July 2024 and selected from the 'top' results for the main hashtags the movement under consideration has used for coordination and mobilisation: #SaveBuxwahaForest and #SaveBuxwaha.

A number of subsequent steps were taken after this initial selection. First of all, a decision was made to limit the analysis to posts containing language-based text or language-based text and still images. Posts containing videos were therefore excluded, as the meaning-making process in this case also involves semiotic elements such as music or camera movement, thus requiring additional methodological and analytical tools. Secondly, posts from corporate accounts were excluded, as the likelihood of these posts being an instance of green

washing rather than actual activism cannot be ignored. Thirdly, posts from individual accounts that posted massively were excluded, to avoid individual voice(s) and/or style conflating with that of the campaign as a whole. Identical posts which were posted multiple times were also excluded for the same reason. Finally, posts entirely written in a language unfamiliar to the analyst were excluded. The result of this process was a corpus of 19 posts.[2] Although each text exhibits a multifaceted communicative style and many elements are repeatedly used, their analyses were grouped in three macro-groups for reasons of readability in Sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below. Section 4.4 focuses on discussing results.

4.1 Hashtags, metaphor and personification

The analysis was based on the premise that the posts under consideration are multimodal texts whose overall meaning depends on the interrelation between language, visuals and markers of social media communication such as hashtags and emojis, within the genre of online environmental communication practices of a grassroots movement in the Indian context.

A first reflection was made on the main hashtags chosen by the movement. They both underline the need to "save" Buxwaha and its forest. While this choice showcases that urgent action must be taken, it also paints humans as the 'saviours'. This is therefore an ambivalent choice – even though a common one, as many other environmental hashtags begin with #save, starting from the overwhelming exploited #savetheplanet – because it does not underline that the forest is in need to be saved only because humans endangered it in the first place. A choice such as "#respectbuxwaha" would have exchanged the Material process of "saving" with a Behavioural process, thereby making humans Behavers rather than Actors (Halliday & Matthiessen [1985] 2014: 214) and pointing out that, in the forest/human relation, humans do not need to do anything more than acknowledging and respecting the existence of forests and their importance in the balance of the world's ecosystems.

[2] It goes without saying that all the posts analysed were posted by public accounts which openly share content with the aim of it being consumed and/or engaged with. This also allows for these texts to be analysed within the remit of fair use. However, a decision was made not to show the icons – which often contain the face of the author of the posts – and their handle, and to only quote their X name in the caption of each picture.

Figure 1: Post by Raksha Tawade

Figure 2: Post by FFF Virtual

Figures 1 and 2 are exemplary of meaning-making through the interaction of words, hashtags and pictures, and their analysis will be functional to introducing a number of notions that will be useful for the analysis of the other texts in the corpus.

In particular, Figure 1 combines:

a) a prototypical social movement slogan ("I STAND WITH…");

b) the main hashtag of the movement (#SaveBuxwahaForest) and a second locative hashtag reinforcing the first (#BuxwahaForest), in line with the collaborative creation and proliferation of hashtags within a social movement discussed by Xiong et al. (2019), both with an affiliation function;

c) an example of artivism, namely an image created thanks to digital art for activism purposes.

Artivism has gained increasing importance within environmental communication, both of the digital and non-digital kind, even more so after the Covid-19 pandemic (Cozen 2013; Rodriguez-Labajos 2022). It allows for activists' communication practices to reach new creative highs. The image in Figure 1, for example, contains two multimodal metaphtonymic chains (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 155), one foregrounded on the right-hand side and one backgrounded on the left-hand side. This is a highly creative pattern of interaction resulting from the combination of a multimodal metaphtonymy (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 125) and a multimodal metaphoric chain (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 152). A multimodal metaphtonymy stems from a metonymy (A FOR B relation) being integrated in the source or target domain of a metaphor (A IS B

relation) when different modes (e.g. verbal + visual) are combined. A multimodal metaphoric chain is obtained when different modes construe a metaphor whose target domain acts as the source domain of another metaphor. In this case, the foregrounded multimodal metaphtonymy CUTTING THE TREES OF BUXWAHA FOREST IS KILLING GIVING PEOPLE is based on the visual metonymy AXE FOR TREE CUTTING and the multimodal metaphtonymy THE TREES OF BUXWAHA FOREST ARE GIVING PEOPLE; the latter, in turn, is obtained thanks to the interactions of words, hashtags and the visual metonymies ARM FOR PERSON and FLOWER FOR GIVING PERSON. The backgrounded multimodal metaphtonymy DIGGING IS CHASING AWAY/DISPLACING PEOPLE AND ANIMALS is based on the visual metonymy EXCAVATOR FOR DIGGING and the multimodal metaphtonymies THE TREES OF BUXWAHA FOREST ARE DISPLACED PEOPLE, which is created through the interactions of words, hashtags and the visual metonymies SLIT TRUNK FOR LEGS, ROOTS FOR FEET, FEET AND LEGS FOR RUNNING, and the visual metonymy FLYING FOR DISPLACED/CHASED AWAY BIRDS. Figure 1 is therefore a highly creative text which generates and communicates two narratives: one of killing and one of displacement. Both can only be fully appreciated if the broader context is known and all the mappings can be activated, as suggested by Kövecses' work on the relation between metaphors and context (2015) and his extended view of conceptual metaphor theory (2020). Charteris-Black's work on Critical Metaphor Analysis also focuses on the interrelation between ideology, culture, history and the reasons why "*particular metaphors are chosen in specific discourse contexts*" (2004: 243; emphasis in original). This is especially relevant when deliberate metaphors are considered (Kövecses 2020: 120). Indeed, in Steen's genre-driven model for metaphor analysis, three dimensions are distinguished (2016: 310-11): expression ("metaphor in language"); conceptualisation ("metaphor in thought"); communication ("metaphor in interaction"). The latter sees the use of both non-deliberate and deliberate metaphors – namely "metaphors used as metaphors" (Steen 2016: 318) – in order to achieve specific communicative purposes. However, while in language-based communication deliberate metaphors are less frequently used than non-deliberate ones, in visual and multimodal communication in genres such as advertising, activism or artivism, they are the norm, as the authors of those texts *intend* to create those specific metaphors and they *want* the receivers to be able to decode them. This is especially true when these metaphors are based on allusion to specific facts (Naciscione 2022: 301), as the implicit meaning conveyed cannot be fully comprehended without the appropriate background knowledge. In case of

Figure 1, for example, the arm extending a flower is a clear reference to the giving nature of trees, given their unique and essential ability to produce and share oxygen, which allows life as we know it on the planet. By the same token, the image of the excavator, in context, does not only refer to generical digging, but to digging for diamond-mining purposes. The interpretation of the analyst itself was guided by the wider context in the lexical choice of "DISPLACING" alongside "CHASING AWAY", when a major risk connected with this mining enterprise was the displacement of thousands of indigenous people.

Overall, the personification of trees in Figure 1 is ambivalent. On the one hand, it reinforces the anthropocentric narrative that puts people at the centre of the human/more-than-human relationship, assigns more-than-human world human values and perspectives, and paints nature as the victim. On the other, it helps to create highly communicative multimodal narratives which aim at shocking the recipient and generating empathy for the trees and animals at risk by humanising them, so that people might see themselves reflected in the fear of the running tree or the distress of a tree offering a flower and being repaid with the axe. This is also reinforced by the high validity (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 154) of the visual. In visuality studies, "validity" is intended as visual representation based on realism (ibid.). In the image included in Figure 1, for example, the author opted for a naturalistic rather than an abstract representation. Indeed, of the eight validity markers identified by Kress & van Leeuwen ([1996] 2021: 156-158) the image ranks high in six (colour saturation, colour differentiation, colour modulation, representation of detail, illumination, brightness), medium in contextualisation, since the background is not fully articulated, and low in depth. In other words, the picture aims at being as realistic as possible, rather than opting for the cartoon-like quality of the picture in Figure 2. The final result is a striking communicative effect generated by the opposition of highly creative figurative multimodal language and the search for realism through the naturalistic validity of the image.

Even though the meaning-making process of the post presented in Figure 2 is also based on the combination of words, hashtags and digital artivism, the specific communicative strategies are quite different from those employed in the previous text. First of all, while Figure 1 opts for an effect similar to those generated by shockvertising (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 88), in an attempt to foster a strong emotional response in the recipients through the frame of violence (killing, running away, displacing, cutting with an axe), Figure 2 focuses on the frame of affection. Indeed, the visual of the woman hugging the tree with her eyes closed is strengthened by the metaphtonymy TREES ARE (BRANCHES FOR

ARMS FOR) PEOPLE. The personification of the tree allows for the embrace to be reciprocated, and the affectionate nature of the hug is further reinforced by the pink hearts, a symbol prototypically used in digital communication to signify love. In other words, this post focuses on love for nature as a primary motivation for environmental action. Additionally, the verbal portion of text "We have to take action now" is expanded by the hashtags to clarify what the purpose of taking action is, namely saving Buxwaha forest. Interestingly, multiple hashtags are used in this case, which amplify the message of the main hashtag by suggesting that saving the forest equates to saving life and future. The image interacts with words and hashtags by providing an example of a specific action that can be taken, which results in the multimodal metaphor HUGGING TREES IS TAKING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION. In order to fully appreciate all the layers of meaning in this post, context is once again necessary. Firstly, the words in the picture "when you can't hug people, hug a tree" combined with the mask on the face of the woman sets this post in the early days of the 2021 campaign, when the COVID pandemic was ongoing, which underlines the relation between online communication and environmental action by highlighting that the activity of the movement switched to completely online rather than stopping altogether. Secondly, the depiction of a woman hugging a tree is a reference to the practice of tree hugging for environmental protection, which was initiated in the 1970s in India by the villagers of rural areas, particularly women, inspired by Gandhi's idea of non-violent resistance and which resulted in the emergence of the Chipko Movement (Sadak 2024). The multimodal metaphor HUGGING TREES IS TAKING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION created in this post is, therefore, both a call for positive action and an acknowledgment of traditional and indigenous values and environmental practices.

Figure 3: Post by Ismail Association Trust

Figure 3 offers another example of personification of trees which, however, is achieved through a completely different communicative practice. In this case, it is the verbal portion of the text which creates a narrative in which trees are personified. Even though the first two clauses underline that trees are *not* human ("We can't walk and talk like humans"), they are nonetheless very clearly identifiable as the authors of the narrative, as demonstrated by the signature "Trees of buxwaha forest" and the inclusive subject "we", which is also Actor of the two Material processes (Halliday & Matthiessen [1985] 2014: 224) "give life" – whose Recipient is "to the humans" - and "die". The narrative also underlines the reciprocal nature of the human/more-than-human relationship thanks to the first conditional ("if you save us we will give life to the humans"), implicitly referring to the oxygen produced by trees. This recalls the notion of "con-vironment" suggested within ecolinguistics (Fill 2024) as an alternative to "environment", all too often intended and interpreted as "backstage to human activity". On the contrary, the notion of con-vironment underlines the close interdependence among all elements on earth and the relational and reciprocal nature of the interaction between all life forms on this planet. Interestingly, the hashtags and the picture included in the post do not interact with the verbal portion of the text in the same way as in Figures 1 and 2, in that they do not contribute to construing its narrative meaning but, rather, reiterate it and reinforce it. More specifically, the three hashtags recall the main goal of the movement to create affiliation while also offering an example of creative proliferation of hashtag activism, since the slogan "I stand with…" observed in Figure 1 becomes a hashtag in Figure 3. The digital art opts for a

style similar to Figure 2 and uses its cartoon-like quality to foreground the main hashtag while also presenting an opposition between lush green trees, bushes and grass and a single cut-off trunk. Overall, Figure 3 applies a strategy that many studies (Goatly 2022: 482; Lakoff 2010: 79; León et al. 2022: 987; O'Dowd et al. 2024; Stibbe 2023) have identified as both frequent and successful within environmental communication, activism and education: telling a story people can empathise with.

Figure 4: Post by iPlus Talks

In Figure 4 metaphor is used once again, but in a verbal ("Trees are our life") rather than a conceptual or multimodal format. Similarly to Figure 1 and 3, this metaphor also underlines the connection between trees and human life and serves as the reason for the appeal "please don't cut them". Notably, the use of the possessive adjective "our" within this metaphor foregrounds how vital trees are for humans and how strong the dependence of human life on trees is. The verbal metaphor is further reiterated in the picture, which also reiterates the "Save Buxwaha Forest" message. A most salient element of this text is its hashtag proliferation. Not only does the text utilise the main hashtags and others seen previously (e.g. #savetrees in Figure 2), but it also employs #FFFvirtual and #ChipkoPhirSe. The former links this text to the global environmental movement #FridaysforFuture, showing the collaboration and support among global and localised grassroots movements. The latter refers to the Chipko movement discussed above (Figure 2) and translates into English as "Chipko again", thereby drawing a direct link between this environmental movement and the rural and/or indigenous roots of most environmental

activism in India, while also making a reference to the risk of displacement faced by thousands of indigenous people.

4.2 Sarcasm and unconventional oppositions

Figures 5 and 6 both exhibit a similar strategy: a cartoon using sarcasm in combination with a preceding portion of the text without humour.

Figure 5: Post by Mona Patel

Figure 6: Post by Shivam ;-)

In Figure 5, an appeal to ecological action ("raise your voice"; "support those who raise their voice") is followed by a factual statement about the consequences of mining the forest and the main hashtag. A tree emoji is also used twice, with a function of reiteration rather than meaning expansion. The cartoon also includes factual information about the area in danger at the bottom left-hand side. The rest of the cartoon, however, foregrounds an unrealistically large diamond within a display case and two people discussing it. The woman's comment on its beauty and enquiry after its price is met by an indirect, sarcastic reply from the man who, rather than replying with an estimated sum of money, quotes "some lakhs of trees, habitat and livelihood of countless people" as the price to pay for the diamond. Once again, allusion to a specific fact – the mining project threatening Buxwaha forest and the consequent destruction of the habitat and displacement of forest dwellers – is necessary to understand the sarcastic remark. Figure 6 also contains a sarcastic cartoon, which is also flagged by the hashtag #greenhumor, in which a crying crocodile utters the words "this

time it's ecological grief", implicitly comparing the proverbial crocodile tears with the insincere worry for ecological matters of many, including corporations such as the one spearheading the mining project. The verbal portion of the text displays a proliferation of hashtags and a sentence which introduces the first of the oppositions that, as we shall see, can be detected within the corpus: diamonds VS life. Indeed, comparatives are one of the structural triggers of opposition (Jeffries 2010: 46). Furthermore, the comparative allows the text to draw an unconventional rather than a conventional opposition (ibid.). In other words, rather than presenting a commonly shared opposition such as Labour VS Tories in British politics (ibid.: 39), opposites can be created in texts which are unconventional, namely unexpected, creative and very much based on context and co-text, as well as on canonical oppositions. Unconventional opposites have been found to be more fruitful in communicating beneficial stories in environmental communication than conventional ones (Virdis: 2022b). In this case, the opposition 'diamond VS life' is certainly more unconventional than, say, diamond VS common stone or death VS life. It is also communicatively salient, in that it plays on the polysemy of the adjective "precious", intended as "expensive" when referred to diamonds and as "important" when referred to life. The opposition is further strengthened and becomes multimodal thanks to the many hashtags and to the emojis used to give a visual representation of what "precious life" means according to the author of this post, namely plants, trees and animals, which gives rise to the multimodal metaphor BUXWAHA'S PLANTS, TREES AND ANIMALS ARE PRECIOUS LIFE. Both Figure 5 and 6, therefore, exhibit a communicative style which differs from the texts analysed so far, in that the picture and remainder of the post do not directly interact with each other to construe the overall meaning as in Figures 1 and 2, nor do they support each other as in Figures 3 and 4. Rather, in this case a humorous picture is used following a first portion of the text with a serious tone, which allows these texts to inspire ecological reflection while also making the audience smile.

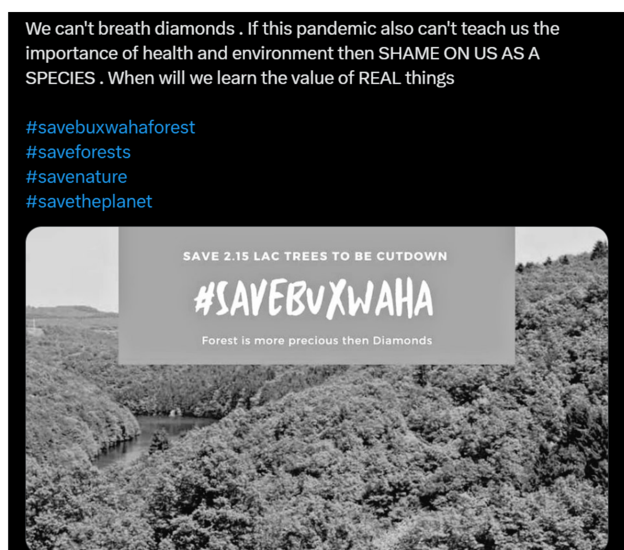


Figure 7: Post by সৌম্যজিৎ রায়

Figure 7 presents another example of unconventional opposition via comparative which plays on the semantic potential of the adjective "precious" within its picture: forest VS diamonds. The opposition is strengthened in the verbal segment of the text by the figurative sentence "we can't breathe diamonds", which creates the unconventional opposite diamonds VS oxygen via negation, another structural trigger of opposition (Jeffries 2010: 35), and the use of the verb "breathe". Background knowledge about the ability of forests to produce most of the oxygen on the planet allows for the 'diamond VS oxygen' and 'forest VS diamond' oppositions to reinforce each other. Furthermore, the rest of the written text creates yet another opposition: real VS unreal. By allusion to the pandemic and the evaluative adjective (Hunston & Sinclair 2000) "important" used in connection with "health and environment", as well as the uppercase used for emphasis twice, the opposition between 'diamonds as unimportant and unreal' and 'health and environment as important and real' is construed. The hashtags are used in an affiliative function, while the image in the picture does not contribute to meaning expansion or construction as much as it provides a visual representation of the subject matter, Buxhawa forest. That the image is low in brightness, being dark grey and lighter grey (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 158), shows that the picture aims more for abstraction of validity than amplification (ibid.: 155), hence towards evocation more than realism.

Figure 8: Post by Abhi and Niyu

Figure 9: Post by Sarvesh Sharma

Figures 8 and 9 also exploit opposition. Figures 8 is a post used to publicise on X a YouTube video posted by a couple of high-profile influencers and activists. In Figure 8 the unconventional opposites are 'trees VS diamonds' and this opposition is created multimodally. Indeed, while the written portion of the text creates opposition via coordination ("Trees or diamonds?"; Jeffries 2010: 44), the picture shows a green forest in the background on the left hand-side which fades into purple on the right hand-side; in the foreground is a pile of sawn tree trunks, some of which are being lifted by an excavator arm and are opposed to an overlarge cartoon-like diamond via a red arrow. The forest in the background starts fading into purple where the diamond appears on the image. The picture, therefore, does not aim for realism but for a creative impact. This reinforces the opposition explicitly made in the written text by showing the visual contrast between a healthy, green forest and what happens to it and its trees when diamond mining is involved: sawn brown trunks and a disappearing darkish forest. The opposition is further expanded through evaluation, by the use of the evaluative adjective "important" in the written text and of the evaluative noun (Hunston & Sinclair 2000) "scam" in connection to the imperative "Save Buxwaha" in the picture, which leads to the interpretation that trees are important and diamond mining is a scam. Figure 9 hinges on the opposition 'mining VS trees', created through a comparative. This opposition, however, is but one of the meaning-making elements in a highly creative and communicatively complex text. As for the language-based segment, it starts with the uppercase slogan "I STAND WITH BUXWAHA FOREST" which appears more than once in our corpus, either as a slogan or as a hashtag (Figures 1 and 3). Factual information follows, which integrates one hashtag within the

sentence (“More than 2 lakh… #BuxwahaForest”) and precedes the ‘mining VS trees’ opposition. A call for collective action (“Let’s unite”) is then combined with a metaphor which, thanks to the combination between words and image, is multimodal. “The lungs of the earth” is indeed a widely used metaphor when talking about forests, especially the Amazon rainforest. The picture both reinforces this metaphor and recontextualises it. One the one hand, this picture presents the metaphtonymy (TREES FOR) FOREST IS (BROWN SPOT FOR) SICK HUMAN LUNGS,[3] which traces a link between the lungs of the earth and those of people and, once again, hinges on the life-giving ability of trees to produce the element lungs need to function: oxygen. On the other, it recontextualises a WWF ad through the main hashtag #savebuxwahaforest, implicating that *all* forests, including the one the movement is fighting to protect, are the lungs of the earth.

Figure 10: Post by Vikash Balmuchu

Figure 11: Post by sharma_upanasa

Metaphor is widely used in Figures 10 and 11. Three metaphors can be detected in Figure 10. Two of them “Nature is the real diamond” and “Forest is the real diamond” are verbal and exploit the connotative meaning of “diamond” as something precious and invaluable. The third one is a multimodal metaphor contained within the protest poster shown by a masked protester, which allows

[3] The original WWF advert was investigated through frame analysis and blending by Dancygier (2023).

the performativity of in-presence environmental activism to filter into its online counterpart and, as in Figure 2, underlines that activism cannot be stopped even by a pandemic (which is further supported by the "Fridays for Future Virtual" logo). More specifically, the metaphor THE REAL DIAMONDS ARE THE TREES is cued both verbally and visually, thanks to the drawing of an overlarge diamond. This proliferation of similar metaphors within the same semantic field (nature, forest, trees) allows for them to support and expand one another, by exploiting metonymic relation (trees for forest, forest for nature) easily accessible to any addressee. Figure 11 presents a meaning-construction strategy similar to Figures 5 and 6, in that the written segment of the text and the picture convey two connected but not integrated pieces of information which, added to each other, provide the audience with the overall meaning of the text. Indeed, the language-based part is meant to give factual information for mobilisation purposes (when, where, why to meet), completed by three hashtags with an affiliation function. The picture, on the other hand, employs figurative multimodal language, through the multimodal metaphor RAINDROPS ON LEAVES OF BUXWAHA FOREST ARE REAL DIAMONDS, cued both verbally and visually and, once again, exploiting the denotative meaning of "diamond". This is achieved thanks to an explicit verbal reference ("these") and a picture which is very low in depth (the background is out of focus), and in colour saturation and brightness, being a black and white picture; the image foregrounds a leaf with raindrops lying on it which, however, are portrayed in a hyper-realistic fashion, since they are so high in illumination and representation of detail that they sparkle like actual diamonds when hit by the light. In other words, the verbal part of the text gives information about how to take action, while the picture uses multimodal figurative communication to explain the reason why environmental action is needed.

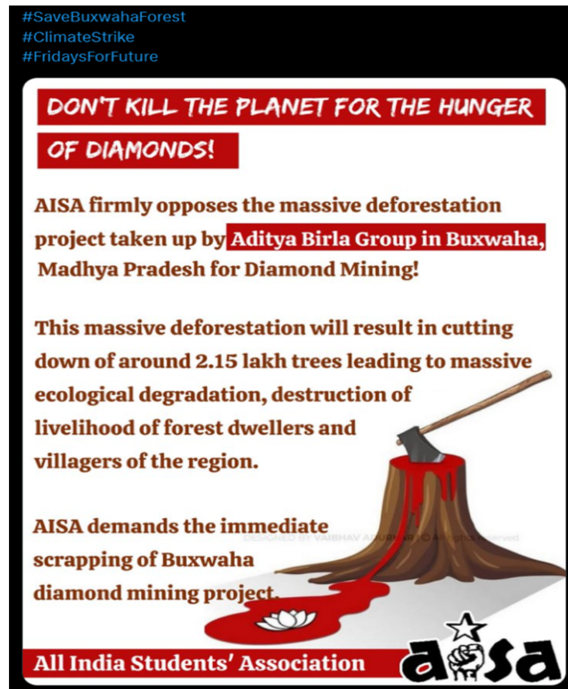
Figure 12: Post by Adv Neelesh Kushwaha Figure 13: Post by CleverLion

Figures 12 and 13 once again construe the unconventional opposition 'forest VS diamond'. In Figure 12, the opposition is created both verbally and multimodally. The Hindi portion of the verbal text translates as "I don't want diamonds, I want trees!" and is reinforced by the picture which, in terms of composition (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 216-217), presents an oppositional information value based on a Given-New realisation. This implies that two opposed elements are juxtaposed horizontally, so that the left, Given element is presented as the point of the departure of the message which is already well known, while the right, New element is presented as the novel information the audience needs to pay attention to. By contrasting an image of a lush green forest with the "Save Buxwaha forest" imperative, and a pair of human hands – a metonymy for "humans" – holding several sparkling diamonds of different shapes and colours, the image presents the forest as the Given, "natural" element, and the diamonds as the new, "unnatural" element due to human greed. The rest of the written text in English ("Guys…forest") is an appeal for unity and affiliation to take collective action, reinforced by the hashtags. Figure 13 shows even more complex meaning-construction strategies. A verbal metaphor similar to a multimodal metaphor already detected in our corpus (Figure 10) is used ("Trees are our diamond"). The unconventional oppositions are construed multimodally, with the hashtags used to make the opposites explicit ("#trees vs #diamond"; "#oxygen vs #diamond") and the top part of the picture showing the same oppositional information value as

Figure 12 with similar images: a lush green forest on the left and a desert landscape in the background on the right, with a human hand in the foreground holding a diamond. The opposition is further highlighted by the question "A diamond is forever?", which questions the ability of diamonds to have eternal life, when forests can certainly contribute to give it to the planet. Moreover, if we consider the picture as a whole, we will notice that it shows an Ideal-Real oppositional information value (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 217): the top half portrays the "ideal" part of the message and the bottom half showcases the "real" part, namely men at work to cut trees and factual information about the extent of the project ("What about….?"). Interestingly, the written elements in the bottom half of the picture touch upon some key elements of the fight behind this grassroots movement. The rhetorical question lists the danger for both trees and forest dwellers, while the final sentence explicitly refers to the action taken by the activists and, once again, creates a multimodal unconventional opposition between the "pristine Buxwaha forest" and "diamond mining", foregrounded from the rest of the text by virtue of being written in yellow rather than white. Finally, the text uses the hashtags "#acchedin" and "#AccheNationals" in addition to those investigated so far. The former translates as "good days" and refers to the election slogan largely used by Modi even though it had been coined by his predecessor (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/acche-din-slogan-was-originally-coined-by-manmohan-singh-nitin-gadkari/articleshow/54316285.cms?from=mdr), and which is often used on social media with a negative evaluation or mocking function by Modi's critics. Here, however, it is used with a positive evaluation function, to signal that environmental action is a means to achieve the "good days" promised, but not delivered, by the Government. #AccheNationals is the hashtag launched by the account of the same name (https://x.com/AccheNationals) which is focused on amplifying the voice and support "change-makers", namely environmental activists in the subcontinent. In other words, this hashtag shows the interrelation and community support among various environmental organisations already observed in Figures 2, 4 and 10 (and which can also be observed in Figures 14, 15 and 19, in which the Fridays for Future hashtags are used and their accounts tagged).

4.3 Violent/apocalyptic scenarios, hyperbole, semantic redefinition and indigenous imagery

Figure 14 and 15 exploit the same "shockvertising factor" observed in Figure 1.



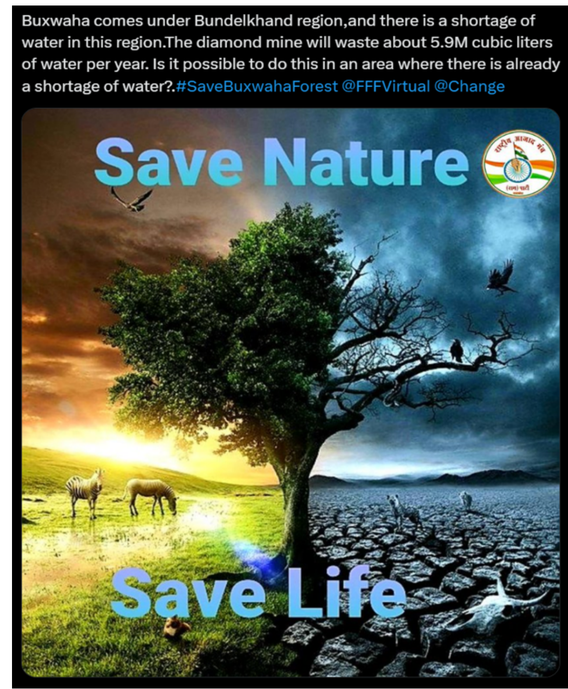


Figure 14: Post by Adarsh

Figure 15: Post by Harshit Awashti

While the written portion of Figure 14 provides factual information on the mining project in Buxwaha Forest and clarifies the demands of the student association, the visual portion is made up of a striking example of artivism, which creates the visual metaphtonymy (PARTY SYMBOL FOR) MODI'S GOVERNMENT IS (AXE AND CUT-OFF TREE TRUNK FOR) CUTTING TREES AND (FLOWING BLOOD FOR) KILLING PEOPLE. Interestingly, the symbol of Modi's BJP party that is surrounded by blood in this digital art is usually orange, not white. The use of the white colour, therefore, given the wider context of the campaign, can be interpreted as another metonymy (WHITE FOR DIAMONDS), which hints at the reason why trees are being cut and peoples' lives are being put at risk. Figure 15 also provides factual information in the written segment of the text, in this case focusing on the risk connected to shortage of another life-giving element: water. The point is then visually underlined with a digital art exploiting the same Given-New compositional structure as in Figure 12 which, however, exploits an apocalyptic frame. Indeed, the picture puts in opposition the image of a healthy forest at sunrise or sunset on the left,

populated by trees, grass, water and non-human animals. On the left is a dark image of a landscape suffering from water shortage, as suggested by the cracks in the terrain. Furthermore, besides being cued because of the lack of water, the frame of death is also evoked by the animal skull in the foreground, the hyenas in the background and the tree branches devoid of leaves. The "save nature", "save life" imperatives contribute to the conventional opposition 'life vs death' created in this picture.

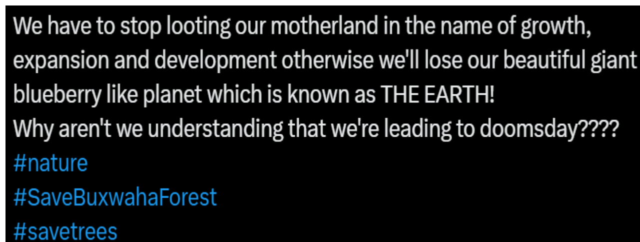


Figure 16: Post by Diksha Tripathi

Figure 16 is the only text in our corpus which does not include any visual elements. It includes the most frequent hashtags used with an affiliation function and shows examples of figurative language, more specifically verbal metaphor and simile ("motherland"; "blueberry like planet"). Furthermore, it makes an explicit reference to the notion of growthism (Halliday [1990] 2001: 196), by mentioning "growth, expansion and development", which are blamed as the main reasons for the environmental emergency by those focusing on capitalism as the major drive of the current situation. Finally, words like "looting", "lose" and "doomsday" and the rhetorical question accompanied by three emphatic question marks evoke a violent and apocalyptic scenario similar to those traced in Figures 1, 14 and 15.

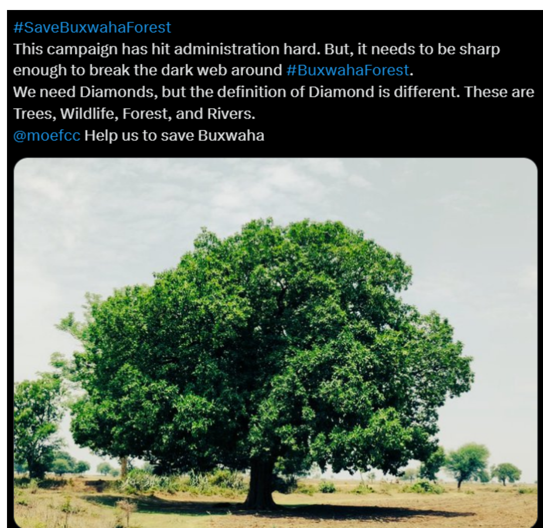


Figure 17: Post by Tuluva

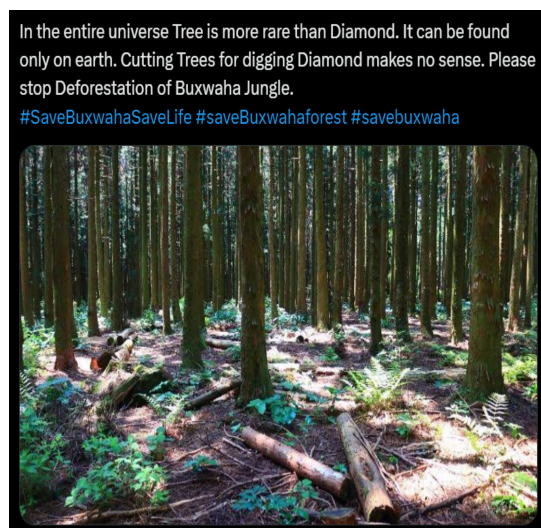


Figure 18: Post by DCF

Figures 17 and 18 both include a written text which is supported by a picture. In Figure 17 hyperbole is used ("in this entire universe Tree is more rare than Diamond"), which focuses on another quality usually attributed to diamonds – their rarity – and assigns it to trees. An appeal to stop the mining and the main hashtags complete the language-based segment of the text. The picture shows a group of tree trunks, some of which cut off and lying on the ground, which supports the statement about cutting trees for diamond-mining purposes not making sense. Figure 18 starts with a direct reference to the government and the successful outcome of the environmental campaign and an encouragement to persevering. This is followed by a very specific communicative choice: a semantic redefinition of the word "diamond", to be intended as "trees, wildfire, forest and rivers", rather than economically precious stones. The picture supports this choice by foregrounding a big tree with lush green leaves and smaller trees in the background, as if to visually provide an example of these newly redefined "diamonds".

Figure 19: Post by Arif Ismail

Finally, Figure 19 makes a very explicit reference to the danger faced by indigenous forest dwellers. Written text and picture cooperate with each other to construe the multimodal metaphor BUXWAHA FOREST IS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' HOME, thereby offering this as the main reason to oppose the diamond-mining project. This is achieved thanks to the plea included in the written text and replicated in the picture, the use of the main hashtags and the #ChipkoPhirSe hashtag previously discussed (Figure 4), and an image of a group of indigenous people who are easily identifiable as the referents of the adjective "their". Poignant is also the lexical choice of "home", as opposed to, say, "habitat", which plays on the emotional connotation this word has when referred to the place someone lives in and underlines the ancestral relation indigenous peoples have with the ecosystems they live with. Finally, the hashtags and logo related to Fridays for Future Virtual are also used, to both signal affiliation with the world-wide grassroots movement and request support, as previously observed.

4.4 Discussion

Based on the analysis carried out, visuality seems to be a common stylistic trait of the online communicative practices of this grassroots movement, as only one out of nineteen texts does not present any visual element.

Verbal and multimodal figurative language is also stylistically salient, as examples of verbal metaphors, similes and hyperbole, as well as visual and multimodal metonymies and metaphors, multimodal sarcasm and metaphtonymies are prevalent in the corpus. Notably, all the non-verbal metaphors and metaphtonymies analysed are deliberate and, for the most part, exhibit complex and original patterns of interaction which make them highly creative, in that they do not activate frames which are particularly overused in environmental communication. If we take the frames identified in Dancygier (2023), Hidalgo-Downing et al. (2023) and Rebich-Hespanha and Rice (2016) as a reference, we will see that Figure 19 activates the frame "'regular' (sometimes vulnerable) people" (Rebich-Hespanha & Rice 2016); Figures 1, 13 and 14 activate the frame "threat", where the "predators" (Hidalgo-Downing et al. 2023) are represented by human being and excavator, humans, and axe, respectively; Figure 15 is the only one to activate the "natural disasters" frame (ibid.); finally, Figure 2 activates the "actions and plans" frame in relation to environmental activism (ibid.). This is communicatively significant, as novelty and creativity are engaging communicative strategies which allow to avoid the overuse of certain elements, e.g. visuals of stranded polar bears or the globe burning, which might lead to what Dancygier (2023: 11) has termed 'persuasion bleaching' and cause disinterest rather than engagement. The tendency towards novelty and creativity is also confirmed by the frequent use of unconventional oppositions within this grassroots movement, whose members have found versatile ways to construe the overarching "forest/diamonds" opposition in a number of related oppositions using different modes. This is the one strategy which is not only stylistically salient, but also specific to the #SaveBuxwahaForest movement and can only be fully appreciated when the wider context of their protest is considered. The last point is, however, generally true for all the texts analysed, as allusion to facts is prevalent within the corpus and lack of background knowledge would make all the 19 posts partially or fully impossible to decode.

All in all, the analysis of our data shows that the digital communicative practices of this grassroots movement aim at engagement, mobilisation and persuasion. While factual information is sometimes offered (Figures 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15), it is never the sole purpose of the text, as figurative and persuasive language is used as well. The texts tell narratives, encourage and call for action, stimulate engagement through creativity and, in a limited number of cases, aim at inspiring fear and show doomsday scenarios. Some of these choices are ambivalent, as in the case of the main hashtags or in Figure 1. Some can be

classified as destructive, as in the case of Figures 14, 15 and 16, since research shows that violent, fear-inducing and apocalyptic scenarios seem to be less effective a means to inspire environmental action and might even lead to ecoanxiety and disengagement from environmental action (see Bilfinger et al. 2024; Hogg et al. 2021; Landry et al. 2018; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole 2009). The rest of the corpus employs beneficial strategies to engage the public through verbal and/or multimodal figurative language and encourage mobilisation (Figures 4, 10, 11, 17, 18), reframe the narrative of economic gain being more important than environmental protection and justice (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 19) and give hope even in the face of a pandemic (Figures 2 and 3).

5. Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn. First of all, integrating ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, MCDA and multimodal studies allows for a fruitful theoretical and methodological approach to investigate the online communicative practices of an environmental grassroots movement. Theoretically, a critical lens – which all the disciplines involved share – encourages to set the investigation within both its global and local context, which is a fundamental step when exploring social practices like online communication; additionally, the tenets of ecostylistics and ecolinguistics allow us to investigate environmental activism with the support of a wealth of research on environmental communication and style. Methodologically, the toolkits provided by the combined approaches make it possible to explore the meaning-making process of the texts analysed as a whole, consider all their composing elements, verbal and non-verbal, and draw conclusions on their communicative purposes and effects.

Secondly, through historical context-setting and the analysis of current communicative data, this contribution has shown that present-day environmental (in)justice can be traced back to colonial and postcolonial ideologies and policies in the area under investigation. This confirms that background knowledge about the (post)colonial history of former colonies such as India is necessary for scholars interested in investigating social practices such as grassroots environmentalism and activism in these areas. By the same token, even though indigenous studies have begun to occupy a wider international stage, a localised focus is necessary when indigenous peoples and lands are involved, since the history, identity, social or political claims of an indigenous

people might not be shared by another, even within the same country, especially when the country is as vast as the Indian subcontinent.

Thirdly, this study aligns with the results of previous research on the communicative practices on social media of the #FridaysforFuture movement (Zurru 2022). More specifically, the results of the analysis carried out in this contribution seem to confirm that visuality is a stylistic trait of online environmental activism. This has certainly to do with online communication being inherently visual, as demonstrated by studies confirming that posts with visuals tend to have more engagement across different social media platforms (Cashyap 2024; Kanuri 2024; Li & Xie 2020). At the same time, activism via in-person protesting has always being inherently visual and performative too, with posters, banners, body and face paint, or even specific coloured garments – e.g. the "pink pussyhats" used during the 2017 women's march within the #Metoo movement (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJr06-Go8b4) – being as exploited as slogans and chants to construe the activists' message. The frequent use of visuality in digital grassroots communication, therefore, might also be connected to preserving this distinctive trait of in-person protesting. Verbal and multimodal figurative language also seems to be stylistically prevalent, and engagement, mobilisation and persuasion – rather than, say, information sharing or education – seem to be among the main communicative functions of online grassroots environmental activism.

Finally, while a minority of texts in our corpus contain ambivalent or destructive communicative elements, the majority employ beneficial strategies which encourage positive environmental action, the respect and safeguard of forests and indigenous peoples, and the resistance to capitalist demands which put ecosystems and lives at risk.

This study has limitations. First of all, while the integrated approach adopted is fruitful, it is also highly time-consuming to both organically integrate the theories and methodologies selected and to proceed with the qualitative analytical process. Secondly, readability and understanding can suffer because of the need to pack many notions from different disciplines, some of which may be unfamiliar to readers, when the space of an academic article only allows for concise definitions. Thirdly, even though a 19-text corpus is not necessarily small for a study within multimodality adopting a qualitative approach, further data are required to achieve conclusive results which would allow us to claim that the range of stylistic traits identified in this corpus are consistently present in all the texts produced within the online communication practices of this grassroots movement. The latter limitation, however, opens up a path for future

research, since enlarging the data collection to some of the other hashtags which were co-created within the movement (e.g. #istandwithbuxwahaforest) might provide support for the findings of this research, or offer new insights. By the same token, collecting data from social media platforms other than X would help support or enrich the findings of this study. It would also be interesting to investigate other grassroots environmental movements in the subcontinent, and compare the style and effects of their online communicative practices with those of the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign.

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