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Research Paper

Echoes from the Hills: Rap as Memory, Mourning, and Movement

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Abstract:
This study examines how rap music from Uttarakhand articulates ecological crisis through the interconnected functions of memory, mourning, and movement. Focusing on two compositions—Saksham Dhyani's Rota Pahaad (The Weeping Mountain) and Fidato's Mero Pahaad (My Mountain)—the analysis proposes the conceptual framework of "hip-hop eco-witness" to describe how environmental destruction is made audible through everyday language, rhythmic repetition, first-person address, and the capacity of recorded music to preserve memory. The study demonstrates that Dhyani speaks as the mountain itself, giving voice directly to the landscape, while Fidato speaks through the relationship between community and land, using the possessive pronoun "my" as an act of claiming. Both songs perform memory by documenting the erasure of roots, the selling of ancestral land, the betrayal hidden beneath the word "development," and the loss of sacred places. Mourning finds expression through the bewildered question of how this can be called progress, through sorrow for fading traditions, and through grief at the transformation of living landscape into commodity. The study concludes that rap has become a mode of ecological expression capable of sustaining hope amid environmental destruction. The formal characteristics of the genre enable both artists to remember, grieve, and call for change at the same time, thereby fostering collective agency.
Keywords: *Hip-Hop Ecologies, Uttarakhand, Environmental Memory, Ecological Mourning, Climate Justice, Vernacular Expression*

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I. Introduction

The contemporary scope of rap music as a form of cultural expression and environmental resistance has significantly gained attention. The genre of rap music has historically been associated with urban resistance and to critique the socio-political conditions of the society. Rap music has profoundly been instrumental in voicing the issues of inequality, identity and social recognition of the marginalised (Madhusudan 45). However, in recent years the genre of rap has moved from urban origins to engage with much crucial concerns, highlighting the environmental injustice and loss of ecological consciousness.

For generations, the communities living in the Himalayas possessed ways of listening that reflected deep spiritual bonds. They addressed mountains as deities, rivers as mothers, forests as kin, fostering respect and admiration (Nepali 286-87). Their songs, prayers, and daily practices were forms of translation—ways of converting the nonhuman world into human ritual and speech. However, colonial cartography overwrote indigenous place-names with survey numbers. Development economics renamed living landscapes as 'natural resources,' a phrase that performs epistemic violence by erasing nonhuman agency.

II. Rap As An Emerging Mode Of Ecological Expression

2.1 The Emergence of Rap in Environmental Discourse

Rap music originated in the marginalized communities of the Bronx, New York, during the 1970s. For decades, scholarship treated hip-hop as an essentially urban genre, concerned primarily with the social conditions of inner-city life (Rose 45). However, as rap traveled across the globe, it adapted to diverse local contexts—including rural and mountainous regions where environmental destruction has become a pressing concern (Mitchell 12).

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has begun to attend to what might be called "hip-hop ecologies"—the intersection of hip-hop culture with environmental discourse and activism (Steinhilber 38). This emergence is not accidental. Rap possesses formal characteristics that make it particularly suited to articulating

environmental loss, particularly in contexts where official discourse has failed to register the scale and urgency of ecological crisis. As one scholar notes, discussions on ecology have increasingly "found their space in rap music," with artists using the genre to explore human relationships with the environment and generate discourses of resistance (Madhusudan 45). Other researchers have examined how contemporary rappers express their "social ecologies" through themes of cultural inheritance and structural violence, demonstrating the genre's capacity for environmental critique (Greve 74). The emergence of "eco hip-hop" as a pedagogical and activist tool further confirms that rap has moved beyond urban social commentary to engage with climate justice and ecological sustainability (Eusterbrock 294).

2.2 Formal Characteristics of Rap as Ecological Expression

Rap possesses four formal characteristics that render it particularly adequate to the articulation of environmental destruction. Rap music has four qualities that make it well-suited to speaking about environmental destruction. First, it uses everyday language, speaking in local dialects rather than scientific jargon, which allows it to name specific places and losses that official discourse renders invisible (Rose 45). Second, the beat keeps returning. Rap's repetitive structure mirrors the slow, incremental nature of environmental harm—what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—unfolding gradually without spectacle, and rap's insistence refuses to let listeners look away (Nixon 2).

Third, rap says "I." The first-person address enables the rapper to speak as the mountain or the forest, transforming the nonhuman world from object to subject. When nature speaks through the artist, the message becomes harder to dismiss (Hila the Earth). Fourth, the recording persists. Unlike oral testimony that fades with memory, a recorded track endures, carrying the names of places long after they have disappeared from official maps (Mitchell 12). Together, these qualities make rap a distinctive and urgent voice for damaged landscapes.

2.3 Rap in the Himalayas: A Growing Movement

The Indian state of Uttarakhand has emerged as a significant site where rap music and ecological discourse converge. The region has endured decades of environmental transformation: forests cleared for infrastructure, rivers dammed for hydropower generation, and hillsides destabilized by unregulated construction. The Kedarnath disaster of 2013, which claimed thousands of lives, was not a natural calamity in any conventional sense. Rather, it resulted from incremental environmental degradation that accumulated over time before culminating in catastrophe (Drew 67).

The underground rap scene in Uttarakhand has been characterized as "the next big wave" in Indian hip-hop. Two artists, in particular, exemplify the depth of rap's engagement with ecological loss in the region. Saksham Dhyani, through his track Rota Pahaad (The Weeping Mountain), gives voice to the mountain itself as a weeping subject. Journalistic coverage describes the song as bringing "a big wave of resistance and a strong voice against oppression and destruction of nature" (Sen). Dhyani's work reflects upon "the theme of destruction of natural resources" and critiques how "nature getting replaced with buildings and cement spells death for the future generation" (Sen). The track implicitly references the Kedarnath disaster and the forest clearing that preceded it, performing the archival and testimonial functions identified in the preceding section.

Fidato, through his track Mero Pahaad (My Mountain), adopts a different but complementary strategy. Where Dhyani's title emphasizes the mountain's capacity for tears, Fidato's possessive pronoun asserts a relationship of belonging that development discourse has sought to sever. The title declares that the mountain is not an object to be extracted but a relative to be protected. This possessive claim transforms passive belonging into active guardianship, performing the movement function that distinguishes rap as ecological witness.

The emergence of Dhyani and Fidato is not an isolated phenomenon. It belongs to a longer tradition of Himalayan environmental expression—one that includes the Chipko movement of the 1970s, when villagers physically prevented logging through nonviolent resistance; the folk songs that encoded ecological knowledge across successive generations; and the contemporary activism surrounding water conservation and forest protection. What distinguishes Dhyani and Fidato is their chosen medium. They inherit this tradition but translate it into the vernacular of hip-hop. The act of tree-hugging becomes the nodding head. The village assembly becomes the digital comment section. The cry remains unchanged, but its amplification is new

III. Exploring Memory, Mourning, And Movement In Mero Pahaad And Rota Pahaad

The two songs examined in this section—Fidato's Mero Pahaad and Saksham Dhyani's Rota Pahaad offer complementary approaches to ecological witness. Both songs are structured around the intertwined themes of memory, mourning, and movement. Neither theme operates in isolation. The songs remember what is being lost, grieve that loss in real time, and call for response. This section analyzes each theme across both songs, drawing on the complete lyrics to demonstrate how Fidato and Dhyani perform the work of hip-hop eco-witness.

3.1 Memory: Archiving What is Being Erased

Both songs perform the work of memory by documenting what official discourse has rendered invisible. Fidato's *Mero Pahaad* opens with a question that carries its own answer: "Kan k holuyopahado ko vikas" (How is this development of the mountains?). The question is not seeking information. It is an accusation dressed as confusion. The singer cannot understand how what is being done to the mountains can be called by the name of progress. The word *vikas* (development) is placed under suspicion from the very first line.

The opening stanza immediately names what is being lost: sanskriti (culture), dev devta (gods and deities), pittar (ancestors). Fidato presents these as inseparable categories. They are the fabric of Pahadi life, woven together and rooted in the pahadokiGodh (the lap of the mountains). The abandonment of this fabric is presented as a mystery. Why have we left? The question implicates the listener. The abandonment is collective, not individual.

Dhyani's Rota Pahaad performs a similar archival function through its opening declaration: "Me rota pahad, me rota garhwal, me rota kumaun, me rota jaunsaar" (I am the weeping mountain, I am weeping Garhwal, I am weeping Kumaun, I am weeping Jaunsaar). The enumeration of specific regions grounds the memory in geographical precision. This is not an abstract cry. It is the cry of particular places, each with its own history, its own dialect, its own pantheon of deities. Dhyani refuses to collapse these distinct cultural-ecological zones into a single undifferentiated category.

Both songs document the transformation of land into commodity. Fidato sings that land is being sold, that the region is being broken into pieces- khand-khand, fragment by fragment. The spiritual wholeness of dev bhoomi (land of the gods) is being dismantled through economic transactions. Dhyani echoes this: "meribhumibikauhua, garhgarhsamapt" (my land has been sold, fort by fort, completely destroyed). The phrase garhgarh references the region's history of hill fortresses—sites of autonomy and resistance against external domination. Their destruction signifies not only physical loss but the end of a political geography of self-rule.

Fidato's memory extends to cultural practices and their erosion. He asks why there are no longer customs of jaagar (waking ceremonies) and how the sound of dhol-dhon (traditional drums) will ever be heard again. These are not merely cultural artifacts. They are the sonic texture of Pahadi life—the sounds through which communities have marked time, honored deities, and maintained connection to place. Their loss is the loss of a whole system of meaning. Fidato also mourns the potential loss of language itself: "How will our language remain?" The question encodes the understanding that without language, the relationship to land cannot be articulated or transmitted.

Dhyani's most politically charged archival line documents state violence that exceeds economic exploitation: "khulle me goli or Yuvaki lash" (open gunfire and the corpse of a youth). The couplet records violence that cannot be incorporated into developmentalist narratives of progress. The Yuvaki lash (corpse of a youth) archives state violence as a component of the ecological crisis, refusing the separation of environmental and political analysis.

Both songs also document the social consequences of ecological transformation. Fidato sings that fields are being divided, that the original inhabitants no longer remain, that in the empty mountains the Pahadi population is decreasing. The mountain is suna (empty). Dhyani's refrain catalogues what has been lost: hope, definition, village, Ganga, Yamuna, waterfall, water, air, speech, mountain ridge, field, forest. The comprehensiveness of the list argues that no dimension of Pahadi existence remains untouched.

3.2 Mourning: The Public Performance of Grief

The mourning in both songs operates through multiple registers. Fidato's most fundamental register is interrogative bewilderment. The repeated question—"Kan k holuyovikas" (How is this development?)—is not seeking information but expressing grief. The singer cannot understand how what is being done can be called by the name of progress. The question itself is an act of mourning for a concept that has been corrupted beyond recognition.

Dhyani's mourning operates through the first-person declaration "Me rota pahad" (I am the weeping mountain). The first-person framing transforms weeping from a description of emotion into an enactment of grief. The singer does not report that the mountain weeps. He weeps as the mountain. This eliminates the distance between observer and observed, witness and sufferer.

Both songs mourn the contradiction between Uttarakhand's sacred identity and the destruction it suffers. Fidato calls the region dev lok, the land of the gods yet immense destruction is happening there. He asks why, if the gods reside in this place, such devastation is permitted. The question has no answer within the framework of piety. The mourning here is for the withdrawal of divine protection, or for the blindness of those who claim to serve the gods while destroying their abode.

Dhyani extends this mourning to the loss of the sacred pantheon itself. He names specific local deities: Bhairav, Narsingh, Dhan Singh. These are not the pan-Hindu gods of urban temples but the gods of particular hills, particular villages, particular watersheds. Their loss is the loss of the specific, the irreplaceable. The

conclusion is stark that states, sanskritichipege (culture will be hidden). The verb suggests erasure through neglect rather than active destruction. Culture does not die in a single spectacular event. It recedes, becomes invisible, ceases to be transmitted.

Both songs mourn the transformation of living landscapes into dead commodities. Fidato sings of soil being sold at market price, of those who buy and sell it speaking only of profit. The reduction of maati (soil) to exchangeable value is presented as a sacrilege. One couplet delivers a particularly acute mourning for the digital consumption of the mountains: "In search of peace, rivers and mountains have been sold / And on Instagram reels, people are praising the views." The mourning here is double—for the mountains themselves and for the distance between image and reality that allows distant viewers to praise what they do not truly see.

Dhyani registers similar mourning: "Sukoonkitalash me NadiPahadbikchukehai" (In search of peace, rivers and mountains have been sold). The irony is that the search for sukoon (peace, tranquility) has resulted in the sale of that which provides peace. The mourning is for the self-defeating logic of development that consumes its own foundation.

Both songs also mourn the transformation of water. Fidato sings of the river being sold for its light and becoming a lake, the conversion of flowing water into stagnant reservoir. A river is alive. A lake held behind a dam is a corpse. Dhyani's catalogue includes meri ganga, merijamuna, merajharna, merupani (my Ganga, my Yamuna, my waterfall, my water are all lost). The mourning extends to the loss of youth and water, the two sources of vitality. Fidato laments that both now exist only as written stories, old tales. They survive in memory but not in reality.

The mourning in both songs is also self-reflexive. Fidato questions what "bad fate" the community has nurtured. The question implicates the listener. We have raised this fate. We have fed it. Dhyani addresses the goddess Chandrabadni with an apology: "Meri devi me Chama kari, teribhoomi sab dooshithuyegi" (My goddess, forgive me, but your land will become completely polluted). The request for forgiveness acknowledges that what the singer is about to say that the land will be polluted is itself a violation. But he says it anyway. The truth must be spoken even at the cost of ritual impropriety.

3.3 Movement: The Call to Wake, Demand, and Stand

The third function of both songs is movement, the call to move from witness to action. Fidato's song shifts decisively from memory and mourning to mobilization in a passage marked by the repetition of abhi (now, still). He declares: "There is still time, wake up / There is still time, demand / Make this your resolve, take a stand." The repetition creates urgency without panic. The progression is carefully constructed: jaag (wake), mang(demand), thaan le (take a stand). Each verb presupposes the previous. Waking without demanding is passive. Demanding without standing is performative.

Fidato appeals to intergenerational responsibility: "Go and do such work that the coming generations take your name." The addressee is called to act not for personal benefit but for the sake of those who will inherit the landscape—or its ruins. The object of protection is specified as comprehensive: land-mountain, river-air, ancestors' traditions, sacred places. The movement called for is not single-issue environmentalism but the defense of an entire lifeworld.

Fidato names what remains as motivation for action: "only the passion of being Pahadi." Culture is drowning. The only thing left is the stubborn refusal to stop being Pahadi even when everything that made Pahadi identity possible is being destroyed. This junoon (passion, obsession) is positioned as the affective fuel for movement.

Dhyani's movement operates through different but complementary mechanisms. The most fundamental is the act of speaking itself. The declaration "Me rota pahad" is not a lament but a claim. The mountain speaks. That speaking, in a context where the mountain has been rendered mute by developmentalist discourse, is already resistance. The first-person voice restores agency to a landscape that has been reduced to resource.

Dhyani shifts into Garhwali for his closing passage, and this linguistic shift is itself an act of movement. Hindi is the language of address to the outside, to the state, to the nation, to the global audience. Garhwali is the language of interiority, of self-assertion, of direct address to the community. He declares: "Meeterusatychhaun, teruaadhaar, teruastitvachhaun." (I am your truth, your foundation, your existence). The declaration positions the mountain as constitutive of Pahadi identity. Without the mountain, the Pahadi has no ground to stand on, no identity to claim.Dhyani makes a crucial distinction: "Mayeena.Tvepaudlimerijaroorat, mee ajar amarterichhodisanskritichhaun." (I am not your need. I am the immortal culture you have abandoned). A need can be satisfied, outsourced, replaced. A need is instrumental. But the mountain is not instrumental. The mountain is the culture. The singer identifies himself with what has been abandoned.

The closing lines of Rota Pahaad issue a conditional invitation that functions as both warning and appeal: "If you come, then come at least once / For a wedding, for a festival, even that is enough / Otherwise I will also go with your ancestors." The singer does not demand permanent return. A single visit would

acknowledge relationship. It would keep the connection alive. But if even that does not happen, the mountain threatens to depart. The warning is not anger. It is grief articulating its own condition.

Both songs also deliver sharp political critique. Fidato juxtaposes discourse and practice: the government speaks of dharm (righteousness, duty), but its actions are aadharmi (unrighteous). The gap between word and deed is exposed and named. The reference to the Kedarnath disaster is specific: "No service in disaster / This is the way of rising in Kedar." The critique extends to the commodification of pilgrimage. The four sacred shrines the Char Dhaam have become sites of viyapar (business, commerce) rather than devotion. The word *Dhong (hypocrisy) names the gap between what is claimed and what is done.

3.4 The Interplay of Memory, Mourning, and Movement

The three themes do not operate in sequence but in simultaneity across both songs. In Fidato's work, the question "Kan k holuyovikas" is simultaneously an act of memory (recording what has been lost under this name), mourning (expressing bewilderment and grief at the gap between word and reality), and movement (refusing to accept the official discourse without question). In Dhyani's work, the declaration "Me rota pahad" is simultaneously an act of memory (the mountain remembers what has been done to it), mourning (the mountain weeps for that loss), and movement (the mountain refuses to suffer in silence).

Memory without mourning is cold documentation. Mourning without memory is grief without object. Movement without memory and mourning is action without grounding. Both Mero Pahaad and Rota Pahaad hold all three together. They do not separate analysis from affect. They do not separate documentation from demand. They remember what is being lost, grieve that loss in real time, and call for response—all at once, in the same breath, on the same beat.

The weeping mountain and the mountain claimed as "mine" are, in the end, the same mountain. The tears and the claim are the same response. The song does not solve the crisis. It does not offer a program or a policy. It testifies, insistent, vernacular, first-person testimony that refuses to be silent. The song ends, but the cry continues. The question for listeners is whether we have learned to hear.

IV. Conclusion

The two songs examined in this paper—Saksham Dhyani's Rota Pahaad and Fidato's Mero Pahaad emerge from the same distressed landscape of Uttarakhand, yet each articulates the ecological crisis through a distinct register of address. Dhyani speaks as the mountain. Fidato speaks for the relationship between the mountain and its people. Together, they constitute a complete ecological voice one that weeps from the wound and one that claims belonging as the ground of resistance.

What unites these songs is their refusal of silence. In a context where developmentalist discourse has rendered the mountain a mute resource, where policy documents speak of vikas without registering the bodies and forests and water sources consumed in its name, Dhyani and Fidato insist on speaking. Their medium is rap—vernacular, rhythmic, insistently first-person. Their message is memory, mourning, and movement entwined.

Rota Pahaad performs the work of memory through its archival catalogue of loss: the roots made nameless, the crops destroyed, the land sold fort by fort, the forest taken in the name of development, the corpse of a youth left by open gunfire. The song mourns through its titular declaration—"Me rota pahad"—and through the litany of what has been taken: hope, village, rivers, water, air, speech, ridge, field, forest, deities, culture itself. And it moves through its shift into Garhwali, its declaration that the mountain is the listener's truth and foundation and existence, its conditional warning that if the people do not return—even for a wedding, even for a festival—the mountain will go with their ancestors.

Mero Pahaad performs memory through its documentation of the contradiction between sacred identity and material destruction, through its recording of the transformation of river to lake and community to emptiness, through its archive of the sounds that are fading—the ‘jaagar’, the ‘dhol-dhon’, the language itself. The song mourns through its interrogative bewilderment—"Kan k holuyovikas?" (How is this development?)—and through its lament for the youth and water that now exist only as old tales. And it moves through its direct call to wake, demand, and stand, its naming of the government as unrighteous, its repetitive insistence that refuses closure.

The two songs differ in strategy but share a structure. Both hold memory, mourning, and movement together in simultaneity. Neither allows one function to dominate the others. Memory without mourning would be cold documentation. Mourning without memory would be grief without object. Movement without memory and mourning would be action without grounding. Dhyani and Fidato refuse these reductions. Their songs remember what is being lost, grieve that loss in real time, and call for response—all at once, in the same breath, on the same beat.

What emerges from this analysis is a recognition that rap has become a mode of ecological expression adequate to the specific challenges of mountain destruction. The genre's vernacular directness speaks in the

languages of the foothills. Its rhythmic insistence enacts the temporality of slow violence. Its testimonial first-person gives the mountain a voice. Its archival function ensures that the witness endures. Dhyani and Fidato are not anomalies. They are exemplars of a broader movement, one in which the cry of the damaged mountain finds a new medium, a new audience, a new insistence.

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