



Humanism Versus Environmentalism - The Hungry Tide

* D. S. Bindu

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sethu Institute of Technology, Pulloor

The relation between nature and society plays a prominent role in a country like India with ecosystems ranging from Himalayas in North to the Indian Ocean in South and from Sunder bans in the East to the dry Thar of the West. Moreover human culture is connected to the environment affecting it and also affected by it. Nature and culture cannot be isolated. This paper is focused on ecocriticism through one of the novels of Amitav Ghosh; *The Hungry Tide*. Amitav Ghosh brings out the interrelationship between human, nature and animal worlds. In his novel nature is proved to be stronger than manpower. Man is helpless in front of natural calamities. The life in Sunder bans and nature is weaved together to such a great extent that the inhabitants are forced to accept nature's bounty and adversity. Nature is both destroyer and preserver. The relation is a global concern that is deliberately neglected by politicians and is leading to the doom of mankind.

Amitav Ghosh takes us to Sunder bans which is otherwise known as the tide country. The fresh water and salt water, river and sea blend together. During partition in 1947 mass migration of East Bengali Hindus to West Bengal in India took place. It was especially the higher class Hindus who were persecuted by low class Muslim tenants. They fled and found refuge in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives of Calcutta. But low class Hindus 'squatted' on public and private land. The migration continued in 50s and 60s and after Mujib Rahman's massacre and Zia Ur Rahman's rise to power in Bangladesh the last remnants of low class Bengali Hindus fled to West Bengal. The congress government under B.C. Roy sent them to in hostile and infertile areas like Dandakaranya which included parts of Orissa and former Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh now in Chattisgarh.

The politicians promised that if they won the elections they would settle them in West Bengal and Jyoti Basu, demanded in 1974 in a public meeting that they should be allowed to settle in Sunder bans. But when they came to power they did not keep up the promise. The refugees congregated at the railway stations to move to Sunder bans. But the government denied the basic necessities like food and water and they were asked to return. Many of them escaped to various places but some went to Sunder bans. The refugees who went to Sunder bans had relatives there who were brought by the Britishers to clear the forest for the cultivation. The refugees worked in fraternity with islanders and built huts, cultivated and earned through fishing. They dug tube wells, established fishing industry, salt pans, dispensaries, schools and so on. They worked together to carve a niche for themselves. The effort taken was only short lived.

Out of 1, 50,000 refugees, 30,000 encountered government opposition under the leadership of Satish Mondal, a sympathizer of communist party. The government declared that Morichjhampi was "unauthorized and violation of the forest act". The government declared that the permanent settlement would disturb the forest wealth and ecological balance. The police deprived the settlers of food and water,

they were tear-gassed, their tube wells destroyed and boats sunk. People who tried to cross the river were shot. Several hundreds died and their bodies were thrown into the river. These stories never appear in history. This issue is voiced by Amitav Ghosh. He brings out the troubling present using history as the tool to assess the linked past events. The theme of the novel ranges from history to the current events which he reinterprets and weaves together. Though the novel deals with the danger of Sunder bans with the lurking tiger in the jungle and harmless looking but deadly crocodiles in the water, the fisherman who eke out a living, the study of Dolphins by Piya, a cetologist, Kanai a translator, the core of the novel lies in the ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugees who had run away from the Dandakaranya refugee camps to Morichjhampi as they felt that the latter region would provide them with familiar envisions and therefore a better life. This is a reality which is almost forgotten.

Ghosh blends ethnography and history. Ethnography in which Ghosh delineates a series of cultural features of the tide country's microcommunity. History intervenes in the particular area of Utopia and class conflict. It speaks about the Utopia community founder in the Sunder bans at the beginning of the 20th century by the visionary Scot Daniel Hamilton. 'S'Daniel's schooling was in Scotland, a harsh cold and rocky place. His teachers taught him that life's most important lesson is "labour conquers everything". A time came when Daniel Hamilton with his countrymen had to leave his native land to seek his fortune and he chose India. He came to Calcutta and joined Mackinnon & McKenzie, a company with which he had a family connection. This company sold tickets for the P&O shipping line, which was then one of the largest in the world. Young Daniel worked hard and sold many first class, second class, third class, steerage tickets. For every ship that sailed from Calcutta there was only one ticket agent to sell hundreds of tickets. Soon S'Daniel became the head of the company and one of the richest men in India.

The contribution of Kanai's uncle, Nirmal and his aunt, Nilima to the places and the inhabitants in the novel is commendable. Nirmal was originally from Dhaka but had come to Calcutta when he was a student. The events of partition separated him from his family and he had preferred to stay in Calcutta where he had carved a niche for himself as a leftist intellectual and a writer of promise. He was teaching literature in Ashusthosh College when his path crossed Nilma's. She happened to be a student of one of his classes. The elitist poet Rilke and the revolutionaries socialist Marx attracted Nirmal equally. Within a few years of Nirmal and Nilima's arrival in Lusibari, an island in Sunder bans, zamindaris were abolished and large landholdings were broken up by law. What remained of Hamilton estate was soon crippled by lawsuits. Nirmal had founded a union which continued to grow, drawing in more and more members. The union started offering a number of services-medical, paralegal, agricultural. The movement grew so large that it had to be reorganized. A trust was formed and it was named as Badabon Development Trust.

As days rolled on Nirmal was enticed towards the plight of refugees.

The plight of the refugees is presented through the words of Kusum. As days rolled on dozens of police boats encircled the island. They used tear gas and rubber bullet and the settlers were forcibly prevented from bringing basic necessities like rice or water to Morichjhapi. Moreover boats were sunk and people were killed. It seemed as if war had broken out in the silence of the tide country. Kusum starved herself in order to feed her son, Fokir. Kusum kept Fokir indoors because of the swarming police. He managed to go outside and catch a few crabs and fish. Kusum subsisted on a kind of wild green known as jadu-palong. These leaves were palatable at first but proved deadly in the end and caused severe dysentery. The inhabitants took the precaution of buying some essential provisions like rice; daal, oil and it was stored in Kusum's dwelling. But Kusum would have none of it. She roused herself on her mat, and hefted some of the bags on her shoulders. According to Kusum the worst part of the struggle was the announcements by policemen that the existence of the refugees was less worth than dust. The inhuman announcement "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid by people from all around the world" struck like hammer in the hearts of the hungry people. Kusum began to interrogate herself if being born as human being was a fault, if the desire to live like human beings was a fault and if animals were more important than human beings.

The issue still exists as to whether it is necessary to preserve flora and fauna at the expense of tribal and dispossessed. This issue is voiced through Nirmal and Nilima. Kusum, one of the refugees approaches Nilima for medical help. She declines as she didn't want to get into trouble by opposing the government. She is not in a position to oppose the government because she needs the help of the government to run the hospital in Lusibari. She explains Kusum that the people are squatters and that the land doesn't belong to them. She advises her not to seize it as it is government property. But Nirmal opposes and he wonders if the dreams of the settlers were less valuable than those of a foreigner like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich Sahib and the people were only impoverished refugees. Government official and policemen often visited the place to induce them to leave. They tried to break their unity by offering bribes and when it failed they resorted to physical violence. Kusum wondered about the people who loved animals to kill human beings.

Wild life and wilderness area face crisis but are the tribals also responsible?

Huge infrastructure projects and dollar earning tourism projects are being advocated in land where traditional communities are being displaced in the name of wildlife preservation. They pretend to ignore that the forest reserves are exploited by poachers and timber merchants by bribing forest officials. When Piya sees the tiger killed by the villagers for having harmed humans and livestock, her concern for the natural rights of animals over shadows her sensitivity to human life. Her European-American concern for ecological preservation dominates humanism but later

the cyclone in which Fokir is killed helps Piya to realize the insignificance of individual human effort. They realize that science cannot meet the fury of nature.

The novel responds to the social and economic disparities both in India's past and its present. The novel is a testimony to the historically unresolved sufferings of the rural poor. It is a transnational struggle of victims. The novel exposes the plight of the tide country's marginalized people. Marxism fails at many situations. NGO established by Nilima Badabon trust highlight a pragmatic way to make contributions through institutions and community building. But the success of the trust is limited because Nilima procures funds through governmental support. She has to compromise with the government. She is not bothered about the massacre in Morichjhapi. The Morichjhapi massacre resulted in large scale raping and killing on the island. The event was documented by the journalists, the crime remained unpunished and an enquiry has never been held. It has lapsed into oblivion. The notebook of Nirmal represents the failure of institutional academia for such atrocities. Every year myriads of people are killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. Proximity of human being with nature is set with historical past, geographically blending human and natural ecosystem involving characters hailing from Delhi and the US. Amitav Ghosh has highlighted the plight of the subalterns of Sunder bans in West Bengal, where socio-political turmoils are proportional to the tides. He focuses on the large sections of the Indian society that has been trampled down and oppressed by the storms of history. He challenges the power and prestige, crusade for the impoverished and displaced and created spaces for their plight to be heard.

Everyday thousands of mangrove forests reemerge as the tides reach several islands and reemerge hours later. Human beings cannot build a home there but the unwanted subaltern dispossessed and displaced have no where else to go. As they can't go else where, they try to make a living from the barren, unyielding, salty tracts of land. They are fisherman who depend on fish and crabs for sustenance. Their life is unpredictable and survival dangerous. The refugees made the land their home and there is an exposure to the incessant battle against storms and tides. In addition, they have the fear of man-eating tigers and dangerous crocodiles. The hungry people begin to interrogate if fauna and flora were more important than human beings. But the inhabitants lead a life transcending class, creed, caste and nationality. Man has the spirit to rebuild and reconstruct.

It is stated in a blog The Hungry Corporation that the Left Front claimed that the island of Morichjhapi had to be preserved as a forest reserve. A government run by the same Left Front planned to handover a substantial part of the Sunder bans to an industrial house like the Sahara Parivar, contrary to the ideology which would turn large stretches of the forest, soaked in the blood of evicted refugees, into a playground for the affluent.

The readers are left in a dilemma between the conservation and the helplessness of human being. Amitav Ghosh presents the political sham that is involved in the name of protecting animals and their natural habitat at the cost of innocent lives.

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