

CONFLICT BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN AND ENVIRONMENTALIST IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

Thoudam Chanu Alpa
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Janki Devi Memorial College,
Delhi University,
New Delhi, India

The past few decades have witnessed a sharpened interest concerning issues related to environment. The vast number of books, coverage of environmental issues on news media, and the number of environmental organisations blossoming all over the world speak of this dramatic increase in interest. According to David L Sills, in his essay “The Environmental Movement and Its Critics”, one of the earliest distinctions that emerged in the environmental movement was between the preservationists and the utilitarians. While the preservationists were mainly concerned with keeping the natural environment free from any human activities, the utilitarians believed that nature should be used, governed and renewed wisely. The preservationist movement faced a lot of criticism from ecologist like Aldo Leopold for its elite members, with many others claiming that the movement was an upper-middle class social movement which is merely concerned with saving beautiful land and animals so that they can be enjoyed in leisure. Leopold, infact, points out in his text *A Sand County Almanac* that the prevailing idea of conservation goes hand in hand with the process of capitalism in that the scarcity of the wilderness is turned into a profitable and consumable commodity through advertisement and promotion.

In contrast to the preservationists and utilitarians movements, a new environmental movement, the 'deep ecology' movement came into being led by figures such as Arne Naess, David Brower, Robinson Jeffers and Barry Lopez. According to the deep ecologists, the living environment as a whole is a subtle balance of complex inter-relationships of human and its environment. The movement is against the idea of anthropocentric environmentalism which is concerned with conservation of the environment only to be exploited for human purposes. It advocates the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their usefulness to human needs and that the environment as a whole should be respected and given its right to live and flourish. Deep ecology movement, however, in its effort to counter the earlier anthropocentric environmental movement almost gives too much value to nature with the result that it sometimes sounds completely indifferent and insensitive to questions of human sufferings. While propagating its ideas, deep ecologists seem only to take into consideration the environment issues of North America and Europe. This blinkered perspective has made critics like Rob Nixon to remark in his essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism”, “Prodigious amount of American environmental writings and criticism makes expansive gestures while remaining amnesiac towards non American geographies that vanished upon the intellectual skyline”. There seems to be a failure to see that relations between humans and environment differ from place to

place and that the blanket solutions the deep ecologists have suggested cannot be applied in every part of the globe.

In response to such contradictions and drawbacks of the deep ecology movement, another approach to environmental issues took shape during the 1960s and 1970s. The new movement, which came to be known as social ecology movement, explains how environmental problems are closely related to social, economic, and political problems. In his essay “What is Social Ecology?” Bookchin defines social ecology as follows:

Social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems. It follows, from this view, that these ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today—apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes.

Influenced by Bookchin's ideas, scholars like Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier have put forward the claim that there are distinctive differences between the environments of the Europe and north American and those of the global south. The differences, they claimed, is determined by the disparity in the wealth of the people in these regions. The human-nature relationship in places like Asia, Africa and Latin America is very different from the ones in Europe and North America. In a country like India where majority of the population is dependent on nature for livelihood, it becomes very important to understand the complex and delicate relation between nature and human being. Understanding this relation could help in maintaining an equilibrium for the survival of both. This interrelationship between the worlds of human, nature and animal, and the dilemma of conserving one at the risk of destroying another is brought up by Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Arnapurna Rath and Milind Malshe best summarize the novel in their essay ‘Chronotopes of “Places” and “Non-places”’, “*The Hungry Tide* by Ghosh is a unique combination of anthropology, migration, travel, environmentalism, ethnography, photography and landscape; wrapped under the cloak of fiction.”

The Hungry Tide gives a glimpse of the lives of the inhabitants of the islands of the Sundarbans. It provides the readers a picture of an uninhabitable place like the Sundarbans and of those people who are so dependent on its resources for survival that they risk their life everyday living in these crocodile and tiger infested islands. Each year, Ghosh illustrates in the beginning of the novel “dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles”. He talks about how in Sunderbans hunger and catastrophe was a way of life with most families subsisting on a single daily meal. Hunger drove the inhabitants of the islands of Sundarbans to hunting and fishing with the result that they became preys to other wild animals’ hunger. Infact, so unpredictable and so frequent are deaths that when men go fishing it is the custom for their wives to change into the garments of widowhood.

The backdrop of the novel is the 1979 ruthless suppression and massacre of East Pakistan refugees who had come to Morichjhapi, one of the islands of the Sunderbans, with the hope that they can find refuge in this part of the region. The Morichjhapi episode, the fate of Sunderbans with its human and wildlife populations, are all intrinsically linked and goes back to the history of Partition of India, and the events that followed in its aftermath. In *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annu Jalais in his article ‘Dwelling on Morichjhapi’ analyses the events that led up to

the Morichjhapi massacre. After the Partition of India in 1947, when East Pakistan became more or less a place for Bangla speaking Muslim majority, Hindu refugees were left with no choice than to relocate in India, mainly in West Bengal. While the rich, upper class Hindus got easily relocated with the help of their rich relatives and with their strong caste connections, the poor who belonged to the lower class faced opposition from the ruling government, and were forcibly relocated in uninhabitable and infertile places like Dandakaranyaa, semi-arid rocky place in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. In the novel, Nilima, aunt of one of the protagonists, Kanai, describes how in Bangladesh, these refugees were victimised and oppressed by both Muslim communalists and by Hindu upper class, and how the so called resettlement was more like a concentration camp or a prison with security guards surrounding them round the clock to forbid them from leaving. When the refugees arrived in West Bengal, the then opposition party, CPI (M) supported them in their appeal for settlement in the Sunderbans against the ruling government. However, when the CPI (M) came into power in 1977, not only did they go back to their promise, but also got hostile towards the refugees. This eventually led to the violent eviction of the refugees from Morichjhapi leading to the infamous massacre. But, what could have been the reason behind this unfortunate incident?

In 1975, Morichjhanpi, an island in the northern-most forested part of Sundarbans, had been cleared by government to grow coconut and tamarisk to boost the state revenue. And the stay of the refugees meant loss of revenue for the government and hence the necessity to evict them. According to Ramachandra Guha in *Social Ecology*, a collection of essays, two types of conflicts can be there around the use of forest: one originating because of intensification of forest exploitation, and the second arising from the conservation process of forest and its wildlife. And in the case of Morichjhapi, both exploitation and conservation of forest and its wildlife seemed to have led to the massacre. The main reason, as per the government, for the eviction of the refugees from Morichjhapi was the dire need to protect the Bengal Tigers. For years, the Sunderbans, home to the endangered Bengal Tigers, and numerous other flora and fauna, had been a global concern because of the dangers being posed to its ecosystem due to human activities. The ecosystem of the Sunderbans is peculiar; it is a place where fresh water and salt water, river and sea blend together, and forms peculiar habitation for numerous aquatic and non-aquatic living beings. In the novel, Piya, a cetologist and one of the protagonists, remembers coming across a study which showed that there were more species of fish in the Sunderbans than could be found in the whole of Europe. The reason for this being that, the intermingling of salt water and fresh water leads to the creation of hundreds of different ecological niches making it conducive for different types of species to exist (Ghosh, 125). This unusual feature makes Sunderbans an even more precious ecosystem to be saved and protected. The animals that coexist in this ecosystem are very different from their counterparts in other countries, thus requiring extra care and security not only from Indian government but also from various international environmental organisations. Any form of disruption in this ecosystem is deemed to have disastrous effects on these beings, and hence a requirement to stop any human activities that could harm it. Thus, due to its unique and rich biodiversity and to protect the tigers, the tiger conservation project came up in Sundarbans in 1970s. But nowhere was Morichjhapi island a part of the core tiger reserve (Jalais, 5). The reason, then, on why the government opposed the influx of refugees could be the fear that they would jeopardise the prospects of the state's economic growth. For the refugees, the whole of the Morichjhapi incident, was an act of betrayal from the part of the government even if they tried to defend the act by claiming to give primacy to ecology. It seems to be of no surprise then that, in the year 2000, the same government handed

over large tracts of the Sundarbans to a private company for an ecotourism project which would generate huge income for the state.

Divya Anand in her essay ‘Words on Water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*’ points out that the novel in voicing the subaltern experience had the force of a political pamphlet which made the world aware of efforts being made to corporatize parts of the Sundarbans National Park, and that Ghosh published the novel in 2004, the same year when the corporate house Sahara India Parivar was poised to take over large areas of the Sundarbans to convert into an ecotourism village. Thus, the problem dealt in the novel is multifold. At the one level, it is international environmental bodies creating policies and sanctioning money to save nature and applying it on third world countries without actually taking into account the adverse effect it could have on people. On the other level, it is the issue of local leaders getting into dirty politics to take undue advantage with the help of corporate world with certain misfit laws to protect them. According to Guha in his introductory chapter to *Social Ecology*, in India there is huge class influence on natural resources where rich farmers, industrialists and bureaucrats “selectively channelize water, forests and other natural resources for their own benefit, but only at a substantial cost to the environment and disadvantaged social groups”(P-6). This fight over resources is increasing in contemporary India and this is where environmental movement in India differs from those of the West. While Indian environmental movements have their genesis in the conflict over natural resources, for the West it was an aesthetic and biological concern (Guha, p-6).

The Hungry Tide without undermining the fact that the Royal Bengal Tiger, a symbol of status as a national animal and an important part of the Sunderbans ecology, needs protection, effectively gives the unjust side of the same process of protecting the tigers at the cost of human lives and thus trivialising the human life. The novel brings up the core problem of whether it is necessary to preserve flora and fauna at the expense of poor and the dispossessed, and if it is enough to enact environmental laws without actually assessing the complexity of a situation. Very little or no effort is made to modify conservation process to bring greater harmony with the needs of people and the need to maintain an ecological balance. And these very problems and issues of wilderness conservation in areas populated by the socially and economically underprivileged are some of the many focal points of the novel.

In the aftermath of killing a tiger by the inhabitants in the novel, Kanai explains to Piya that both of them were also complicit in the act of the brutality “because it was people like you (Piya) who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I’m complicit because people like me- Indians of my class, that is - have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons. It is not hard to ignore the people who’re dying - after all they are the poorest of the poor” (Ghosh-301). Thus, a set of environmental policies uniformly applied to every country may end of doing more harm than fulfilling the very purpose they have been made for. That certain environment has a distinct relationship with its inhabitants is emphasised in the novel. In this context, the novel helps highlight the tragedy of the dispossessed, the violation of human rights that are inherent in the conservation efforts anywhere in the world, and the dilemma of prioritising man over animal, or vice-versa. The novel carefully presents the helplessness of the refugees who opt Sunderbans as a place for refuge, at the same time calling the readers’ attention to the effect of human settlement on the wildlife neither of which cannot be ignored. This is the dilemma the novel puts the readers into; this is where one sees a conflict between humanitarianism and environmentalism. But, nowhere in his narrative is Ghosh judgemental or takes side. He lets his

characters and through their takes on different situations present the various sides of the same story. It is through the characters that one gets a glimpse of clash in interests between humanitarianism and environmentalism, and also the complexity of bringing about a solution. Characters like Nirmal, Piya and Nilima are some of the characters through which this clash becomes evident. In the episode when Piya witnesses a tiger being brutally killed, her love for animals overshadows her sensitivity towards human life. She seems blind towards the fact that the same tiger has entered the human enclosure to attack them and their livestock and that killing it was an act of self-defence. Piya is no doubt sympathetic a person, but her job as a cetologist seem to make her sympathise more with the animal world than with the human beings. Her European-American concern for ecological preservation dominates humanism, but later the death of Fokir helps her to realize the insignificance of individual human effort. But, as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee points out in *Postcolonial Environments*, towards the end of the novel, Piya learns that the relationship between nature and culture is both interactive and dynamic, with humans trying to mould the environment to their own ends but always having to work within the limits set by nature. Earlier, she misunderstands the relationship between the villagers and the tiger. Until the moment of Fokir's death, she had prioritize the sufferings of animals only to realise in the end of the novel the significance of both the animal and the human world and their coexistence.

In the typical post-colonial world, the poor and dispossessed's existence holds no value for the state or the ruling class. And the inhabitants of Sunderbans belonged to the poorest lot. So deprived were they that, Pablo Mujherjee, in his essay 'Water/Land: Amitav Ghosh' points out, "Sundarbans has earned the name 'Kolkatar Jhi' or 'Calcutta's servant' because of the sheer numbers that migrate to the metropolis to find employment as domestic labourers because of severe poverty". The insignificance with which the refugees were treated is emphasised in the novel, when Kusum narrates how the police while attacking, starving and killing people announces that they were doing so because the refugees were endangering the tigers. This prioritising of tigers over human beings is what Jalais calls 'the anthropomorphisation of tigers in relation to the villagers'. Questioning this attitude, Ghosh enquires if caring for the environment means indifference towards the plight of human beings, or treating human life, especially impoverished people, cheaper than that of the animals. The novel shows how the answer to this question is a complicated one.

Considering all this, for the state at least, it did not seem too hard a choice to take up the banner for the Bengal tigers which bring in a lot of state revenue through eco-tourism projects and other multinational organisation. The concern for the environment then is nothing more than a charade at least in the case of Morichjhapi. In the novel, Moyna conveys her concern about the future of husband's fishing career because she is aware that now there are lots of traders who are using advanced means of fishing which would soon deprive the river of fish. Her statement shows how the river and the forest reserves are exploited by traders, poachers and timber merchants with the help corrupt forest officials, and yet the government seems to turn a blind eye to them which is highly unbecoming of a government who had been showing concern for the preservation of Sunderbans. The episode, when a tiger is killed brutally by the villagers Kanai points out that there would not only be arrest, fines and beatings but also enquiries about Piya, the foreigner. He explains further that the reason why the government officials would be curious about her would be to ensure that the news of the killing of the tiger would not reach the outside world, which otherwise would show the state's failure to protect the tigers and which could lead

to a stop to all the international fundings that the government have been reaping so far in the name of conservation.

As mentioned earlier, Ghosh does not take sides and presents the plight of both human and non-human in equal measure. Along with the misfortune of Morichjhapi, the novel also brings up the threats faced by the non-human world. Cases of elephants attacking crops, tigers killing livestock and men have been constant news in contemporary India. The reason for such attack can be deduced from the fact that people have been occupying more and more forest land for settlement, agriculture and other commercial purposes leaving very less of natural habitat for the wild life. *The Hungry Tides* gives vivid account of tigers getting trapped and killed by villagers for their own survival and rare dolphins killed by the coast guard's boat. This reveals the imperative need for conservation of wildlife too. Thus, the readers are left in a dilemma between the need to conserve environment and the necessity to provide for the helpless refugees. The different stands that each character takes in the novel seem correct and justified. If it is the tigers' hunger that keeps encroachers at bay and protects the forests, it is the same hunger that drives men into illegally entering the forests. In fictionalizing the tiger kill, Ghosh draws attention to this pitiful condition of both the human beings and the beasts.

However, almost in memory of the once idyllic relation man and animals had, Ghosh endows in his character Fokir the familiarity with the ebb and flow of the river, its creatures, and the legacy of centuries-old oral tradition. Fokir pays respect to nature, and seems to work in tandem with the course of nature; and his means of catching fish or crabs brings about the least of harm to the ecology. He is the perfect example of man living in harmony with nature, sharing with the non-human world the gift of nature rather than competing against each other. For him the river is his home and even though he lives by fishing he is no threat to his surroundings. The need of the hour then is to protect environment while ensuring that it does not deprive anybody of their land or livelihood, but which would rather help in increasing the productivity of the land, water and forest resources. The main concern while putting into application any conservation technique is to see how the same process of saving the environment could render service for the people inhabiting that particular place, and how people could be made to have role in protecting the environment while making them realise the benefit of doing the same. As R Sukumar notes in his essay 'Wildlife-Human Conflict in India':

Wildlife reserves have enormous potential for generating income from tourism, but so far the benefits from these have not reached the local people in the way it should have. If an adequate proportion of the income derived from tourism is retained by the local economy there would be increased motivation for people to value wildlife and their habitats rather than deplete them through over-grazing, wood cutting or illegal hunting. (p-315)

Resource management is another way through which there can be prevention of wastage of natural resources and can help avoid any kind of social conflict. Humans do not stand above or apart from nature but there is a close interaction between the two. In the novel a harmonic relationship is established between Fokir (indigenous people) and Piya representative of environment movements when they start working together and start understanding each other's work. Not only does Piya realise that Fokir's way of fishing is harmless to aquatic life but also that his knowledge about the river could be utilised to study the behaviour of the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins thus helping in their conservation. In the beginning, Piya had assumed that they might disrupt each other's work, but as their work progressed it proved otherwise: they were

assisting each other. Ghosh describes, “She saw something in his (Fokir’s) expression that told her that he too was amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and their purpose” (Ghosh-141). This brings them together as a partner with similar idea of home bound by no boundary or culture; they are ruled by the love of their profession and can easily connect with each other inspite of the language barrier.

Giving forest rights to the forest inhabitants is of utmost important because natural resources are their only source of livelihood and their identity, skills associated with it. The conservation, protection and maintenance of an area is a question of relation between society and the particular environment, not just the question of physical environment only. There should be reconciliation of development works with conservation. To borrow the words of ecologist Norman Myers from Sukumar’s essay, ‘Conservation should not only sustain the spirit but also the stomach.’

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