



## Postcolonial Friction between Ecological Consciousness and Geopolitical Realities/ Cruelties in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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### Abstract:

*In our Vedic literature and puranas, the personification of five essential elements of nature (sky, water, air, earth and, fire) were considered as life force. They have displayed the ecological concerns of human life. Ancient civilization had a profound veneration for these elements, which had constituted balanced ecosystem around them. The cultural heritage of India also has personified the earth as 'Mother', rivers as 'Lok Mata' and, forests as 'Brothers'. The evolution of syncretism between humankind and environment in ancient times had two eco-socio reasons: (i) cordial relationship between society and nature and, (ii) consortium within and among the society. Therefore, the nature represents the aesthetics of physicality and spirituality. In the contemporary world, the coexistence fabrics of the nature and society have considerably dampened reciprocative respect and concerns for each other. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is the vantage point which has, in the postcolonial backdrop, portrayed the intervention of globalization and politics that has marred the environmental fabrics of West Bengal immense archipelago in the Ganga delta of Sundarbans. The objective of this paper to analyse few issues of the novel *The Hungry Tide* from ecological and geopolitical perspectives.*

**Keywords:** *Ecological Ethics, Anthropological Surroundings, Refugees, Sundarbans, Resettlement*

The earth, the air, the land, and the water are not an inheritance from our forefathers but on loan from our children. So, we have to hand over to them at least as it was handed over to us.

-Gandhiji

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war. Why? Because we're told that it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good.

- Arundhati Roy, *The Greater Common Good*

The understanding of the river's significance will be inadequate if we purely bank on its water transportation, physical magnitude and geographical trajectories. The holistic relevance of the river much lies on its cultural magnitude, cultural ecology, socioeconomic connectivity, agriculture produces, and fluvial sediments. The flowing trajectory of Ganges River that begins in the distant Himalayas and falling within the national territories of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, covering an area of about 1.75 million km<sup>2</sup>, and also creating the largest delta in the world at 105,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Renaud et al. 2013), could not be solely assessed its worth as a source of life. Her streams are the bountiful source of ecology, symbology, folktales, myths and mythology, along with social and religious diversities. The "river that nurtures, heals, and rejuvenates" (Uttaranchal Tourism Development Board, 2004: 29). Jawaharlal Nehru relates the temporal association of Indian civilization with the Ganges:

‘She has been a symbol of India’s age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga...The Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, running into the present, and flowing on to the great ocean of the future...’  
(Nehru qtd in Uttaranchal, 2004: 2-3)

The shundorbon, literally ‘beautiful forest’ in Bengali is an enormous archipelago situated between southern tip of West Bengal in eastern India on the vast Indian Ocean and the fertile plains of Bengal in the north. This archipelago, created by the confluence of the mighty rivers Ganges, Meghna, Brahmaputra and their innumerable tributaries, constitutes a vast delta.

‘Covering approximately 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> the Sundarbans...is the largest contiguous mangrove forest on earth. Mangroves forests are highly productive and diverse ecosystems, providing a wide range of direct ecosystem services for resident populations. In addition, mangroves function as a buffer against frequently occurring cyclones; helping to protect local settlements including the two most populous cities of the world, Kolkata and Dhaka, against their worst effects.’

In the last part of the novel THT, published in the year 2004, Ghosh has narrated, the terrifying scene of a gigantic cyclone that had severely affected the Sundarbans. Few months after its publication, on December 26, 2004 the world had witnessed a massive undersea earthquake of 9.3 magnitude on Richter scale occurred in the Indian Ocean off the western coast of Sumatra, triggering a series of catastrophic tsunami waves that killed lives of millions across 12 countries, including the Sundarbans. Reading Ghosh’s THT after the December 25, 2004, the reader cannot escape from the Ghosh’s prediction of the tsunami catastrophe in the South Asia. His *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) through the literature, postcolonial history, and global politics of climate change, focuses connection between economic inequality and environmental destruction.

We are introduced in the novel *The Hungry Tide* three distinct identities of Sundarbans: Firstly, is swathed with profound biodiversity. Secondly, the international borders between India and Bangladesh in this huge archipelago of around three hundred islands are only ‘shadow lines’ because it is practically impossible to put in force any border laws and fencing on a territory that has a constant tendency of resurfacing and submerging the land with the temperaments of ebb and flow of the tides. Therefore, eco-geographically these ‘non-existent’ borders are porous and, **thirdly**, the ‘other’ postcolonial Sundarbans has come into existence with the penetration of humans into the realms of biodiversified archipelago. Sundarbans, since then, represents the ‘polyvalent modes of relation between human beings and the environment’ (Pirzadeh). Around 250 years ago the inhabitants were fishers, woodcutters, pirates, and salt makers who used to live on boats. The postcolonial Sundarbans has become the house of refugees, incessant poverty, ecological upheavals, miserable conditions for humans and non-humans, concentration camps for migrants, and the government neglect and oppression.

Nineteen seventeen-eight is the most important year for the West Bengal: (i) politically momentous as the Left government with thumping majority won the assembly elections and took the charge and, (ii) geopolitically turbulent year for the state as around 30,000 refugees have arrived at Sundarbans islands called Morichjhāpi. This migration of refugees has become possible due to eco-geographical territorial porosity between Bangladesh and India. Waters and lands of Sundarbans delta have miserably failed the international treaties to deploy their logistics to prevent cross-border intrusions. Most of the Bangladeshi refugees who arrived in the West Bengal belonged to the low namasudra, Kshatriyas and the Poundra-Kshatriyas of Hindu caste. Their arrival in India was in the wake of ‘communalization of Bangladesh politics and Bangladesh liberation war against Pakistan few years back. Why had they waded through intimidating waters of this region and risked their lives from Bengal tigers? Why their natural choice has become Calcutta and its surroundings? The answer lies in the 1947 process of decolonizing India where India had its political freedom on the unnatural divisions into East and West Pakistan. The then metropolis, especially southern suburbs, were largely populated by Hindu settlers migrated from East

Pakistan. Ninety seventy-eight refugees had thronged in the hope to have support and sympathy from their ninety forty-seven Hindu lineage who had shared common sociocultural rituals and language. In the passage of three decades, the table had taken U-turn and the new consignment of refugees received utterly hostile reaction from their own old settlers. Beneath this hostility lies a caste war between the bhadrakok (gentle community) and the namasudra community. The bhadrakok were ruling the Bengal Congress Party never wanted namasudra to become the part of mainstream of West Bengal and therefore, in spite of opposition by various Left parties to send refugees outside, the state they refused to accommodate these refugees and were subjugated and transported to 'concentration camps' with inadequate facilities in the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh now in Chhattisgarh. It seemed as if the central government declared this East exodus as a national calamity. Dandakaranya, the mythological place of the 'dark forests' where Ram was exiled. Mr. H.M. Patel, Chairman of the Committee asked to go into the development of the Dandakaranya scheme covering the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, the National Development Council decided that an autonomous authority 'should be set up to clear the jungle and develop this area and resettle East Pakistan displaced persons there.' For the new settlers the land appeared as a land of hope than a place of banishment.

The Bengali Communists, the then chief opposition party, have exploited the refugee issue and strongly agitated for their return to West Bengal and promised them to preserve their civic rights. After winning the 1978 assembly election, the Communist party discovered that refugees had marched en masse towards the Sundarbans to settle on. Trusting on the Communist Party election manifesto, thirty thousand of them reached to the mud flats Morichjhāpi in a hope. The ruling government seemed "fast and vicious reversal of its line on the refugees." The government found now that these Morichjhāpi settlers have violated forest preservation laws, trespassed into the habitat of white tigers, and became threat to them. These environmental concerns merely served as an alibi:

'...island of Morichjhapi was a part of the Sundarbans Forest Reserve, but the mangrove vegetation was cleared in 1975 by the Congress government to make way for the revenue-generating coconut and tamarisk plantations. The island was also not part of the core area of the tiger reserve.'

(Anand 2008, 31)

Considered as lesser humans, managing their mundane life affairs, the West Bengal refugees situated at the periphery and dumped into the margins due to their social, economic, and political subservience by the Hindu upper caste 'bhadrakok'. The West Bengal Bhadrakok Hindu community (elite class) unanimously developed apprehensions that the refugees 'were a severe economic liability and that their rehabilitation would make enormous demands upon the meagre economic resources of the province' (Kudaisya and Yong). The Communist Party leadership was hugely under the influence of high-caste of Bengali Bhadrakoks who feared on the resettlement of refugees in Bengal. They realised that refugees were going to 'to forge a new respectable identity for themselves as well as a bid to reclaim a portion of the West Bengali political rostrum by the poorest and most marginalised' (jails1759).

Globalization is apparent and so the displacement which has turned out to be an endemic phenomenon that has significantly affected the foundations of socio-cultural fabrics. The native communities take on them as their counterparts and governments take them as 'permanent liabilities'. Process of assimilation with the new communities starts with a note of friction and ends with negotiations, adjustments, compromises, humiliations and they live their 'lives in a series of punctuations, each chapter' of their lives '**joined with an ellipses**' (Ya, Renee: A Punctuation Life) of memories of their past.

In anticipation of refugees' marching to islands, on January 27, 1979, the state government brought ban on all sort of mobility in the Morichjhapi under the Forest Preservation Act and Section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code. This ban was lifted in the Calcutta High Court against the refugees 'appeal with the help of local people. The court also reprimanded the government on the misuse of power by

preventing refugees from the access to natural resources like land and water. The government ruled out the court ruling and resorted 'draconian measures' employing off-duty policemen and hired criminal gangs to 'forcibly evict' the determined and unbowed refugees. These paramilitary forces moved in on the Morichjhapi refugees and manhandled with them. They under the patronage of the government raped hundreds of women, thousands of people they killed, and dumped in the river. Ross Mallick illustrates this postcolonial massacre as the conflict between "human rights and ecological preservation" (1999: 117) which is the reading of the postcolonial Friction between ecological consciousness and geopolitical realities/ Cruelties in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004):

"Amara kara? Who are we? We are dispossessed. Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?" *The Hungry Tide* ((2011)

When these distressed shrieks of refugees in unison piercing through the untidy waters of border politics in the midst of uncanny spaces documented in HT, one more chapter of dehumanization in the history of the fourth world community is attached for our perusal.

Ghosh's novel THT starts with a sharp modern opening. One of the two "outsiders" on the Dhakuria commuter (daily-passengers) platform Kanai Dutt, a forty-two-year-old with a "well-grounded belief in his ability to prevail in most circumstances" and "the true connoisseur's ability to both praise and appraise women", is "an interpreter and translator by profession" in New Delhi. In THT Ghosh has exhibited his concerns on the border migration and its language, nations and movements to the islands, government's ill-treatment with the refugees to the story of Kanai and Piya and their meeting in a remote corner of Sundarbans.

Both the "outsiders" meet in the train on their ways to the tidal world of "watery labyrinth". Unknown to the mythical, social, cultural and environmental undercurrents of these waters, the two take off to explore in separate direction into the tide narratives. Kanai heads for Lusibari on a personal visit to his seventy-six-year-old aunt Nilima on her summons for Kanai's eye on the journal written by his uncle Nirmal way back in 1979. His aunt Nilima, who lives somewhere, in the middle of the Sundarbans. He takes train journey from Calcutta moving across Canning to Lusibari. Lusibari, the name itself is a relic of a bygone colonial period. Piya Roy, an American researcher of Bengali origin is a "cytologist" working on the behaviour of a rare species of Gangetic River dolphins. The Orcaella, or fresh water dolphin, is one of the earth's rarest and least well-favoured creatures. A cousin of the killer whale, it swims on its side and looks like a pig. Piya, a graduate student in cetology at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California, heads for Canning to the Forest Department office to seek an admission card into the Sundarbans for her research on the Gangetic River based rare Irrawaddy mammal dolphins *Orcaella brevirostris*.

The journal, Kanai claims, narrates him the story of the massacre of Morichjhāpi refugees and Piya's field trip brings her face-to-face with the reality of material life in the deltaic life in the Sundarbans. She realizes that that the Sundarban is the place where the ideals of civilization are confronted with the 'horror' of the jungle. Kanai argues that there is a paradox in the fact being able to feel suffering of an animal but not of a human being: "isn't that a horror, too...that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings?" (HT, 300). This exposes an alibi of metropolitan outsiders who are casual to protect wildlife and Sundarbans environment without concern for the local inhabitants. Piya goes on saying that she would be willing to give up her own life in order to save an animal. Piya's Western environmentalism, which sees the protection of life as the highest good, clashes with the harsh reality of the people living in the area. Ghosh raises the question whether the protection of wild life is something that appears valuable and necessary only from a privileged distance when the personal environment is not directly threatened.



The Hungry tide deals with two-fold subalternity of human and non-human. The subalternity arises from the clashes between nature and 'culture', between indigenous interests and environmentalism. The gap is dramatically illustrated when the local fisherman of Sundarbans Fokir involves himself in the trapping and burning alive of a Bengal tiger. For Piya, she has to inevitably accept that treatment and utilities of 'nature' are different to the local Fokir and to the Western environmentalist. What is fauna for Piya is a staple food for Fokir. As Howarth puts it:

'Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose. If we learn to translate the message with fidelity' (in Coupe 2000: 163).

The conflicts and dilemma are the two major aspects Ghosh talks about in postcolonial and environmental studies. Neither the Morichjhāpi massacre refugees nor their descendants of the Ghosh's THT were/are indigenous to the sights, smells, sounds and rhythms and, fauna, and flora of Sundarbans. However, the difference is also generated between Piya and Fokir by the colonial and postcolonial geopolitical histories, which have divided them from each other. Unlike the white Bengali tigers of the Sundarbans, the Morichjhāpi refugees were never indigenous but they were forced to be into this delta: **first** by displacement during the 1947 Partition in the colonial period. **Second** in the in the early 1970s break up of East and West Pakistan, formulating Bangladesh in the postcolonial period. **Third** factor is the neocolonialism that has emerged in the postcolonial azad (Independent) India. The present-day survivors of the Morichjhāpi strongly hold a view that neocolonial state government's brutality that resulted tigers and humans into competitors for the survival instead of nurturing eco-friendly environment in a syncretic way. The so-called 'green speak' bhadralok of Calcutta have never settled in Sundarbans but their self-styled cosmopolitan idiosyncrasies have wanted to have 'elitist grip' on Sundarbans without showing ecological interests. Jayanta, one of the refugee decedents of refugees raised his subaltern voice:

'Why have our dead remained unaccounted for and un-mourned by the babus of Kolkata, forced to hover as spirits in the forest, while a tiger who enters our village and Economic and then gets killed puts us all behind bars?' (Jalais 2005, pp. 1760-1).

This neocolonial barbaric history of injustice has invented inescapable rivalry between two subaltern dwellers of the Sundarbans: the humans and the tigers. Tigers and islanders are now preying each other out of fear of survival. In one incident, Piya failed to comprehend the savage behaviour of islanders at the trapped tiger. She was aghast at the live burning of the tiger. Ghosh's presentation of this episode establishes the lethal relationship that prevails over the ecology of the Sundarbans today. Kanai explains to Piya the new structures and equations of survival in the Sundarbans: 'You shouldn't be so upset...When tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die' (THT 294-5). Why tigers had become man-eaters? Before the Morichjhapi ecological turbulences engineered by power politics, there had been an idyllic relationship between tigers and islanders. After the Morichjhapi massacre, tigers had started preying humans. Here, Piya's Western conservationist approaches have become absurd and now she tries to view this from the postcolonial perspective and new ecological dimensions she relates with the history of Morichjhapi.

The enthusiastic participation of Morichjhapi islanders in torturing the 'man-eating' tigers in the Sundarbans inwardly suggests that they are showing retaliation on being persecuted and besieged at the mighty hands of the Bengal politics. However, Ghosh holds a view that the indigenous environment that webs ecological ingredients in harmony is mightier than the ephemeral humans and the tigers. Neither tigers nor humans are the integral parts of the Sundarbans ecosystem. If tigers for their survival have volunteered themselves as the consumers of this fragile place so the Morichjhapi islanders have been pushed in by the history of the postcolonial blunders. I would rest my presentation by asserting that the ecosystem of any land is beyond its physicality. Its creation and manifestation lie within layers and layers and layers and layers to which any social animal or forest animal have perpetually failed to

comprehend its physical magnanimity and fail to spiritually assimilate with the altruism concords of the nature:

“The Universe along with its creatures belongs to the lord. No creature is superior to any other: Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach over the rights and privileges of other species.” Isha-Upanishads (1500-60 B.C.)

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