



Ecological Crisis and Endangered Biodiversity in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

With an ever-increasing human population and technological developments and the consequent environmental pollutions, the biodiversity of any region invariably becomes vulnerable to the extent that it creates imbalance in the ecology of the region. It is therefore very important to maintain the biodiversity not only to maintain a balance in the ecosystem of any region but also because it provides sustainable development for the human population and others that are dependent on it. However, in several occasions it has been noticed that political intervention with an objective of developing and maintaining biodiversity of a region actually invite a large array of problems instead of working out a plan for smooth flow and existence of biodiversity. The present paper deals with Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* that explores the consequences of unjust political intervention for some very lucrative state purposes that not only disturbs the biodiversity of the Sunderban region of West Bengal but also creates such an imbalance in the ecosystem of the region that puts the life of the inhabitants of the region into perpetual risk. The paper also traces the very significant political event, Marichjhappi Massacre and the politics of the state machinery that not only led to the creation of imbalance in nature but also gave rise to a never-ending conflict between man and nature and between man and man, i.e., the inhabitants and the agencies of the state government.

Key words: Biodiversity, ecology, Marichjhappi Massacre, state machinery.

Introduction:

Biodiversity, a contraction of 'biological diversity', generally refers to the variety and variability of life on Earth. It also includes the variability within species, between species and between ecosystems. Thus, biodiversity can be said as the variety of life on Earth. It is the lifeblood of sustainable development and green economies. It is a general concern that biodiversity is being depleted at an unprecedented rate as human populations, and their levels of consumptions increase. Biodiversity underpins the delivery of a wide range of essential goods and services on which we all depend: food, fodder,

fibres and medicines. Poor people in rural areas of developing countries are disproportionately dependent on these goods and services to meet their day-to-day survival needs. To them, biodiversity is a safety net, a natural health service and an insurance strategy. Thus it becomes a responsibility and obligation on the part of several governmental and non governmental agencies to maintain biodiversity on the earth. However, there are instances where not very equal or convincing efforts have been made to maintain biodiversity so as to obtain a sustainable life in some specific areas.

Literature which is considered a mirror of the society, its culture and socio political status; also serves the purpose of bringing out the hidden bitter truths of the society and its several governmental and nongovernmental agencies. The biodiversity in one of India's most beautiful regions, the delta areas of Ganga and Brahmaputra, i.e. in the Sunderban areas of West Bengal have been captured by Amitav Ghosh in one of his most successful novels, *The Hungry Tide*. However, he does not allow himself to be lost in the charming beauty of the region; rather he delves deep into the political intervention of the state government and its agencies in the name of maintaining biodiversity of the area and the after effects of it that led to an incessant conflict between the wild life and the inhabitants of the place.

The novel, *The Hungry Tide* explores the tenets of Social Ecology to provide a logical proof for the antagonistic relationship between human beings and wild and aquatic life of the region. The new branch of ecology, called Social Ecology 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 a branch of ecology that 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 without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it.

Amitav Ghosh through the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, that is divided into two very significant sections, Ebb and Flood weaves the different facets of the relationship that the inhabitants have created with the wild and aquatic creatures of the region. It provides a picture of an uninhabitable place like the Sundarbans and its inhabitants who are so dependent on its resources for survival that they risk their life everyday living in these crocodile and tiger infested islands. It is an accepted fact in the region that many of them have lost their lives and will lose their life in the untameable region of the Sunderbans, "dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles." (THT) However, it is not only the adventurous nature of the place that drove them to such unpredictable livelihood. Rather it is the pain of hunger that drove the inhabitants of the islands of Sundarbans to hunting and fishing with the result that they became preys to other wild animals' hunger. In fact, 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 wretched condition of the Sunderban dwellers that force their life to all sorts of natural calamities and bestiality of the wildlife can be traced back to the Marichjhapi Massacre, a brain child of the then ruling political party of West Bengal. The Marichjhapi episode, the fate of Sunderban with its human and wildlife populations, are all intricately linked and goes back to the history of Partition of India. 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 comfortably relocated and settled themselves in the new state, 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. 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. They defended their stand by emphasising on the point that any effort of converting the inhabitable Sunderban to a habitable place would mean risking the wildlife and the ecosystem of the place. This eventually led to the violent eviction of the refugees from Morichjhapi leading to the infamous massacre. However, it is interesting to note that the government that wanted to save the wildlife actually cleared the Morichjhapi Island to grow coconut and tamarisk to boost the state revenue.

Thus the Morichjhapi Island of Sunderban region becomes the space where unequal fights between different species are contested. It becomes the space where the conflict between forest exploitation and forest conservation to preserve the wildlife of the region, especially the Royal Bengal Tigers becomes evident. 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.

Before exploring the conflict that infested the region, Amitav Ghosh gives a graphic picture of Sunderban to show its vulnerability in the lap of nature. The region, Sunderban, has derived its name from the Sundari Trees, a common species of mangrove whose spread protects the entire region from the fury of cyclonic destructions at the same time providing stability to the whole region by preventing erosion due to tidal action. The rivers of the delta are also of varying nature, ranging from very small ones to the large ones that cover the region like net, "The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable." (*The Hungry Tide* 6-7)

Through a graphic description of the hostile and shifting nature of the Sundarbans Amitav Ghosh unveils several issues related to life and existence on the delta region with its diverse ecosystem in which man, animal and other beings strive for their own eco-space thereby trying to find their means of survival. Ghosh juxtaposes everyday problems of living from the residents' point of view with the nonhuman creatures. The novelist deftly depicts the conflict between man and wildlife, especially with the most powerful of the species, the tiger that is in a constant conflict with man. Another major concern that Ghosh tries to address in the novel is the ever depleting richness of the biodiversity due to salinity that foretells the extinction of several rare species and yet how the ecosystem is home to the Gangetic and Irrawaddy dolphins, crocodiles, deer etc., with other fauna and flora at the point of extinction. The land therefore, is the battleground for all sorts of living creatures that engage themselves in a perpetual struggle for their survival.

If on one hand Amitav Ghosh deals with the political problem that the local residents try to fight to make a living for them, on the other hand, he delves deep into the harmonious relation that the residents have developed with the wild living creatures, especially the ocean mammals of the delta region, the huge dolphins. Piya, the research student who has visited the Sunderban region for her work on wildlife under threat in the region is overwhelmed to find how the dolphins cooperate with the humans in their cast-net fishing. In that the Irrawaddy dolphins serve to increase the amount of fish caught by the fishermen thereby proving themselves to be economically valuable to the human lot. She even thinks and also concludes that the movements of the Orcaella adapting itself to the tidal ecology might provide clues to conservation of this endangered species. Even closer to the nature and wild and sea life of the Sunderban region is Fokir. From his childhood he is exposed to both the benign and malign natures of the region. He has developed, rather learned the intricacies of the movements of the creatures of the region. Thus he explains to Piya and Kanai how he knew all about the dolphins and where they go. As a small boy his mother Kusum had told him stories about the dolphins in Garjontola, of how they were Bon Bibi's messengers and brought news of the rivers and floods. They were almost his friends.

The most amazing message that Amitav tries to convey to his readers is that each of the creatures of the ecosystem of the region has a worthy role to play in the larger canvas of the bionetwork. Piya also comes across the estuarine crocodiles apart from smaller creatures like the horseshoe crabs. In spite of the efforts on the part of the inhabitants of the region to build a harmonious relationship with the wildlife, they are left helpless by the Government's over ambitious projects to preserve the tigers at the cost of the lives of the inhabitants. The novel becomes a curious study of political intervention in conservation and preservation of natural resources that often lead to adverse socio cultural effects on the region. The government that showed its deep concern for preserving the heritage tigers of the region and blamed the inhabitants of the place as disturbing the ecosystem of the region themselves invited more imbalances in the biodiversity of the cluster of islands by launching advanced technology in the area. But it is not the inhabitants who can be blamed for this imbalance. The novelist in the novel tries to bring home the point that the dangers of exploitation are the direct result of anthropogenic intervention in the form of

globalization, economic development and eco-tourism. One such lucrative and ambitious project, that Fokir tells Piya and Kanai was that of the Sahara India Pariwar that put forward its multimillion project proposal of creating an eco-village, floating restaurants, wild life tourism and several water ways in the region. The second one is that of the technologically developed fishing machines and water vehicles that are used either for patrolling the water body, or for tourism like the motorboats. The third is that of the over protective concern of the state Government to protect and privilege the wild tigers of the region that are considered as endangered species and therefore all efforts are been put to conserve under the Project Tiger.

The Sundarbans is the only mangrove forest in the world that houses the tiger with the highest tiger population in the world being found in this tiger reserve. The local residents are in direct combat with this animal not only because of its ferocious bestiality but also because of the several conservation projects undertaken by the state and environmentalists that privileged the wild beasts over the poor humans of the place. By converting the status of Sunderbans from just a cluster of uninhabitable islands to that of an important tourist place, the authorities have put the tigers in the centre and marginalized the people of the islands.

Amitav Ghosh interrogates the availability of space marked by the authorities for the natives of the region as against the tigers. Since no fixed demarcations were made by them for the wild beasts, the tigers wander into human space/habitation and end up eating men, women, children and cattle. With the increasing population of the tigers and their free movement in to the habitats of the natives, Ghosh interrogates the irresponsibility of the state authorities that is over concerned to protect and conserve the tigers but not to provide protection to the local residents from the wild beats. Thus it builds a seething rage in the natives the result of which is killing of a tiger by the local mob as soon as the beast trespasses into the zone of the human beings. Though the forest officials often find the natives at wrong and are punished for poaching wild animals, the natives have a reason to defend themselves. The residents of the place have started killing the animals because the tigers have encroached upon human habitation having killed a buffalo and revisiting a second time is caught by the furious mob waiting to kill it. The narrative beautifully portrays how the angry mob awaits the tiger to approach into the village:

When they neared the crest of the embankment Horen pointed to a large mark in the dust and gestured to indicate that this was the place from which the animal had surveyed the village and picked its prey. . . By the light of the torches they saw that the village was made up of clusters of mud huts, so arranged as to run parallel to the embankment. Directly in front of them, a few hundred meters away, was a small mud-walled structure with a thatched roof. More than a hundred people had gathered around this little hut: most of them were men and many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: they were plunging in to the hut over and again. Their faces were contorted in such a way that they seemed to be in

the grip both of extreme fear and uncontrollable rage. Many of the women and children in the crowd were shrieking, Maar! Maar! Kill! Kill!! (THT 291- 292)

The naive Piyda, a hardcore lover of environment develops an inclination for the wild animals of the region and exhibits a strong desire to save the animal that is about to be attacked by the inhabitants of the region. However, the predator that has already killed two people, and many livestock of the village, she is shocked to realize that both Fokir and Kanai too join the mob in setting fire to the animal. Piya, the would-be-environmentalist, prioritises her sensitivity to the rights of animals over the men who tried killing the animal. She fails to understand the tricky situation wherein human beings were fighting for survival against this animal. And ironically the next day the government agencies approached the village for taking actions against them for their attempt to kill the tiger.

Conclusion:

The politics played by the state machinery in the name of maintaining ecological balance and preserving biodiversity is nothing but an eye wash for the commoners. The novel, *The Hungry Tide*, unveils the role played by the state machinery in order to increase its revenue through eco tourism tries to invest a huge sum on the Royal Bengal Tigers of Sunderban region by blissfully ignoring the economic development and sustainability of the poor natives of the region, for whom survival means a dependence on the wild resources of the place, like fishing, collecting honey, leaves, barks, seeds and fruits for eating as well as for medicinal purposes. 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 the 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 novel, *The Hungry Tide* registers this conflict between the exploitation and conservation plans as thought of and implemented by the state government and other pro-active environmentalist and NGOs that have marginalized the human dwellers to such an extent that they are left almost with no preoccupation to feed themselves and sustain their life in the Sunderban regions.

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