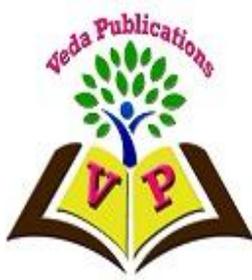


**UNDERSTANDING THE NEXUS OF TIDAL LANDSCAPES AND CASTE IN BENGAL**

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Caste and Nature are two different notions. If one is a social construction, the other is a natural transition. If one is based on segregation and isolation and is hierarchical in nature, the other is all inclusive and comprehensive. Whereas caste is a constructed social identity, based on social stratification and practices of hierarchical division, nature is all encompassing and uniform. So, an eco-critical understanding of nature and caste opens up discussions about the nexus existent between the two. The state of West Bengal can probably be viewed as an ideal location to investigate the nexus as the lower castes are not only dependent on tidal landscapes for their survival, but at times also experience problems of ownership. Such complications also often underscore the symbiotic relationship between the lower castes and tidal landscapes. Questions emerge- how does one define the use of natural resources and when does it become an abuse? What role does the state apparatus play in deciphering the difference between use and abuse? Finally, where does one locate the lower castes in an eco-critical analysis of a Bengali fiction?

Keywords: *Eco-criticism, Lower Caste, Ownership, Survival, Tidal Landscapes.*

**INTRODUCTION**

“Water may be a component of the external landscape, but it also flows within; a do or die question that derives from one’s caste and connects to external hierarchies. For Dalits, water is their life and work, and a foundation for their survival and culture.”ⁱ

These lines by Mukul Sharma highlight the effervescence of the correlation between lower castes and natural resources. The question of caste is of paramount importance as it allows and forbids people from the use of natural resources. The Dalits in India had been denied access to water throughout many centuries and Ambedkar’s life was a living testimony of the humiliations experienced due to the denial of such. Gopal Guru blames the codes of Manu for the exclusion of the lower castes from even the periphery of water bodies as water was used “for constructing a perennial division”ⁱⁱ in society. However, with the enlightenment of the lower caste communities through education and emancipatory arrangements, the lower castes are gradually trying to assert their rights to the access of water. Such assertions are not without experiencing some degrees of violence in return. The question arises- Is it possible for the lower castes to exert full right over water bodies, especially when the assertion of right becomes synonymous with power dynamics? In spite of depending on the water bodies for survival, can the lower castes prevent any commercialization of the water resources? How does one define the use of water resources by the people residing in the riverine area?

To understand such questions, it is imperative that one approaches the question from an ecological perspective. The reason for such had been stated by Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil. They found a major gap in the investigation of the “ecological infrastructure of human society.”ⁱⁱⁱ They mentioned how a major critique of capitalism lies in the lack of acknowledging “the ecological context, that is, the soil, water, animal, mineral and vegetative bases of society in which the infrastructure is embedded.”^{iv} So, eco-criticism becomes an important

rejoinder because eco-criticism entails the study of the human society with nature.

DEFINING ECOCRITICISM AND A BRIEF HISTORY

According to Cheryll Glotfelty, the founding officer of Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and herself a distinguished professor and persona in the world of ecocritical studies,

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches... Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere.^v

It can be read as an accession of critical pedagogy into an investigation and exploration of ecology and text. Thus, to put it broadly, ecocriticism can be defined as the interpretation of the existence of a congruous correspondence between the individual and the natural world, the human and the non-living surrounding. A result of the amalgamation of two diversiform branches of studies- ecology and literary criticism, ecocriticism, then, has its foundation in both - textual analysis and environmental disquisition. It advocates conserving the interest and ecological equilibrium of nature and the physical environment.

Since, it is perceived as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of text and environment, one can postulate that ecocriticism also enunciates the quintessential relevance of maintaining the balance in nature by articulating the various and probable explanations for the redressal of the contemporary environmental circumstances. There has been a consistent and ever-growing plunder of earth’s natural resources and a persistent threat of the destruction of the physical environment, especially since the last century. Increasing commercialization



of nature and natural spaces for human self-aggrandizement and decreasing humanitarian concerns about the attrition of natural environment has led to a number of eco-critics voicing their apprehensions for the depletion of nature and environment.

In eco-critical studies then, the chief concern is to recognize the prevalent environmental problems which are repercussions of human being's constant endeavour to augment their revenue. So, both eco-critics and eco-critical texts function as apposite reminders to reiterate the fact that human beings are a part of nature, not apart from it. They (human beings) are microcosmic entities as compared to nature. Hence, the need of the hour is to move, from self-centred desires of human beings to earth-allied discourses.

Historically, ecocriticism as an unexplored academic terrain materialized only in the 1990's, although its antecedent is usually manifested to be the late 1970's meeting of the Western Literature Association (WLA) where the notion of ecocriticism and its objective were first introduced. However, till the 1980's there was no deliberation over ecocriticism as such, and what existed was the conventionally and universally accepted notion of environmental studies, especially in the scholarly field. However, the term itself was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert, who was also among the pioneering voices for environmental concerns. His ecological acumen can be adjudged from his own admission:

The idea that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvellous and characteristic parts of the ecological vision.^{vi}

However, it was Vandana Shiva who had brought ecocritical awareness in India, especially through her writings in the last two-three decades. In texts like *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), *Making Peace with Earth* (2012) and *Ecofeminism* (1993, co-authored with Maria Mies)

she wrote about the emergent situation of saving nature from man's anthropocentric desires, and why movements like the Chipko movement are the need of the hour. She vociferously claimed that degradation of nature is equivalent to the abuse of women in society and established a way of reading similarities between nature and women through eco-feminist approach.

It is important to note that eco-critical writings in India are majorly influenced by the current environmental scenario, where modernist approach and technological advancement in society is gradually leading to a depletion of earth's natural resources as well as natural spaces. The constant public reminders about effects of deforestation, steady lessening in the number of wild animals, danger of extinction of certain endangered species, clearing of the natural habitat, increasing health hazard due to air pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, melting of glaciers, and a gradual replacement of natural processes by biochemical mechanisms are dangers which are lurking over the Indian society. There is an urgent need of conservation of natural habitats as well as protection of the rights of nature. And hence, she emphasized that:

Modern industrial society has no time for thinking about regeneration... The land, the forests, the rivers, the oceans, the atmosphere have all been colonised, eroded and polluted. Capital now has to look for new colonies to invade and exploit for its further accumulation.^{vii}

LOCATING CASTE AND NATURE IN A BENGALI FICTION

The exploitation that Shiva refers to is visible in a Bengali fiction by Pranab Sarkar. The story titled *Paharadar* from the collection bearing the same name is an example of capitalistic approach towards nature. It deals with the issue of encroachment of upper caste people on to the lands of the lower castes. It highlights the degradation of a lower caste farmer Dharmadas Sardar into a mere security guard and the gradual commercialization of river water for generating more revenue. The river here is Bidyadhori. It contrasts two situations- first, where



water from the river Bidyadhori, near the Sunderbans, earlier used for harvesting of crops, is now used in full-fledged way to breed prawns for export, and second- where the agricultural land owned by the lower caste farmers has been taken away from these farmers by the prawn breeding class of *babus*. The text mentions how life for these lower caste farmers revolved around the paddy fields and the river. They considered themselves *jomidar*- proud owner of agricultural field earlier and how they have been displaced from being a *jomidar* to a *paharadar* now.

In the narrative, the river water has been compartmentalised into smaller segments to breed prawn. Breeding prawns is more profit generating than cultivating rice, hence both land and water resources are diverted for this purpose. The owners are the upper class/ caste individuals, political leaders who want to earn as much profit as possible. The symbiosis between the water body and the lower caste individuals exists here in the form of unique degradation and victimisation that both have witnessed and encountered. Lands from the lower caste people have been forcefully taken to utilise it for commercial purposes and in turn he has been turned into a security guard.

Politics invades the area in the form of upper class members from the political party who are more than willing to convert these farming lands into prawn breeding area. Not only the agricultural land is forcefully taken away but the free flow of the river is also diverted and restricted with small segments called *bheri*, being set up to breed prawns. Sarkar highlights how crop yielding has been destroyed. With it has gone all kind of agro based festivities. He mentioned:

When they worked in the fields as peasants, they were the owners of the land. Festivals were celebrated; marriages conducted, sweet dumplings were prepared on a daily basis- all from the money earned by selling off their cultivated rice. But those days are gone. Now everything depends on the whims and impulses of Kalu Sheikh, the new master of the *bheri*...^{viii} (Translation mine)

The new land owners are not the farmers, but the prawn cultivators and the party leaders. The explanation given for such drastic transformation is the generation of better revenue, for, export of prawns yields a higher return than export of crops, and a higher return will automatically lead to more financial strength and administrative power. Not only this, the politically inclined and power hungry political leaders deployed every means to augment the production of prawns. They have transformed the original *jomidars* into security guards employing them for menial labour of continuously changing and cleaning the water of the *bheri* and keep a check over theft.

The new *paharadar* and the river turned *bheri* both are dependent on each other here for the production of prawn, the profit of which is earned by the owner of the *bheri*. The water body and the lower caste individuals have entered into an alliance where they are mutually dependent on each other for their survival. In a way, the labours of both- the individual as well as the river has been commercialized. The variation lies only in the type of labour. The lower caste individual is commercializing his physical labour; the river is commercialized for its productive labour. This story also deals with the idea of ecocide. What was initially a place for cultivation of crops has now degenerated having being used only for commercial reasons.

In other words, politics makes nature and caste/class enter into an alliance. It is not just a symbiosis but a combined struggle as well, where the lower caste people and the river are fighting against the *babus*, the former actively, the later silently. The bureaucrats, who are the agents of modernism here, are not concerned about the wretched and penniless condition of the lower castes for they constitute only a negligible share of their vote banks. As far as the river is concerned, the *babus* concern is only about that area of the river which can be potentially commercialized. The other side of the river with receding water levels is not their concern. And hence, the river and the lower caste men are to be sacrificed for a larger benefit. In this case too, the river has witnessed a death- the death of the hopes of the *jeles* (fishermen), who are left out in the lurch by the



political leaders. Their hope for survival was dependent on the river and the river itself is dying.

HISTORICAL AND ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The story published in 2001 is a reminiscent of the *Chilika/Chilka Bachao Andolan*^{ix} which happened in Orissa in the early 90's in India. Notably, just as the Integrated Shrimp Farm (ISF) Project spearheaded by the TATA Company was posing a threat to the livelihood of the fishermen around the lake, similarly, the fishermen and paddy cultivators around the river Bidyadhori are threatened by the forceful modifications made in the land and water resources by the intruding forces of the powerful politicians in the area. Just as in the ISF, the main motive behind the setting up of the project was the cultivation and export of prawns, in the fictional story too, prawn breeding is popularised so as to export them to foreign countries. *Chilka Andolan* was successful but the fictional story does not provide any success to the fishermen and cultivators around the region. In a way then, *Paharadar* can be read as a future of an unsuccessful *Chilka Andolan*- portraying the possible outcome when such projects hamper the living conditions of the lower caste people around the region.

This practice of forming *bheris* by diverting river water also brings forth issues about water crisis and privatisation. The issue of commodifying environmental resources especially the tradability of water resources and other elements of nature have been increasing progressively; and with it has increased the creation of a market space which allows water rights to trade natural resources. Vandana Shiva mentions how the World Bank has recommended the creation of such market of "tradable water rights"^x which will ensure the flow of water resources from individual farmers doing cultivation on a smaller scale to "corporate super farms"^{xi} establishing thus, a channel of monopolization of water resources. Besides creating monopoly of water resources, it will further lead to exploitation and more wastage of water resources, the consequences of which will have to be borne by small farmers and fishermen, further disintegrating the rural fabric of the country. With commodification

of water resources and privatisation of water, poor farmers and fishermen will be deprived of any chance to access water because of high cost involved.

Privatisation of water in India was based on the assumption that it will enable the owner of land or water to realise it's worth and invest in measures which will ensure its conservation but in reality what it has done is displaced the public (except the rich who can afford to pay the price) from the right to access common resources in India. To justify her argument against privatisation of natural resources Shiva gives the example of river Ganga, which has been violently appropriated by creating dams and other river projects, which has relentlessly caused massive destruction to the environment and prevented right to access common resources.

India, especially West Bengal has been a state with major rivers and an abundance of rainfall but with excessive use of river water for commercial motive it is facing serious water crisis. Rivers are drying up or dying as the water is either dammed or redirected. Matched with it is the gradual disappearance of ground water which has forced people to maximize commercial output with whatever little is available at hands and the easiest means of achieving it is using river water for commerciality. Vandana Shiva also blames the World Bank loans which have played a major role in creating water crisis in India. She says:

The Bank has driven intensive irrigation projects which have wasted water and created water-logged and saline deserts. It has promoted groundwater mining with its tube well irrigation loans. During the 1950s-1980s the World Bank assisted the creation of a water crisis in India by financing dams and diversions of river waters; from the 1990s on the Bank has used the financial and hydrological crises it created to force Indian states and public utilities to privatise water services and assets.^{xii}

Thus, *Paharadar* can be read in the context of privatisation of natural resources where there is a paradigmatic shift in understanding the importance of water, a shift from "water for life to water for



profits; from water democracy to water apartheid; from some for all to all for some."^{xiii} Hence, river water is channelized for the profitable growth of handful of people in power and the lower castes remain landless and resource less.

Thus, the above narrative portrays how the domain of natural spaces has been constantly usurped by commercial and capitalistic forces for profit generation. It not only signals the death of nature, it also invites degraded status of the already lower caste members of the society. There is complete monopoly over the river Bidyadhori's water which is being viciously and surreptitiously diverted to *bheris* for commercial reasons. The breakdown of the peasant culture and all agro based production signals the disintegration of the rural fabric of the country which Shiva mentioned earlier. There is no farmer left for all have turned to security guards symbolising how appropriation of water resources have resulted in complete breakdown of social structure.

These lower castes are losing out on their livelihood as the natural spaces and its constituents are dying a gradual death. These narratives of ecocides also act a rejoinder to delineate the fact that the lower castes in Bengal are closer to nature than their higher caste counterparts and any imbalance in the ecological system adversely affects them too. So, attempts of conservation have been a chief motif of mainly the lower castes. With the conservation of nature, not only are they preventing ecological imbalance, they are also trying to preserve their culture from going extinct. These narratives also show how monopoly of natural resources are gradually resulting in denial of rights to access common resources for the lower castes.

Not only the narrative talks about monopolization of natural resources, it also throws light on the fishing techniques used in post independence India. Ramachandra Guha had written:

Until independence the coastal waters of India were fished by artisanal fisher folk employing rowing boats and sailing boats, with the fish consumed largely along the coastal towns and villages... The fisheries

development effort following independence supported mechanization, with the introduction of trawlers and purse seiners, the development of cold storage and canning facilities and the promotion of export of marine products...^{xiv}

With the increase in mechanization procedures, there has been an enhancement in catching fishes, prawns and shrimps along the coast, enabling the exchange of foreign currency as fishes, shrimps and prawns are exported to foreign nations. But alternately, such modern techniques have also resulted in over fishing and coastal pollution. Due to this, the fisher folks along the tidal lands have been greatly ruined. In the narrative too, one can see how new techniques of diverting and mobilizing water resources have resulted in a paradigmatic shift in the lives of the lower castes. There is a gradual collapse in the traditional methods of fishing with artificial prawn breeding and with it is lost the harmony between nature and the lower castes.

The state apparatus in the form of political leaders and people in the administrative power have also turned a blind eye to the decline of traditional methods as they are also partaker of the profit generated. In Sarkar's own admission:

In my village, people still use hurricane oil lamps as there is no electric connection. As far as the infrastructure of schools, colleges and roads are concerned, the less is spoken, the better. People live in dire poverty and hunger. Often, people die due to the lack of medical assistance. With the explicit and ubiquitous support of the administration and political leaders, most of the agricultural lands are transformed into *bheris*.... Power resides in hands of the owners of *bheris*, illegal money lenders and corrupt party leaders...^{xv} (Translation mine)

So, it is most legitimate when the author directs his anger against such power hungry representatives who have no remorse in exploiting both natural resources as well as lower caste people for their personal interest. On one hand, it becomes a matter of survival for the lower castes, at the same



time, it becomes a matter of existence of the gradually disappearing river too. Ecocritics are trying to see literature with a new outlook, which is inclusive of the emergent voice of nature. Nature is articulating through the medium of literary narratives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the position of the lower castes in Bengal in relation to nature is a complex one because there is a very thin line between use and exploitation of nature. Till nature and natural resources in the form of water bodies are utilized just for survival and livelihood, there is harmony maintained between nature and human beings. However, the moment, utilization of nature changes to exploitation of resources for the generation of profit, nature is abuse. And with a desecration of nature, the lower castes suffer too.

GLOSSARY

- paharadar : security guard
- bheri : a set up of small segments of water/ river, normally done for artificial breeding of fishes and prawns.
- jomidar : ruler
- babu : upper-middle class/ caste men of Bengal
- jele : fishermen

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- ⁱ Mukul Sharma, *Caste and Nature*, pp 179
- ⁱⁱ Gopal Guru. "Archaeology of Untouchability" pp 51. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/37/special-articles/archaeology-untouchability.html>. Accessed on 10/10/2019
- ⁱⁱⁱ Madhav Gadgil, and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land*, pp 13
- ^{iv} *Ibid*, pp 12
- ^v Cheryl Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, pp xix
- ^{vi} William Rueckert, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, pp 74
- ^{vii} Vandana Shiva, *The Seed and the Earth: Biotechnology and the Colonisation of Regeneration*. Web (Accessed on 19th Dec, 2017) <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/cc8c/1171bea10e454f49cb631eff64aebec612fc.pdf>
- ^{viii} Pranab Sarkar, 'Paharadar', pp 105.

^{ix} The *Chilka Bachao Andolan* or the Chilka Movement in Orissa was a protest movement by mostly the fishermen who resisted the Integrated Shrimp Farm (ISF) Project for extensive prawn cultivation and export to foreign nations.

^x Vandana Shiva, *Making Peace with the Earth*, pp 16.

^{xi} *Ibid*

^{xii} *Ibid*, pp 83

^{xiii} *Ibid*, pp 84

^{xiv} Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity*, pp16.

^{xv} Pranab Sarkar, 'Bhumikar Bodole', *Paharadar*, pp 7.

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