

Caste, Ecology and Nature: Environmentalism in Indian Dalit Literature

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ABSTRACT

Eco-criticism in India has so far been interested in positing resistance against the capitalist hierarchy of anthropocentric development but has failed to address the underpinned concern in a multi-layered Indian ethnicity. So far, it has been biased in its focus on the representative savarna texts and thus, failed to capture the heterogeneity of the issue or the need for a positive reservation to enable the left-out ethnography amidst the hierarchically inherited eco-system. Several Dalit narratives have undoubtedly addressed the social, historical, political, and cultural evils poignantly but have not satisfactorily justified their positionality to shift this alignment. To counter eco-casteism, elimination of human rights, subordination of the Dalits within the mainstream, upper-class environmental movements and to make the subalterns speak on their own, it is important to understand the political hegemony prevalent around the rights over land. This paper focuses on West Bengal and Kerala, both having a multifarious demography and exhibiting a spurious and varied dependency on land to sustain their livelihood. But the age-old political hegemony prevailing there has robbed the primitive inhabitants of their sole life force and basic needs. This paper demonstrates this through a re-reading of Adwaita Mallabharman's "Titash Ekti Nadir Naam" (1956) and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) in conjunction with the relevant socio-historical and political scenario.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Eco-Casteism, Environment, Indian Writings

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Introduction

The question of caste and ecology are intricately intertwined in a heterogeneous Indian context for its rigid homogenization and cosmopolitanization of globalized aesthetics. In India, the questions of environmental politics, and struggle for rights and identity have always been debated where it surely encompasses the voices of the marginalised like women, and indigenous groups but fail to address their relationship from the ambit of the dominant social hegemonic framework. The cognizance of Dalit with environmental discourse is multifarious as they have been mostly the victim of this changing landscape, and also a rightful primordial resistant to it for a mutual cause of sustainability. The resonance of this thought can also get well reflected if we consider B. R. Ambedkar's idea of the human-nature relationship where he tends to put equity first, and apart from the over-exploitation of the natural resources speaks for the inequality in accessibility among the ostracized groups, especially the Dalits.

In the present Indian Dalit literature (I consider the upsurge of it through the late twentieth century and especially in the 1990s), if I put aside the debacle of true-inherited Dalit text and one of a *savarna*² text for validation of a living experience; then it broadly values the projection of Dalit livelihood amidst the ecological boundaries. It is often full of metaphors, imageries and epiphanic moments explored through autobiographies, memoirs, plays, songs, ballads, folklore, poetry and often self-narration too. In most of these narratives, writers often choose to adapt the confessional style of first-person narrative talking about myth, rituals, heritage, traditions, and nostalgia about the old order; which can be foregrounded as the literature of ecocritical and eco-justice. This can further be described in relation to political hegemony, land rights, and the issue of caste in our country with a special focus on West Bengal and Kerala as these are the settings of my texts. The common

² The pre-dominant four *varnas* in the Vedic *varnashrama*; for example, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are called *savarna* people, while people who are not included in this caste system according to their birth; are called *avarna*, i.e., Dalit and Harijan people. *Savarna* people have always been hostile and oppressive to these *avarna* people and staying within this domineering hegemonic system they enjoy unlimited privilege in every sphere of the society. In Dalit literature, the word *savarna* depicts the susceptibility and scepticism about the narratives written by the casteist about the outcaste people. According to many criticisms, it is a tilted and biased positionality as it is not quite feasible to talk about the lived experiences of the marginalised staying at the centre of the power, and it is also unwelcomed that the outcaste, the Dalit and the subaltern will always be represented in the language of the powerful. Some critics, asserting the literary and aesthetic value dismiss this standpoint and criticize this as more of a sectionalist politics.

point being the rise of Marxist politics in a democratic electoral system that marks a different chapter for these two states, where the issue of ethnicity and indigenous problems have been addressed with a populist mandate channelized through the land reform measurements by abolishing the age-old feudalism of *Panchayati Raj*. West Bengal being also a case study of rehabilitation of the migrants, sees the scrapping of birth-right over land the most. While it has long been a winning scenario for the Left in Bengal since it has solved the issue of land reformation by democratic decentralisation after doing away with dominant centralism present among the privileged mass, it also becomes a nightmare for the backward classes as their voices are subdued and existential heritage is sacrificed. The upper-caste Bengali *Bhdrolok* which consist one-fifth of the population decides for all the dominant ideologies in almost every sphere of life. The 'ideal' culture, song, literature, arts and intellectualism; all get represented by this section which results in an acute absence of the marginalized voices in the mainstream. The political hegemony gets lopsided too since it has always been a perennial *Babu* culture that represents, and mutilates every other expression since the Renaissance in Bengal. In Kerala, the scenario is almost similar, as the political centrality cannot get over the representational politics due to sectarianism, sub-caste and religious division making the demography wide open and porous. It has undoubtedly extended the sustainable development towards all stratum but unfortunately, at the face of democratic devolution, it cannot decide where the locus of policy and decision making should reside. For both these states, the persistent political hierarchy solved the long institutional gap between the masses and government but failed to address the growing chasm of socio-political demographic habitus which is almost irrevocable (Mukherjee & Ghosh 202).

Their experiences of discrimination, ostracization and humiliation find ways of hope, freedom, equity and equality in the natural order of care and harmony. As any Dalit narrative looks for a balance between erasure and subjugation of social hierarchy, and fight for establishing the rights and selfhood, the deprivation they face, subsequently gets replaced in their assimilation with nature. The ordinariness of human existence veils the shimmering subjective anthropocentric position before the anonymous lived experiences. In her autobiographical narrative, Tamil-Indian Dalit

writer Bama expressed herself as *Karukku*²³ (meaning palmyra lives, which have jagged edges on both sides, like a double-edged sword throwing a challenge to the oppressors always). Her experience of oppression in Christian Missionary is that of a caged bird, and her recovery from that social trauma has been described as a falcon soaring high through indefinite freedom. Manohar Mouli Biswas, a *namashudhra*³⁴ writer from West Bengal imagined himself as a hyacinth (neglected in oblivion), and named his writing *The Life and Death of Prisnika*⁴⁵ expressing his hurtful experiences. Dr. Siddalingaiah a Dalit writer from Karnataka, used to live at a separate place in a village called *Ooru Keri*⁵⁶ and also died there. Later his autobiography has also been named

³ It is the English translation of the autobiographical narrative by Bama, the first woman Dalit writer; and it talks about how she manages to escape the convent in order to save her from caste oppression. When she approached the publisher with this story, initially they refused to publish for its unpolished approach. Being undeterred, Bama, herself went to the people, narrate her story and wove it into history, about the convent, the colonialist approach of the Christian missionaries, and, due to the absence of the caste-system, how the lower-caste people are oppressed there. The readers are also expected to enjoy the update afterwards, as it renders how Bama's life gets changed after its publication. It talks about her struggle and zeal, which in a way inspires many others in the struggle against caste and creed.

⁴ Also known as *Namassej* or *Namassut*, this community is primarily an *avarna* community centred on central and south-central Bengal. While they share largely a diasporic past and had migrated due to the political issue during the time of partition and during the time of Bangladesh's war of Independence, they later adapted and mingled with the outcaste communities already there in Bengal's demography. That is why they are also known as *Chandal*. Mainly a fishermen community, they used to see the Bengali *Bhodrolok*, as their common enemy under the socio-religious figureheads of Kalachand Vidyalankar, Sahlal Pir, Keshab Pagal etc. and currently being clustered as Matua community under the leadership of Hari Chand Thakur and his familial dynasty. In colonised Bengal, they used to constitute the second largest caste in the Hindu religion and participated in the freedom movement gloriously. Due to migration, many of them still suffer from the issue of a stable identity and the right of an Indian citizen. Narratives about them talk succinctly about their lives, their oppression, their caste struggle and their issue of identity too.

⁵ It is an autobiographical narrative by Manohar Mouli Biswas, where he attaches a note saying catching the tone of the entire narrative thus clearly: "I have named my autobiography *Amar Bhubaney Ami Benche Thaki (Surviving in My World)*. My world is of great pain, one of being pitied by others. It is my firm conviction that it will become clear, on reading this autobiography, that my world is a different world. In the beginning I had named my autobiography Prisnika. Later I renamed it Life and Death of Prisnika. Prisnika is an uncommon Bengali word and its meaning is Kochuripana (water hyacinth) once thought that let me name it straightway Life and Death of Kochuripana. But it hurt to think of myself as a water hyacinth. This happened because of a sense of glory that had developed in my identity. It is satisfaction of being able to establish myself as a human being. That I'm being able to think myself as a human that is the pleasure" (Biswas xviii-xix).

⁶ *Ooru Keri* is the autobiography of the famous Dalit writer Dr. Siddalingaiah. From the subaltern perspective, it deals with his childhood and youth, recording the emergence of a new, confident, educated Dalit from a very humble background. The word 'Ooru' stands for village, where all the non-Dalit castes from Brahmins to the land-owning caste to the barbers; all live here containing the settlement's main temples. On the other hand, the word 'Keri' means the village where the Dalits live, separated from the main body of the village and etymologically the word also means a street, a fleeting human existence.

the same: a place close to nature, secluded from the hullabaloo of the structured violence of society and urbanization. Hence it is the nature and the indigenous lifestyle and birth rights over the ecosystem which provides the Dalits with a life force against the harshness of the oppressive class binary system.

The historical origin of nature-writing and its lineage can be traced back further to the Vedic civilization of India. In contemporary Indian English literature, the trend of nature writing focuses on the question of creating ecological consciousness and settling the dispute between science-culture enigmas. The ecocritical writing here, broadly mitigates the gap of seeing nature from a scientific-intellectual standpoint, through landscapes and physical-context talking about 'eco-ethics'^{6,7} through myth, legends, folklore, ecological inheritance, forceful migration, stripped of rights and livelihood, ethnic demography's survival, local culture-activism and sometimes only mere personified pristine beauty. Mostly rural and ethnic communities are seen in these narratives bearing the pain of exploitation along with their natural surroundings, while the urbanized-bourgeois have been seen in the power-driven positions. In *Rig Veda*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Sanskrit poems of Kalidasa, works of some Mughal writers, some British expeditioners and historians; ecocritical writing has achieved multifariousness in its appeal. Though it mainly flourished through early-independence and post-independent Indian fictions: in works of Salim Ali, Arundhati Roy, Ruskin Bond, Raja Rao, M. Krishnan, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai et al. and through activists like Medha Patkar, Sundar Lal Bahuguna and many others in the late 1960's; which also mark the participation of Indian women for a greater cause.

Caste and Nature: An Indian Perspective

The ecological ethic of care embedded in Indian communities has always been dominated and curbed under state bureaucracy and recuperated neo-Brahminism, where the very assumption that the moral status depends upon the identity of

⁷ This concept ensures a philosophical, holistic approach to consider every life on this earth is equal and has its intrinsic value, no matter how it is relevant or irrelevant to human beings. It also grants our responsibility to preserve our environment; ecosystem and nature not for our sustenance only but also out of our fundamental duty. It also depicts our moral relationship, value and harmonious co-existence with all other natural objects. Eminent scholars in this discipline are Aldo Leopold, Arne Næss, and Alan Marshall etc.

interests of the dominant instead of recognizing the pluralistic, heterogeneous inherited rights is questioned for religion, ethnicity, lineage, orthodoxy, sectarian exploitation, improper rehabilitation and trauma. The environment is naturally conceived as *Prakriti*^{7,8} a feminine identity that needs to be cultivated for our common, inherited and acquired source of nurture. A surrogate mother, with whom our umbilical cord has long been cut off (separation from innocence and source of birth) but still holds a nostalgic connection and a continuous source of our nutrients. On the other hand, Dalit, a subservient of Hindu religion, due to the latter's ancestral and hierarchical structure, thinks that our living body is created by a greater cosmic man *Purusha*^{8,9} under whose advocacy we perform our living duties where it is believed that hegemony, complex class structure (according to the birth), division of labour and its associated injustices are stratified, historical and structural to our country and society. As it is opined by a Dalit writer:

My eyes opened and I saw a broken piece of sky, agitated, caught in the square of the window. A big, inky black cloud had grabbed the feeble sun and squeezed it, breaking the sun's legs – Ajay Navaria^{9,10}

The representations of many natural resources and ecology thus, pushed the Dalits into delegitimized spaces followed by inaccessibility and exclusion. In spite of a considerable sacrifice to conserve and recharge the natural bodies, the Dalits, for a pre-ordained set-up of untouchability, community-based occupation, ghettoization, have long been disempowered, stigmatized and isolated (with only some assigned roles of maintaining the excretory and cleaning the waste, filth, dirt, left-overs, stinks) in the contested space of environment and eco-system. The Marxian idea of the human-nature relationship is largely practical from the outset, and hence is based on action, which also defends the inclusion of caste in Indian environmental politics. It is

⁸ *Prakriti* and *Purusha* are two complementary manifestations of the Brahmanical incarnation of *Isvara* in the Hindu religion. *Prakriti* means that which can be found unaltered in its natural form and existence. It normally carries the feminine essence within it. Its opposite is *Vikriti*, a substance, which is deformed and altered from its original, ethnic and natural state.

⁹ *Purusha* is a complex concept best described in relation to *Prakriti* in Vedic philosophy and texts of *Upanishads*. It refers to the plural, immobile male (bearer of spirituality, cosmic relationship and pure consciousness); manifested in Shiva according to the *Rig Veda* in the theory of creation. It consists of everything and everyone.

¹⁰ A Dalit author and academician too, author of two books of short stories: *Patkatha Aur Anya Kahaniyan* (2006) and *Yes Sir* (2012) and a novel: *Udhar Ke Log* (2009). His, *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013) is an anthology of short stories, which, later gets translated into English.

the state-sponsored biopolitics that is alienating the labour of the Dalits and making their own righteous environment unfamiliar to them which has been previously discussed in the socio-political context of Bengal and Kerala.

The dichotomy between the social security model and populist-totalitarian approach of development has found a debate between Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar in India, which can further defend my findings of village-based caste-nature representation in fictional narratives of Indian English literature. Earlier, the hierarchical environmental activism used to see casteism as a socio-cultural and historical determinant and the Dalits were seen largely as part of a homogenous crux and unified eco-system which is already lopsided with hegemony and Brahminical sabbatical ascendancy. The Dalit intellectuals, later on, through their lived experiences talked about the community's "contextual, social and organic connection with the nature and natural resources and have termed them 'rooted in the soil'" (Sharma 35). While, Gandhi's view was Western, based on sustainability and equity around the environment, B. R. Ambedkar truly pointed out the differences in thinking about the environmental space, especially in the village as a homogeneous, unitary, and neutral of religious and other social strictures. The latter opposed the untouchability and denial to share the development with the Dalits in the Indian Village system. Though being criticised for a long time, he has been hailed by later environmentalists like Madhav Gadgil, Vandana Shiva and Maria Miles, who romanticize the Dalit issue, and in the concept of *ecofeminism*¹¹ have shown us through the differences between the pre-capitalist, and the colonial Asian society, how harmony gets shattered and the idea of development becomes valid only at the expense of breaking the age-old organic ties. The Dalit narratives that I have chosen are symbolic of them.

In the Mahar movement, Ambedkar tried to shape the paradigm of environmental justice in India, and how it is laden with caste-issue by citing the inaccessibility of water around a village in Maharashtra. The Mahar communities have

¹¹ Ecofeminism is a concept which mainly relies on the concept of gender to analyse the relationship between humans and natural objects. French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne coined this term for the first time. It calls for the abolition of binaries that are available in the current capitalist society, and it also calls for a green, egalitarian and collaborative approach for environmental conservation, where there will be no such dominant group. Some notable scholars in this field are: Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood etc.

to face untouchability as the water gets polluted with their touch according to other villagers. For him, the environmental division across the rural and urban areas is violently capitalist, binaristic and oppressive in its approach, but for the Dalits it is doubly marginalised for passing and carrying it through generations, facing gender divisions and class discriminations. The issue of sustainable development, a primordial approach recently taken by state politics across the world views the entire society as a homogenous entity. Whether people have access or not, no historical context has been taken into consideration. In India, apart from the unequal distribution of wealth, it is also the unequitable positionality; where the lower castes live in worse situations than even the poorest people. Hence, we cannot consider only the ahistorical standpoint as the Dalit narratives are trying to archive and show how personalized experience often differs from collective suffering. The parameters to examine the wretchedness must be mutually consensual, embracing heterogeneous techniques including granting the rights of indigenous people over various ecological spaces according to their needs.

The God (Has Never Been) of Small Things

Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*, a novel of memories and nostalgia, grounded in the luscious natural landscape of Aymanam in mid-Travancore, wishes to dwell in the exoticism of the place, but is shadowed by a blank yet panoptical vision – a vision that engulfs everything but disastrously fails to register and succumb to the prevailing condition. Based on the murder of an untouchable who is a Dalit Christian, the narrative invokes a flashpoint of the stringent-dominant-oppressive system of caste, class, and sexual codes prevalent in Kerala. It archives the shifting regional socio-political-cultural climate of the 1960s, when feudal landlords, upper class, and caste values had been on the verge of decline and communism that gained force in the state, failed miserably. Aymanam is rendered upon these twin scenarios, separated by a period of twenty-three years, visualised and experienced through the seven-year-old twins and a thirty-one-year-old adult. In Roy's novel, the culturally and socially constructed discourses grapple the body, and thus, the latter tries to find its relevance through the compensation of its shame and guilt (which is also essential in the case of casting out a Dalit). In spite of the patriarchal forbearings, which Ammu feels strongly

as she once has been sexually coerced (hence the river acts as a border between her living enigma and her trauma), the characters' interaction with failure always questions the dominant orthodoxies in the nature which acts as a seizure to the human freedom.

Rahel and Estha's view of the environment reveals a pristine purity that evokes childhood's innocence and poignancy. While Rahel's thirty-one-year-old subjective impressions of the landscape are profound, their interaction and reactions to the environment are more like objective negotiations formed through the touch of nature with a child's intellect. "Manam" in Malayalam refers to both the subject's and the object's mind, which is why the phrase "Aymanam" can be broken down into *I-manam* or *Ey-e-manam* (mind's eye) (Anand 96-102). This same undifferentiated object is responsible for the disparities between the dual perspectives. Rahel and Estha's social learning begins at the same time when the river is polluted by hazardous waste. Just like their childhood innocence has been sullied, the river has clinically contaminated the life-struggle in the locality. The river separates two social worlds while connecting the touchable and intangible worlds. They were living in a Syrian Christian upper-class, upper caste home where hypocrisy and pretence were wrapped in age-old values and customs. When Velutha appears as a 'noble savage', he represents the 'cultural other' to this world- the unapproachable world of caste Christians — low caste, low-class *Paravans* entrenched in nature. There are various meanings of the act of crossing the river. As for Ammu and Velutha, it meant disobeying class and caste hierarchies and opposing the patriarchal feudal order destroying all social and cultural conventions. Whereas, when the children are overwhelmed by tradition, the natural impression, and human memory are perfectly merged.

They dreamed of their river.

Of the coconut trees that bent into and watched with coconut eyes, the

Boats slide by. Upstream in the mornings, downstream in the evenings.

And the dull, sullen sound of the boatmen's bamboo poles as they

Thudded against the dark oiled boatwood. It was warm, the water.

Greygreen. Like rippled silk.

With fish in it.

With the sky and the tress in it.

And at night, the broken yellow moon in it (Roy 123-4).

Whose Name is 'Titash' in *A River Named Titash*?

Amitav Ghosh refers to Adwaita Mallabarman's novel *A River Named Titash* (1956), while discussing global warming. A fictional river, the *Titash* flows through a community in rural Bengal where the narrative is situated. The novel begins: "Titash is the name of a river (1)." Her banks are full of water, her surface is alive with waves, and her heart is full of life. It has a dreamlike beat. There are differences in look and essence, however, between all the rivers on earth. The way they interact with others and the way others interact with them vary. The river there is a frenetic sculptor at work, destroying and creating restlessly in frantic ecstasy, riding the high-flying swing of terrifying energy. There is nothing special about *Titash*; it's just a regular river. History books, national upheavals, and other historical records will not mention it by name. Again, a mother's love, a wife's affection is inscribed on its banks. A brother's love is imprinted on its banks. It is possible that some people are aware of this history, while others are unaware. This is a factual account of the past. The author is successful in culminating the regional literature, and topographical history associated with the folk and tribal tradition of Bengal and has woven this into the novel's elegiac mood. The duality explored in the character name Ananta is thus, a caricature of the duplicity and hypocrisy that the lower caste always faces. The folk is constantly being feminized, and it becomes more prominent when Ananta gets turned down vehemently, in an insulting manner by the upper-caste woman. Thus, he could say probably, "My Anantabala (*bala*, the very suffix refers to a girl, a feminine subject in the regional language, hence it can be conceived, that Ananta is looking for the androgenicity to mingle up with *prakriti*) is waiting only for me" (Mallabarman 256).

The novel's four parts are woven together in a complex web of narratives, with vivid descriptions of the river, Malo, the fishermen, fish varieties, nets and boats, vibrant community life and cultural spirit, formation of the silt bed, the beginning of wet-rice farming, and the painful displacement of the Malo. In the film, we follow a fisherman on his shattered trip through nature, trying to reclaim his social and personal space. He travels forward and backwards in space and time in search of a new

spatial identity, which he eventually achieves. A restless youngster exhibits an insatiable desire for knowledge of nature and education. A fisherman is enraged at the exploitation by the upper-caste traders and moneylenders and becomes friends with Muslim peasants. The story's structure, dialogue, and lyrics are infused with nature. The interaction between people, rivers, and seasons infuses events and images, metaphors and meditations, songs, and talks. Daily life, festivals, events, and reveries all reflect nature's ever-changing state. The river both invokes and impacts people's lives and thoughts. The sexual vulnerability and associated oppression are not because of the gendered binary but also due to the caste-based bigotry. When Dayalchand claims, "We hear that Kayasthas come to your home to practise table-playing, and to eye your daughter.... Think of this- you're mixing with Kayasthas will not confer on you the rank of Kayastha." (Mallabarman 89): it is an emblem of the upper-caste haughtiness which is ever-ready to push off mortals of the cliff of sustenance and also existence. But the mastery of the author lies with how he makes it a sentimental narrative and the very river *Titash* becomes the only oasis, caregiver and sympathizer, as the narrator names their history as *darader itihaash*, history of compassion^{11,12}. They may have not protested against the injustices around them directly, but they have never swallowed it visibly; their 'weapons of the weak' (in James Scot's phrase) is reflected thus:

Although they have lost the voice to protest injustice, they never swallow injustice. Hence ... the multitude of the speechless, even if they cannot storm to the forefront of protest, unfailingly express their objection, however indirectly [it may be]. Sometimes they express it by laughing, sometimes by crying, sometimes by whistling. And elsewhere, inside their homes, the speechless protest by smashing utensils, by banging their heads against walls, or by setting a lighted match to kerosene-soaked end of their own clothing (Mallabarman 87).

Conclusion

The entire ecosystem around us is a contingency of some segregated but mutually interconnected living organisms. In this present scenario of all-encompassing neo-

¹² *Darad* means here sympathy or compassion, affection, attachment and pain.

capitalist socio-economic dialectic, the divide is ever-growing, and so is inequality. In the last few decades, India has witnessed a series of social and political movements to save ecology, but like other political movements, these also fail to embrace the subaltern, the most compassionate section of Indian demography in the context of ecological livelihood due to its murky sense of identity and false dispositif of hegemony. The narratives of my discussion not only consider natural objects as mere background, but also assimilate the policies of sustainable development imbibed in the lives of the Dalit communities. The monolithic and constructionist paradigm of the present ideologies has been failing so far to understand the evil roots of exploitation on these outcastes and their subsequent rights over nature for a long time. As a result, progress has been made but is mostly compromised under the echelon of power. To resist oppression from the capitalist developments, we need to juxtapose the politics of identity with environmental equilibrium in autobiographical narratives. While the first one will give more onus to the existential and sustainable mode of using resources and its preservation, the second one will address the issue of development for a more equitable, heterogeneous, humane and progressive society.

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