

EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION: CLIMATE CATASTROPHE AND DALIT ECOLOGY IN *TITAS EKTI NADIR NAAM*

MUNMUN PERVIN
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Vidyasagar University

Abstract - Climate concern in literature serves as a poignant lens through which authors articulate the intricate relationship between humanity and the environment. *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* stands as a canvas where climate concerns are vividly portrayed alongside the Anthropocentric interventions resulting in environmental degradation. *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* delves into the lives of the fishermen community along the banks of the Titas river during the 20th century. The novel explores the complex relationships, traditions, and hardships faced by the characters in the novel against the backdrop of Titas River. The river becomes more than a geographical setting; it becomes a metaphor for flow of life. In *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* the climate concern is intricately woven into the narrative, primarily through the portrayal of the Titas River and its impact on the lives of the fishing community. The novel portrays environmental disruptions such as floods and changes in the river's course which inflict vulnerability on the lives of the Dalit communities residing the riverine area. The livelihoods of the marginalized fishermen are directly influenced by the health of the river ecosystem. Changes in climate patterns pose challenges to their way of life. The proposed paper explores the intersection of Dalit ecology and climate concerns through the novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*. The study aims to unravel the impacts of climate change on the lives of Dalit communities and their traditional practices. This research also seeks to propose sustainable solutions in mitigating the impacts of climate change on marginalized communities.

Index Terms – climate concerns , Dalit Ecology , environment, exploitation, marginalised

Dalit Experience and Ecological Narratives

Nature literature has traditionally covered ecological concerns , geography, industrial developments and sacrality , and has frequently overlooked the Dalit literary tradition. While environmental literature has expanded to consider the intersection of nature , culture and society, but the lack of recognition for the Ecological concerns in the literature of the marginalized society remains a noteworthy issue. The Dalit writings in India began with the Dalit Panther Movement and gained momentum in the 1990s. Dalit short stories, novels , autobiography, folklore became widespread in recent times and asserted an ever-present existence in the Indian literary canon. However, Dalit authors have made significant contributions to environmental humanities by offering unique perspective on the intersections of caste , nature , and ecological catastrophe. Dalit activists Kanchallaiah , Gopal Guru , Goldy George interrogated the environmental policies in India. They opined that contemporary ecological movements failed to include casteist and hegemonic structures in environmental policies. Mukul Sharma, renowned Dalit Ecology scholar states that ecological encounters and experience of the marginalized class is distinctive. They hold different memory of their environmental exposure. Omvedt also suggested that Indian environmentalists often support Gandhi's idealization of rural villages, portraying them as places where people coexist harmoniously with nature. On the other hand, anti-caste activists typically resonate with Ambedkar's belief that Indian villages perpetuate social inequality, marginalizing Dalits from physical, social, and ecological realms. Dalit writings are mostly autobiographical notes, personal experiences and tales of suffering, humiliation and their deprivation and discrimination in the hands of mainstream society. Notable works like Bama's *Karukku* , Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* , stories like 'Shaplas' by Panchanan Das , 'The Crocodile' and 'Birds of the Forest' by Shyamal Kumar Pramanik , and oral narrative titled "My

Childhood : An Oral Narrative” by Archana Mandal have come to enrich modern English studies widely. These literary works are tales of their suffering and resistance and how they sought to find a place in Indian literature as a self-ascertaining genre.

The origin of Nature writing in India can be traced back to the Vedic age. In Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata or Vedic scriptures mother nature is deified and worshipped. This ideology is also espoused by Vandana Shiva in her seminal work *Ecofeminism*, where she proclaimed Nature is the goddess Prakriti who shouldn't be ravaged by the Anthropocentric world. Author like Amitav Ghosh, one of the most influential figures in Environmental literature in contemporary era, delineates the sufferings of the marginalized society in *The Hungry Tide* in the shoreline regions of Bangladesh and he rightly points out Adwaita Mallabarman's novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, a pertinent literary text in terms of environmental catastrophe. Adwaita Mallabarman, a member of an impoverished Dalit fisherfolk caste, penned the novel *A River Called Titas* in 1956. Set in rural Bengal along the fictional river Titas, the novel reflects Mallabarman's upbringing in a village community, his later migration to the city, and his early demise from tuberculosis. This posthumously published, autobiographically infused work serves as a self-reflection within the context of the community, its culture, and its living environment. The narrative begins with a description of Titas as a vibrant river, brimming with water, alive with ripples, and flowing in the rhythm of a dream. These literatures from the margins, I found in *Writings from the Sundarbans* as an attempt that endeavours to disrupt the entrenched silence surrounding socio-cultural suppression arising from the society's meticulously maintained system of reinforcing social hierarchy, by addressing issues such as caste discrimination, gender bias, class divisions, and economic and intellectual disparities. *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* portrays the suppression of the fishermen community, their exploitation and 'otherisation' not just in terms of culture and civilization but also they are deprived of access to Mother nature's resources to sustain their lives. These people preach a peaceful harmonious coexistence with the Nature and its comprising ecological networks but they are actually denied their rights to freely live in their natural ecological world.

Emergence of Dalit Ecology

Dalit Ecology as a conceptual structure encompasses and addresses issues of various caste discrimination, displacement and deprivation, devaluation and its resultant ecological segregation and deprivation of the Dalits. The term 'Dalit' literally indicates socially outcast, marginalised and 'downtrodden'. In India, the practice of caste hierarchy in Hindu society kept the Dalit communities at the bottom of the social strata, i.e., 'varnas' and consequently they were forced to remain unaware of their physical environment and surroundings. They lived in the peripheral zone of human-nature binary. The upper class section of the society exploited them as a tool to environmental predation and threw them to catastrophic environmental and ecologically hazardous outcomes at large. They were denied the rights to utilise fertilised land, fresh water and other natural resources for sustenance. They were compelled to do menial jobs including sweeping, scavenging, toilet cleaning and carrying human and animal wastes manually by the environmentally conscious and socially empowered upper castes. Furthermore, the social justice and rights movements for the marginalised classes were often led by the privileged class and hence the Dalit experiences often remain disregarded and hidden from the mainstream society. Adwaita Mallabarman's novel comes as a solidarity towards Dalit ecological activism and it interrogates the upper class anthropocentric society in terms of environmental exploitation and subjugation, specifically the politics of hydrological justice. The opening section of the novel begins with the following lines "Titas is just an ordinary river. No one will find its name in the history books, in any of the chronicles of national upheavals.... True its history lacks any grand element that could make you swell with pride as you read about it in books. But its banks are imprinted with stories of a mother's affection, a brother's love, the caring of a wife, a sister and a daughter. That history perhaps some know, perhaps some don't. Still, that history is true and real. Along its banks appear so many vivid pictures of people with flesh and blood, accounts of their humanity and inhumanity.... Perhaps they have faded away. Perhaps the river will never reveal them to anyone. Yet the stories are all there, deathless like the monkey king Angad (Mallabarman, 22).

In the above lines the river serves as a living entity which sustains and witnesses their everyday ordinary existence and experiences. Dalits hold different and distinct experiences towards nature, where nature serves as

a canvas documenting their struggles , oppression and hardships in sustaining their lives owing to norms set by the anthropocentric capitalist upper class in terms of accessing mother nature's resources. The novel is divided into four sections with accounts of the Malo community's lived experiences in and around the river. The vivid description of the river , farming lands adjacent to the river banks and the painful displacement of the Malo people from their coastal abode. Throughout the novel the Malo community and its people try to form an identity of their own revolving around the riverine existence , they always nurtured a quest for personal space and belonging away from the dominant upper class interventions. The plot of the novel shows one of the Malo fishermen is agitated by the exploitative treatment and torments of the upper caste traders. They don't have a voice against the traders as they are socially and hegemonically weakend by the privileged class. The river serves as a living confidante of the tales of pains and sufferings of these downtrodden communities and apart from Malofisherfolk some other ethnic minorities also feel distressed by the upper caste Hindus. These people hold an intimate bond with nature.

Mainstream environmental criticism fought against environmental destruction but it failed to include ecological injustice in terms of race , community, culture, gender, and economic status. Dalit ecology as a developing genre of casteist study of nature brought forth issues of deprivation of the Dalits in accessing natural resources like land, water and a hygienic living and hence tried to address the issues of their oppression and 'otherisation' and exclusion from the ecological set up by the anthropocentric, instrumentally and socially empowered communities through their hegemonic manipulation. The hazardous effects of natural calamities hardly affect the privileged class people. It is the Dalit community, namely the Malo people in the novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, undergo tremendous hardship and difficulty in survival during the time of drought. One of the characters in the novel , Kishore's father passes away due to persistent hunger and malnutrition. Many people leave for the city, leaving behind their ethnic roots and as a result their cultural identity is threatened. They have always lived under the domination and control of the upper class people. "The Village was once large but has shrunk since the railroads took away part of the Maloneighbourhood. Mightier needs have pushed away the needs of the smaller people."(33). The Malos are not even permitted in the slightest some land to maintain their livelihoods. Their ecological needs are always blown away by the capitalist Brahmins and colonial rulers. Amidst the plot, it can be seen that their houses were occupied to perform 'jatrass' and they could do nothing but remain a spectator in their own home which delineates the pathetic circumstances they were victimized to by the Brahmins and upper Varna representatives. In terms of hydrological resources and access to riverine needs, the Brahmin feudals deprived the Malos severely and this is explicitly evident in these lines "The big landlord there took away from the Malos the land near the water where they used to tie their boats and spread their nets , and he leased it to another community"(36). Thus their livelihood is threatened despite the fact they don't ravage the river Titas , or mother nature more specifically. They solely depend on nature for sustenance and survival, not for capitalist and social benefits like the anthropocentric money mongers.

Titas Ekti Nadir Naam as a Climate Concerned Novel

Adwaita Mallabarmam was born by the Titas river in a modest home of the Malofisherfolk, passed away at 37 in 1951. Though he never witnessed the publication of his initial novel, his narrative depicting a river and its inhabitants, captivates readers with its genuine beauty. The book is embraced by multiple marginalized communities concurrently—Dalits, Ecofeminists, Malofisherfolk, environmental refugees, and the river itself claim ownership of its significance. The novel's four segments intricately weave narratives, immersing in and emerging from nature. It vividly portrays the river, Malofisherfolk, various fish species, nets, boats, vibrant community life, cultural spirit, the formation of silt beds, the inception of wet-rice farming, and the painful displacement of the Malo community. The reader witnesses the fragmented journey of a fisherman navigating through nature, striving to establish his personal and social presence. His trajectory spans both forward and backward in space and time, aiming for a renewed spatial identity. Along the river, a woman embarks on a quest for self-discovery and reunification with her lost family. The river undergoes a profound transformation, unimaginably altering its course. A curious boy, brimming with an insatiable thirst for understanding nature and acquiring education, seeks knowledge tirelessly. A fisherman harbors resentment towards the exploitation by upper-caste traders and moneylenders, and forms a close bond with a Muslim peasant. They all suffer similar exploitation and casteist marginalisation "Although they have lost the voice to protest injustice, they never

swallow injustice. Hence, time after time, place after place, the multitude of the speechless, even if they cannot storm to the forefront of protest, unfailingly express their objection, however indirectly. 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” (87). Dalit perspectives on environmental justice emphasize the significance of caste and hierarchy in evaluating environmental issues within both natural and social frameworks. The characters, settings, dialogues and many other elements in the novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* shows nature-centric theme and social hierarchy and discrimination against the Dalit communities that operate within the Indian subcontinent not just in terms of social structure, which is again designed by the upper class Brahmins into several strata or ‘Varna’, but also in terms of environment. The novel not only centres on the oppression of nature, it also depicts the injustice committed by the upper class against the lower class, along with the repercussions of a natural disaster on the entire Malo community. It explores the interdependence of humans and nature, as well as the impact of natural disasters on human existence. Additionally, the narrative highlights human actions that infringe upon the integrity of the natural world. Mallabharman gives a vivid picture of the geographical space where he was brought up. The river Titas serves as a living entity in the novel and a sustainer of the Malo people. This river witnesses the experiences lived by these subordinate people, the authors writes, “Dawn comes on the river with the most exquisite beauty. The sun is not yet out and the transparent sky, taking on a hint of blue, spreads bluish creamy white light throughout. The sweet tones and soft serenity of this open expanse make all the pores of the heart sing with joy. The unobstructed gentle air rouses the delicate clapping of hundreds of millions of baby waves” (45).

The Malo people maintain their sustenance only through fishing. As an instance, Kishore’s father remained a fisherman throughout his life, and Kishore and Subol also undertook several boat journeys on Titas river for fishing. Their life revolves in close proximity of Mother Nature and even for festivities like “Poush Sankranti” they grind rice powder and dry them under the sun to make delicious food items called *pitha*, as we see Ananta’s mother, Basanti spend the entire night preparing Pitha at Ramkeshor’s residence. Additionally, they craft Chatu using puffed rice. Malo people’s lives are entirely embedded into Nature’s womb away from urbanization and artificial means of living. Malo religious culture depicts worshipping Tulsi plant and they consider it sacred. But their life becomes difficult as they are oppressed by the upper class Brahmin landholders, who initiate the collection of debts from the fishermen and their households, leading to increased hardships in the villagers’ lives. Their agony and tormented lives are solely witnessed by the river. Titas holds numerous tales about the Malo community’s experiences with spaces, places, imaginative concepts, and customs. Initially, rivers emerge on earth as expansive, unrestricted spaces and Malos create distinct places from these river spaces, imparting them with unique characteristics and atmospheres. These places, encompassing villages, huts, and riverbanks, are inherently connected to the spaces from which they originated. The Malo community, as a collective group, maintains deep attachments to these space-place combinations and the associated practices. The essence of being Malo is rooted in the harmonious relationship among space, place, and society. Throughout their river journeys at different times, the activities and practices of Malos also reflect Dalit perspectives on rivers, common spaces, and community. The river Titas, along with its tributaries and canals, holds intricate and multi-faceted significance for the Malo community, encompassing social, economic, cultural, and natural values. However, the caste based riverine existence of Dalit women and men, coupled with their cultural recollections and religious rituals, has historically produced essential elements for developing alternative stories to caste supremacy. The inherent characteristics rooted in nature — the unrestrained flow of Titas, equality among diverse individuals, the shared spaces of the Malo community, and the openness of both space and place — serve as the foundation for a culture that transcends caste distinctions in their surroundings, even without complete eradication of caste.

Conclusion

Titas underwent several transformations over the decades, the rapidly growing problems of increased agricultural practices along river banks, establishment of fishing harbours and fishermen community offices, government policies over access to riverine resources tremendously affected the coastal regions and rivers and tributaries. Apart from the flood, various natural disasters and subsequent change in the course of river-flow

are other climate factors that led to the displacement of tribal communities thus sweeping away their culture and very existence within the river ecosystem. The Malos' identity was formed through their daily engagement with the river, water, boats, and fish. Despite the imperfect interplay between these elements, their constant movement towards an endless horizon—upstream, exploring new tributaries, and covering vast distances—defined their lifestyle. River fish served as both their livelihood and sustenance, fulfilling their basic needs. The dynamic interplay of changing weather, water conditions, rain, and floods consistently brought surprises, introducing new varieties of fish. Each significant stage in the lives of the Malos, such as birth, marriage, and death, evolved in conjunction with and in response to nature. However, during times of river drying up, the Malos, their community appear to be dispersing. Despite being vulnerable dwellers along the river, the Malos also simultaneously offer contrasting perspectives on the Dalit environment. River Titas is a site of intersection between Dalit lives and regional ecology. Therefore, Dalits contribute to environmentalism to a great extent, since the establishment of civilization, as they often evolve discourse of habitation and adaptation as and when Mother Earth changes her ecological structure. In *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, Malos feel secured at the heart of Titas river. Hence, class distinction and oppression in terms of environmental policies need to be eradicated in Indian Eco-literacy to further the scope of Dalit Ecology and inclusivity of every culture and society should be promoted towards curbing ecological apocalypse and environmental degradation in the age of Anthropocentrism.

Works Cited

- Acharya, Indranil, and Sayantan Dasgupta. *Writings From the Sundarbans*. 2023.
- Bargi, Drishadwati. "Understanding 'Dalit Chetna' in Adwaita Mallabharman's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, a River Called *Titash*." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, vol. 8, no. 1, May 2016, pp. 90–104, doi:10.1177/2455328x16628777.
- Acharya, Indranil and Sayantan Dasgupta. *Writings from the Sundarbans*. Orient Blackswan, 2023.
- Era, MahmudaIasmin. "Woman-Nature Interconnection in *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called *Titas*)."
IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS, vol. 22, no. 10, Oct. 2017, pp. 76–81, doi:10.9790/0837-2210127681.
- Mallabharman, Adwaita. *A River Called Titas*. Univ of California Press, 1993.
- Prasad, Indulata. "Towards Dalit Ecologies." *Environment and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, Sept. 2022, pp. 98–120. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2022.130107>.
- Rajak, Sumit. Exploring Caste, Catastrophe and Civilization in Mallabharman's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (a River Called *Titash*) and Its Film Adaptation. 2022, www.redalyc.org/journal/7038/703873575001/html.
- Sandrp, View All Posts By. "Titash Ekti Nadir Naam: Swan Song of a River." SANDRP, 9 May 2019, sandrp.in/2019/05/09/titash-ekti-nadir-naam-swan-song-of-a-river/#:~:text=Adwaita%20writes%3A,horse%2Ddrawn%20vehicles.
- Sharma, Mukul. "'My World Is a Different World': Caste and Dalit Eco-Literary Traditions." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 6, Oct. 2019, pp. 1013–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1667057>.
- . "Dalit on Earth: River *Titash*, Malo Commons and Cultural Affirmation." *Ashokauniversity*, Feb. 2021, www.academia.edu/45227476/Dalit_on_Earth_River_Titash_Malo_Commons_and_Cultural_Affirmation.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.