

**Words on Water:**  
**Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's**  
***The Hungry Tide***

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**Abstract**

Water is the central characteristic of the coastal region between India and Bangladesh known as the Sundarbans. Here water swallows and regurgitates land with every turn of the tide. The tiger conservation project in the Sundarbans in the 1970s prompted the state-led violent eviction of Bangladeshi refugees from the islands, and in 2000 the government handed over large tracts of the islands to a private company for an ecotourism project. These events form the backdrop of Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*. The first incident is narrativized in the novel, presenting a political indictment of the second development. This paper explores the role of water as both a metaphor and a material presence in the text in order to examine how the novelist articulates the rupture of social hierarchies and voices dissent over the violation of human rights in the name of conservation.

**Keywords**

Amitav Ghosh, Sundarbans, tiger conservation, refugees, human-animal conflict, ecotourism

*“The Animal Is in the World  
Like Water in Water [sic]”*

—Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* 19

Amitav Ghosh may have become the first Indian writer to strongly engage with ecological issues in Indian English fiction with the publication of his novel *The Hungry Tide* in 2004. This might come as no surprise, since Ghosh worked as a journalist and has written extensively on various topical issues including terrorism, religious fundamentalism, displacement, and the many postcolonial realities of the Third World. His fictional oeuvre—*The Circle of Reason* (1986), *Shadow Lines* (1990), *In an Antique Land* (1994), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004)—is permeated by an underlying consciousness of the subaltern and a narrativization of the subaltern experience. *The Hungry Tide* takes a step further to voice the subaltern experience, in that the novel’s publication had the force of a political pamphlet which made the world take stock of efforts to corporatize parts of the Sundarbans National Park. The novel raises national and global awareness about the history of violence inscribed on the Sundarbans, throwing into relief the continuing exploitation of the place. The paratexts<sup>1</sup> of the novel, including the “Author’s Note,” interviews, and articles from the time of publication, also serve to buttress Ghosh’s political ends in writing the novel. As Lawrence Buell argues, ecocritics explore literary texts as “refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments, notwithstanding the artifactual properties of textual representation and their mediation by ideological and other socio-historical factors” (30). In this vein, Ghosh’s novel reveals the interactions between the state, the poor, the fauna and flora, and the physical environment, and in doing so this work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that were inherent in the conservation efforts in the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Genette invented the term “paratexts” for material that lies on the threshold of the narrative. This includes chapter-headings, pictures, promotional material, interviews given by the author, dust jackets, preface, foreword and even other novels written by the author, which can influence our understanding of the narrative and hence, become part of the narrative. Genette argues that

a text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this word but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. (1)

Sundarbans. More precisely, it is the discursive construction of the Sundarbans' waterscape in Ghosh's novel that helps achieve this purpose.

In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh problematizes the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. Ghosh sets his novel in the Sundarbans, the tide country where the contours of land constantly change with the ebb and flow of water. But Ghosh presses this point further: He uses water as the agent that rewrites the social matrix of the Sundarbans in the novel. Water is both motif and agent, shaping not only the story but also the geography and history of the land. The unusual agency of water is highlighted here—its potential to act, as well as to move from object/other position to that of the subject and, in doing so, reverse the object/subject status of the characters. It is also significant that Ghosh uses water as the agent to resolve the chief conflict fictionalized in the novel. First, water, as the agent of change, provides Ghosh a way to steer clear of taking a moral or ideological stand while addressing the complex struggle between humans and animals for survival. Second, the motif of water makes it possible to objectively and dispassionately highlight the plight of both the dispossessed people and the threatened wildlife. Third, by using water as an element to undermine the hegemonic social order, Ghosh is able to keep the focus on the conflict, rather than on the resolution, making the novel itself and indeed its primary trope, water, the agents of political and social change. In this context, my paper explores the ways in which water moves beyond being a recurring literary motif to become an active participant that dynamically engages and exerts an impact on the human drama. Water, as both a symbolic and a literal phenomenon in the novel, serves heuristically to expose the ecosocial and ecopolitical issues that the novel addresses as it dramatizes the competing claims of human and non-human species for existence.

## The Voices and the Presences

*The Hungry Tide* unfolds through the eyes of two upwardly mobile, educated individuals who undertake a journey to the tide country. Kanai Dutt, the Bengali-born, Delhi-settled businessman, arrives in Lusibari to visit his Aunt Nilima and claim the package left for him by his late uncle, Nirmal. The package, he discovers, is an account of his uncle's last days, which revolved around Kusum and her son Fokir, who are portrayed as the victims of eviction from the island of Morichjhapi. The second voice of the novel is that of Piyali Roy, an American-born cetologist of

Indian background who chooses to journey into the Sundarbans to study the threatened Gangetic River dolphins. Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one unfolding through Nirmal's journals recounting the Morichjhapi episode that happened twenty-eight years earlier, and the second through Piya's expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the people and the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the chief conflict in the novel—the problems and issues of wilderness conservation and its related social costs in areas populated by the socially and economically disprivileged both in the past and the present.

The sub-narrative foregrounded in the character of Fokir represents the third voice of this ecological drama. William W. Hunter mentions forest guides called “fakirs” who accompanied woodcutters and hunters on their expeditions to the forest. Hunter points out that these woodcutters were so superstitious that they would not venture into the forest unaccompanied by a *fakir*, “who is supposed to receive power from the presiding deity—whom he propitiates with offerings—over the tigers and other animals. Occasionally a large number of boats proceed together in a party, taking a *fakir* with them” (312). *Fakir* is the anglicised form of Fokir, the name of Ghosh's character who guides Piya and Kanai through the waterways. Fokir also worships Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, and loses his life in the process of steering the outsiders safely through the forests. He fits the archetype of the hapless and illiterate native, exposed to the man-eating tigers, sharks, crocodiles, and snakes inhabiting the tide country and also vulnerable to bribe-taking officials of the state, who are constant threats to his survival. But Ghosh empowers him on another level, in his familiarity with the tide country and its creatures, and the legacy of centuries-old oral tradition he inherits, qualities that distinguish him from Piya and Kanai. Despite their high-tech GPS equipment and educational background, the outsiders are dependant on Fokir to navigate the waters. Ghosh's portrayal of Fokir thus resists the stereotypical patronization of him as the noble savage or the innocent villager or even the epitome of an ecological pioneer.

Added to these three characters is the uniqueness of the Sundarbans, the waterscape that alternates between being subject and object, victim and victimizer. Water in the Sundarbans, more than being a passive recipient of both social and physical changes, exercises its potential to transform the physical space and in turn alter the social order. For both Piya and Kanai the expedition and the storm at the end of the novel that remaps the landscape facilitate a renewed and more specific understanding of the Sundarbans, the place and the people. W. R. Greer suggests that choosing the Sundarbans as his setting allows Ghosh “to create a setting where

everyone is on an even footing . . . the hostile environment erases all social strata because everyone is an equal in the struggle to survive in the hostile environment.” Situated in the face of the threatening topography of the Sundarbans, social differences between both the urban and rural sets of characters are gradually elided, resulting in an increasing tension between their cultural and social identities. The novel in this sense is suffused with multiple social transitions, between the First World and the Third World, local and global, rural and urban, traditional and modern, and among linguistic, religious, and class barriers, all played out in the context of the waterscape. Only in the face of a hostile environment are the social barriers broken down and overcome, and nature serves as the agent to level all social and cultural hierarchies.

### **Water: The Metaphor and the Material Presence**

In locating the novel in an environment such as the Sundarbans, place emerges as a larger-than-life character, where the water engages with every minor and major change in the lives of the people and the environment. The Sundarbans is the world’s largest mangrove forest area, situated on the delta where three rivers—the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna—meet the sea. It covers an area of 10,000 square kilometres, sprawling across India and Bangladesh. The Indian part of the Sundarbans was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973 and a national park in 1984. Due to its unique and rich biodiversity, the area was declared a Biosphere Reserve in 1989 and a World Heritage Site in 1985 (United Nations Environment Programme and International Union for the Conservation of Nature). It is home to the largest remaining contiguous population of tigers in the world—245 in Indian Sundarbans in 2001-02 according to the Project Tiger census, plus 200 in the Bangladesh Sundarbans (Khan 3)—living side by side with seven million people. The Sundarbans also has a perpetually mutating topography: there are no constant borders between river and sea, fresh water and salt water; and while some islands have existed intact over centuries, many others have their life expectancy measured in hours. Islands here appear and disappear in the course of a single day with the ebb and flow of the tide. If the tide leaves new land without flooding for a while, the mangroves spawning dense undergrowth invade the area within a few short years. Predominantly through the voices of Nirmal, Fokir, and Piya, Ghosh conveys the unique natural history of the Sundarbans. Nirmal, the dreamer revolutionary in the novel, traces the etymology of the “Sundarbans” to its literal translation as the “beautiful forest,” to the presence of the Sundari tree and to Mughal records which

named the region after a tide—the *bhati* tide, giving the region the name “*bhatir desh* or tide country—except that *bhati* is not just the ‘tide’ but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the *bhata*. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest” (Ghosh 8). Apart from this distinctive feature, the very quality of the water in the Sundarbans sustains a vast profusion of aquatic life. Piya ascertains that

this proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the water itself. The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta; rather they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of freshwater running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. (Ghosh 125)

The friction between land and sea in the Sundarbans creates unique ecosystems for plant and animal life, and given the increasing human encroachment on the habitat coupled with lopsided conservative initiatives, tensions between these various elements seem inevitable. The man-eating habit of the Sundarbans tigers<sup>2</sup> has also been attributed to the material properties of the water. Sy Montgomery refers to the German biologist Hubert Hendrichs’s unfinished study of tigers in the Bangladeshi part of the Sundarbans in 1971 which correlated the most frequent attack sites with areas having the saltiest water. He suggested that drinking salty water may cause liver and kidney damage, making the tigers irritable. But before he could test this hypothesis, his study was interrupted by Bangladesh’s war of independence (Montgomery 13). The incessant tide washing away the scent of the tigers’ prey and the dead human bodies floating in the water during the frequent floods are also cited as reasons for the tigers’ man-eating habit, and both are also linked to the continuing depletion of food resources and loss of habitat. In a region

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<sup>2</sup> The number of people killed by tigers has been a matter of debate since official records do not register the many victims who enter the forests illegally for forest produce and firewood. The recent annual toll of people killed by tigers in the Indian Sundarbans tiger reserve has fluctuated between 66 in 1975-76, 15 in 1989, and 42 in 1992 according to the *Carnivore Preservation Trust*. The BBC reported in 2002 that 22 people were killed in Bangladeshi Sundarbans by April of that year (Lawson) and Reuters in June 2006 reported that more than 50 people were killed in the past five years with wildlife officials claiming that the number may be double this since many cases go unreported (Majumdar). Tigerwidows.org, a non-profit website registered in 2002 for helping women whose husbands are killed by the man-eaters, estimates that there are more than thousand tiger widows in the Indian Sundarbans. The actual number of casualties is therefore very difficult to determine.

where the materiality of water has such a significant role to play, the use of water as an analytical category throws light on the conflicts narrated in the novel.

Water as an image and a presence is of special significance in Hindu mythology, and the waterscape of the Sundarbans has a distinctive mythological connotation. A natural symbol, water is chiefly associated with fertility, immortality, place, creation, and the feminine. Water, especially running water, is deemed sacred, an attitude expressed in the reverence shown toward almost every river that flows across the Indian subcontinent. David Kinsley traces this reverence to the Rig Veda, which says that every earthly river has its origins in heaven (187). The river is a continuation of the divine waters that flow from heaven to earth, which ensures that the world is habitable, making possible creation. And no river is considered more holy or powerful than the Ganges in Hindu tradition. Mythology has it that when the Ganges descended from the heavens, so mighty were its currents that it threatened to drown the earth itself. Shiva, anticipating the deluge, captured the river in his dreadlocks. It is only when the river nears the sea that it untangles into a thousand strands forming the vast archipelago of the Sundarbans. The Ganges is the purifier of all sins, and a ritual bath in the river is recommended to wash away all kinds of impurities, which are diverse, given the purity-conscious Hindu social system.<sup>3</sup> As Kinsley writes,

Moving, flowing or falling water is believed to have great cleansing power; a mere sprinkling of water over one's head or a dip in a stream is sufficient to remove most kinds of daily pollution accumulated through normal human intercourse with those in a state less pure than one's own. . . . The physical evidence of this continuous process of purification is the clarity of a river's swiftly flowing source compared to its broad, sluggish, murky mouth before it enters the sea. (189)

Water, in its traditional role of purifier that helps maintain social hierarchies, also functions as a social leveller, breaking down hierarchies in the novel. If the silt is identified as dirt accumulated by the river on its course to the sea, the islands of

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<sup>3</sup> The traditional Hindu social system is based on caste and is known as the varna system, where the community is divided into four categories: Brahmins, the priests and scholars; Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers; Vaishyas, the mercantile community; and Shudras, or the laborers. Those who fall outside the varna system were the untouchables or the outcastes, and sighting or coming in contact with an untouchable was thought to pollute the sanctity of the upper castes. See Singh, Gould, Gupta, and Rodrigues.

the Sundarbans are believed to be the “river’s restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift” (Ghosh 7). The river in the novel is also projected as a potent and formidable entity, charting its own course, gathering all that comes its way, creating and decimating land in its journey to the sea.

## Histories and the Politics of Writing the Tide Country

The Sundarbans is also mentioned in Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, but it has been a relatively forsaken area with regard to human inhabitation and colonial historiography, precisely due to the hostile terrain. Most colonial historiography, prominent among them being an essay by Sir William W. Hunter, first published in *The Statistical Account of Bengal* in 1876, represents the Sundarbans as wanting in the Victorian ideals of a sublime landscape. According to Hunter, the densely forested Sundarbans region was far from edenic. It was sparsely populated although teeming with abundant flora and fauna. He asserts that the area was “entirely uninhabited with a few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fishermen. The whole population is insignificant” (317). As Paul Greenough suggests, the colonial-era Sundarbans were a place where there were “no indigenes: the humans were all immigrants and the tigers and crocodiles were the only aboriginals” (247). Colonial initiatives for settlement were more or less failures, including Sir Daniel Hamilton’s venture to establish a cooperative society in the cyclone-prone region, a historical curiosity that Ghosh also alludes to in the novel.<sup>4</sup> The water that shelters tigers, crocodiles, and snakes and nurtures the mangrove trees also protects the area from large-scale deforestation and even frequent natural calamities like storms and typhoons.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the postcolonial Sundarbans witnessed increasing human activity, declining biodiversity, and recognition and marketing of the uniqueness of the Sundarbans. As Greenough affirms, “until recently the Sundarbans have been thought of, when thought of at all, as forbidding and obscure. Yet, during the late

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Daniel Hamilton was a Scottish visionary who bought large tracts of the Sundarbans from the British Government to set up a Marxist utopian state for the native villagers, rid of all class and social differences (Guha and Ghosh 4).

<sup>5</sup> The term cyclone was, in fact, invented by Henry Piddington in his book *The Sailor’s Horn-book for the Law of Storms* published in 1848, in order to refer to the tropical storms in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea that frequently hit the Sundarbans. Piddington had unsuccessfully opposed the move to make a major seaport on the Matla River in 1847, only to be proved correct when a cyclone washed away the whole port later in 1867.



1980s a reversal of values occurred, and the Sundarbans' obvious hazards, inaccessibility and desolation began to be read by cosmopolitan naturalists in positive terms" (237). Neo-imperialism, in the form of homogenous conservation policies and increasing commodification of the natural world, resulting in loss of territory for indigenous peoples, loss of biodiversity and conservationist limitations, is an increasingly common postcolonial condition of most ecosystems, including the Sundarbans. At present, the bionetwork of the Sundarbans has witnessed the shift from a threatening ecosystem to a threatened ecosystem. Ghosh published the novel in 2004, at a crucial point in the future of the Sundarbans when the corporate house Sahara India Pariwar was poised to take over large areas of the Sundarbans to convert into an ecotourism village. Sahara's five-star ecotourism project was floated with the complicity of the ruling Left Front Government of West Bengal, and a Memorandum of Understanding was also signed to the effect (*The Hindu Business Line* and *Sahara India Pariwar*). There were no comprehensive environmental impact assessments done by an independent body prior to sanctioning the takeover. The project involved constructing floatels, restaurants, shops, business centres, cinemas and theatres, setting up activities such as excursions to the interiors on motorboats, which would disturb the fragile ecosystem and further threaten the already endangered biodiversity of the region (Sylvester). Several environmental agencies and individuals opposed the move, and after extensive protests the central government intervened and annulled the proposal. At the time, Ghosh was one of the prominent intellectuals campaigning against the move (Ghosh). The aborted Sahara takeover can be located against the historical backdrop of the Morichjhapi incident in the Sundarbans, which is fictionalized in the novel.

The story of the Sundarbans, including its human and wildlife populations, is intrinsically linked to the history of Partition, and the events that followed in its aftermath. India's independence in 1947 resulted in the division of the Sundarbans, with 40 percent of the mangrove forests falling in East Pakistan territory (Sylvester). The Partition of India in 1947 geographically bifurcated Pakistan into Eastern and Western fragments with India in the middle. East Pakistan was created for the Bangla-speaking Muslim majority, which led to the influx of Hindus from East Pakistan into India's West Bengal region. The refugees fleeing the civil war included both Hindus and Muslims fighting for Bangladeshi sovereignty and numbered between 9 million (Luthra 2468) and 12 million (Bandopadhyay 33-38). Unlike the Partition of Punjab in northwest India, the Partition of Bengal had an enduring effect.

From 1947 onward there has been a seeming reluctance on the part of the Indian government to acknowledge and address the refugee crisis in West Bengal (Chatterjee 5; Parthasarathy 100). The discrimination faced by refugees from East Pakistan was not limited to the second-class treatment meted out by the Indian government. An insight into the social demography of the refugee movement from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh opens up another level of dispossession—one of internal social discrimination. After Partition, the upper-caste Hindu landed elite were the best equipped to relocate to India. Of the 1.1 million first-wave migrants who arrived in India between 1946 and 1948, 350,000 were urban middle class and 550,000 rural middle class, with the remaining 200,000 comprising agriculturalists and artisans (Chakrabarti 1). The majority of early refugees were the *bhadralok*, a term used to refer to the “westernized caste elite” (Broomfield 5), the “dominant upper crust of Bengali society who enjoyed a despotism of caste tempered by matriculation” (Johnson 534-35) and “a group of urban, professionalized, middle-class landowners” (Bose 63). In contrast to the *bhadralok*, Annu Jalais uses the term *nimnobarano*, meaning “inferior varna or caste,” to refer to those belonging to the occupational castes categorized as leather workers, boatmen, fishermen, and so on, who were classified as untouchables in British Bengal (1762). Since the *bhadralok* enjoyed a superior social status all over Bengal, with their economic prosperity and social networks they were easily able to integrate with mainstream Calcutta society. Even the squatter colonies established by the *bhadralok* were eventually legalized by the government. The experience of the lower class and lower caste refugees who came from 1950 onwards was drastically different from that of their *bhadralok* counterparts. These *dalit* refugees faced unemployment, denial of their refugee status, grossly inadequate rehabilitation practices, and forcible relocation.

To counter the economic drain on West Bengal with escalating numbers of refugees, the central and state governments implemented a new resettlement scheme in the 1960s. Citing the paucity of vacant land in West Bengal, refugee resettlement camps were set up in regions far away from Bengal in Bettiah in Bihar, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh. Eking out a living in Dandakaranya proved to be a tall order for the refugees. Accustomed to paddy cultivation in Bengal, the majority of the refugees found it increasingly difficult to cultivate the sparse and infertile soil. The *dalit* refugees remained in their dispossessed condition, with negligible opportunity for integration and inadequate relief and infrastructure, which reached them only if corrupt officials had not already pocketed them (Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement” 105). Atharobaki Biswas

writes that “[v]ery few among the intelligentsia are aware that out of 42,000 families who had been dragged and deported there, already nearly 27,030 families have perished; and only now 15,000 families somehow linger on below sub-human level!” (qtd. in Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement” 105). With increasing discontent over their dismal conditions, the refugees began to consider leaving the settlement.

The state governments’ plans for solving the refugee problem were consistently opposed by the Communist Party of India (CPI[M]), which called for refugee resettlement within Bengal. The CPI(M) recommended mainly the Sundarbans and other vacant areas in West Bengal as suitable areas for resettlement, which found favor with the refugees also. Encouraged by the communist rhetoric, many began to move to the Sundarbans on their own. By mid-1975 a large number of refugees—an estimated 16,000 families—had moved to the uninhabited island of Morichjhapi (Elahi 224). The refugees sought the support of the CPI(M) and the Left Front Organization for Refugees, the United Central Refugee Council. In 1977, the CPI(M) assumed power, and the refugees hoped their struggle to go back to their homeland would finally end. The Left gaining power led to an increase in the refugee influx into the Sundarbans. In May 1977 about 30,000 refugees under the leadership of Sathish Mandal, a former ally of the Communist Party’s refugee program, started their journey to Morichjhapi (Jalais 1758). Contrary to its policy statement till then, the government arrested the 15,000 or so refugees and returned them to their original resettlement camps (Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement” 107). Several refugees escaped the police action and managed to reach their destination on Morichjhapi Island. The Left government demanded that the refugees return to their camps. The decision was based on the dictum that the “refugees were in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi, which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest, violating thereby the Forest Acts” (Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, qtd. in Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement” 107). The refugees’ presence on the island was portrayed as “disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance” (Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, qtd. in Mallick “Development Policy” 100). The primary motive behind this reversal of Left policy was to pre-empt the economic drain on the state. The island of Morichjhapi was part of the Sundarbans Forest Reserve, but the mangrove vegetation was cleared in 1975 by the Congress government to make way for revenue-generating coconut and tamarisk plantations. The island was also not part of the core area of the tiger reserve.

On Jan. 26, 1979, the Left government launched an economic blockade on the island. Huts were torched, and thirty police launches patrolled the island, preventing

the refugees from obtaining supplies including food, water, and medicine. Hungry and helpless, those who ventured out had to brave the police bullets. Groups were tear-gassed, boats were sunk, and several people were arrested. With no sign of reprieve from the government, reports of starvation deaths began to appear in the press. On Jan. 27, 1979, the government prohibited all movement into and out of Morichjhapi and also imposed Curfew under Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, making it illegal for five or more persons to gather in a group (Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement" 110). On Jan. 31, 1979, 36 people were killed in a police encounter. Prominent Bengali dailies like the *Anand Bazaar Patrika* and *Jugantar* published articles and photographs of the situation in Morichjhapi. The government slammed the media as "bourgeois" and sensationalistic for supporting the cause of the refugees. The matter was taken up by the Calcutta High Court, which ruled that the ban be lifted for two weeks. The government denied the blockade and ignored the ruling. The police clampdown continued unabated with tacit government approval, but the refugees refused to move despite the deaths and the police atrocities. The government stepped up its efforts and ordered the forcible evacuation of the island, which took place between May 14-16, 1979 (Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement" 110). Based on interviews with officials of the Indian Administrative Service in West Bengal, Ross Mallick writes about the police hiring Muslim thugs from Bangladesh to assist them, on the basis that the Muslims would be less sympathetic to the plight of the low-caste Hindu refugees. Ranjit Kumar Sikdar writes in *The Oppressed Indian* that "most of the young men were arrested and sent to the jails and the police began to rape the helpless young women at random" (23). The casualties numbered in the hundreds, and following reports in the press, the opposition staged a walkout in protest.

To date, the number of deaths during the eviction remains inconclusive. No investigation or enquiry was ever conducted to find the culprits who perpetrated the violence. Joya Chatterjee avers that the plight of East Bengali refugees and, more importantly, the Morichjhapi incident as a whole, has been marginalized in Indian historiography. The reasons for this indifference stem from several factors. Although the nimnobarano community formed more than 23 percent of the electorate, they were illiterate and too poor to matter, unlike the middle-class, urban, and educated refugees, a viewpoint echoed by Ghosh in the novel. The refugees had appealed to the National Untouchable Federation, which was not at the time powerful enough to come to their rescue. None of the national parties responded to their plight. The then Prime Minister Morarji Desai also refrained from pursuing the matter for fear of losing the support of the Left in his coalition government. The

central government's Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission, responsible for ensuring the well being of the lower castes, concluded that there were no human rights violation or atrocities committed in Morichjhapi even though their file contained newspaper clippings, petitions, and names and ages of 236 men, women, and children killed by the police at Marichjhapi prior to the massacre, including some who were drowned when their boats were sunk by the police.<sup>6</sup> Biswas estimates that about "4,128 families had perished in transit [back to their camps], died of starvation, exhaustion, and many were killed in Kashipur, Kumirmari, and Marichjhapi by police firings" (19). The inherent cause for the brutal violence, its aftermath, and the non-issue it was for a long time in both the academia and popular imaginary can be attributed to the invisibility of the low caste and class identity within the mainstream society. The Communist Party has never admitted any wrongdoing in Morichjhapi. The West Bengal State Committee Meeting in 1982 justified the eviction by pointing out that the refugees could not be given shelter under any circumstances (Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement" 111). In Morichjhapi ecological concerns and conservation efforts served as mere disguises to camouflage the pursuit of political ends. By placing Morichjhapi as the centre point of the novel, Ghosh asks a crucial question, unique to Third World and Fourth World peoples: "If you care for the environment, does that mean that you don't care about the plight of human beings, especially impoverished people?" (Ghosh, "The Chronicle Interview"). But in the case of the Morichjhapi, the motives behind caring for the environment appear strongly suspect.

The problem of one-dimensional conservation that homogenizes all people as against nature consequently, in its praxis, pits person against person in the urban conservationist versus the socio-economically disprivileged situation, a perspective that abetted the displacement and dispossession of the refugees in the Sundarbans. In locating the novel in the unpredictable and hostile terrain of the Sundarbans, the odds are further heightened. The Morichjhapi massacre, the tiger killing Kusum's father and Fokir's vulnerability to the state officials are instances in the novel that highlight this predicament of the poor. On the other hand, the tiger trapped and killed by villagers in the cowshed and the dolphins killed by the coast guard's boat are counterpoised to underscore the plight of the nonhuman world of the Sundarbans.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from All India Scheduled Castes/Tribes and Backward Classes Employees Coordination Council to Bhola Paswan Shastri M.P., Chairman of the Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Subject: "Genocide Committed on the Scheduled Caste Refugees of Marichjhapi Island," in Ross Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement" 111.

## Water: The Hungry Motif

Humans, animals, and water form three axial points of Amitav Ghosh's novel, both literally and figuratively. George Bataille's idea of the immanence of animality throws into relief the figurative connections between water and the animal. Bataille foregrounds the idea that animality is immediacy or immanence, that is, the "immanence of the animal with respect to its milieu is given in a precise situation, the importance of which is fundamental" (17). In this sense the tiger killing the water buffalo in the novel does not facilitate any transcendence of the natural economy between the eater and the eaten, and the situation is a given which has no significance beyond the present for either of the two animals. An animal eating another registers no significance to the animal itself apart from a quantitative difference, and so Bataille contends "every animal is in the world like water in water" (19). It gains worth, however, with the buffalo belonging to a villager and having an economic value accorded to it. The distinction between the tiger eating a non-human prey and a human prey, and its ensuing consequence is also best explained using Bataille's exposition that "[b]etween the animal that is eaten and the one that eats, there is no relation of *subordination* like that connecting an object, a thing, to man, who refuses to be viewed as a thing" (18). Therefore, the tiger killing Kusum's father is viewed differently, since the social order of subordination where human is placed higher than beast is reversed. But also because of the quality of human social consciousness that forecloses us from dwelling in the "immanence or immediacy of things." The immanence of the tigers' condition to hunt for its prey, regardless whether this is human or non-human, stems from the necessity to eat, and here the motif of hunger from the title of the novel achieves new meanings. The cyclicity of the tides, coming in and going out, counts as "hungry" in precisely this sense, connecting the immanence of the tide and the tiger.

The beasts' hunger in the Sundarbans is dramatized through two instances, the tiger killing Kusum's father and the tiger killed by the villagers when it enters the cowshed. On the one hand, Kanai reasons that the uncertain numbers and unpublicized death toll of humans killed by tigers is because "these people are too poor to matter. We all know it but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings?" (Ghosh 300-01). The truth of this statement becomes obvious when viewed alongside the statement of Radhika Ranjan Pramanik, a politician belonging to the Communist Party. She says, "Tigers are the best conservators of the forest. They keep human beings away. If there are no tigers in the Sundarbans, the forest area would be left bare in

months” (qtd. in Chattopadhyay). The state’s conservation apparatus, echoing western wilderness conservation impetus, then appropriates the man-eating tiger also as a means to keep people out and preserve the wilderness. This is especially significant since the CPI(M) was responsible for initially encouraging refugees to settle in the Sundarbans until the late 1970s, then embarking on a drive to evict them in the name of conservation in 1979, and in early 2000, sanctioning the same land for the ill-conceived Sahara ecotourism project. On the other hand, the tiger caught in the livestock pen, trapped and killed by the villagers, reveals the imperative need for conservation. The tiger killing verges on the carnivalesque, with the angry villagers plunging their staves into the pen, setting fire to it, and “screaming in a maddened bloodlust, Maar Maar!” (Ghosh 295). So if it is the tigers’ hunger that keeps encroachers at bay and protects the forests, it is hunger that drives men into illegally entering the forests. In fictionalizing the tiger kill, Ghosh draws attention to this pitiful condition of both the human beings and the beasts. And when human beings kill a tiger, the consequences are equally dire. As Kanai suggests, there would be arrests, fines, beatings, and enquiries about the foreigner, Piya. The latter, perhaps to ensure that the news of the tiger’s death does not reach the outside world, testifying to the ineffectiveness of the state’s conservation drives which may hinder further global funding for tiger conservation. The dwindling number of dolphins that Piya studies, their strange behaviour owing to their distinctive habitat on the blurred borders between fresh water and salt water, also point to the uniqueness of the bionetwork of the Sundarbans and the need for conservation. The sight of the dead mother and calf duo killed by the propellers of a coast guard boat further emphasizes the need for habitat preservation. Herein the abstract metaphor of hunger from the novel’s title takes on several meanings. Is it the water constantly swallowing and regurgitating the land, creating the treacherous terrain that is to be blamed for the plight of humans and beast alike? Whose hunger is to be privileged? The hunger of the poor, who are struggling to eke out a living in the face of both discrimination in the name of the environment and resource depletion, or the tiger, losing its habitat, threatened by poaching and on the verge of extinction? Viewed against the background of the Sahara takeover and Morichjhapi, Ghosh shifts between the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, putting forth the very philosophical and moral questions most often sidelined in conservation drives.

The spectre of Morichjhapi massacre looms over the novel as the strongest motif that conveys the inescapable reality of these dilemmas vis-à-vis the Sundarbans. Nirmal’s diary entries recounting Morichjhapi and the plight of Fokir’s mother Kusum serve as a constant backdrop to the contemporary reality of the

Sundarbans. The fight for survival against both other people and the beasts is powerfully conveyed through Kusum, the victim of Morichjhapi, after the water and food supplies are cut off to the island to coerce the refugees to flee. Through her voice, Ghosh problematizes the complex discourse of conservation, evoking the impulse of hunger in both the humans and beasts:

. . . the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world." Everyday sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived—by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (261-62)

Prior to the police shootout leading to Kusum's death, evacuation methods had included threats and sending in thugs. For the refugees once the police lay siege to the island, escape was thus next to impossible. Here water becomes the agent that both shields and exposes the starving refugees to the surrounding world. If it was the water that made them vulnerable to the police bullets, it was also the water that nurtured their idea of having an edenic homeland isolated from the rest of the world.

### **Water as Social Leveller**

Water is also the major factor that irons out all social hierarchies in the novel. The storm and the rising tide demolish all differences and present a level playing field where dormant and disturbing social sensibilities come to the fore. The friction



between people of different economic status, the urban and the rural poor, plays out when Fokir deserts Kanai in one of the mangrove islands. As Kanai and Fokir get off the boat to examine the tiger marks, there is a radical shift in the power dynamics that existed between them. Kanai's unbridled anger toward Fokir, who taunted him to go in search of the tiger when he falls in the mud, stems more from the reversal of roles that occurs: "His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied; the master's suspicion of the menial; the pride of caste; the townsman's mistrust of the rustic, the city's antagonism towards the village" (Ghosh 326). He perceives himself as one of the many "who destroyed Fokir's village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal" (Ghosh 327). Stranded on the island, fear overtakes Kanai and he loses his words in his surreal encounter with the tiger reminiscent of the Sundarbans captured in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* where the protagonist Saleem also loses his ability to speak. At that moment, all social learning escapes Kanai and his world of words collapses around him, face to face with the big cat. The disintegration of the social is facilitated by the natural threats, epitomized by the tiger and the deceptive tide. This natural encounter becomes the point where Kanai genuinely unlearns his socio-cultural prejudices and pretensions. The crossing over from "us" to "them" between Piya and Fokir also occurs, played out against the backdrop of the storm, which claims Fokir's life. In the face of the storm, both of them take refuge on a tree trunk, with Fokir's body shielding Piya from flying objects. The act of shielding with his body soon takes on sexual undertones:

Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (Ghosh 390)

Thus, class, caste, gender, linguistic and national boundaries collapse, and water becomes the agency that purges all characters of their cultivated sensibilities. And true to myths, the Ganges descending from the heavens and dissipating its sacredness becomes the muddied and murky crocodile-infested waters of the Sundarbans that engenders this rupture. As Kinsey writes, the river becomes a continuous liquid link between the heavens and the earth, signifying "a sure

crossing point in the difficult transition from life to death or from bondage to liberation” (193). This is especially true for Fokir, whose death in the storm and the rising waters literally translates into the journey from earth to heaven, signifying his freedom from social oppression.

Apart from the tearing down social divisions, the storm at the end of the novel also aligns human beings and animals on par as victims. Seeking refuge from the storm, Piya comes across the tiger, further accentuating the potential of water as the agent that can bring humans and animals together. This encounter breaks the order of the Sundarbans’ food chain where the man-eating tigers are in many ways above the humans. The novel’s denouement with the storm ends on an optimistic note, with Piya deciding to set up a conservation initiative with the participation of the local community. However, the increasingly apparent proclivity of global environmental agencies to appropriate “community participation” as a means to advance their own agendas and create new subjects of underprivileged people who were earlier invisible entities, as Michael Goldman argues, makes the resolution an uneasy one (499).

## Conclusion

Using water as a heuristic category to analyze the novel serves to highlight significant ecological questions pertaining to the Third World. The traditional conceptualizations of water and the River Ganges, the materiality of the presence of water and its significance as an agency dealt with in the novel, especially against the backdrop of the Morichjhapi and Sahara takeover, illustrate the violence inscribed within western conservation discourses when arbitrarily implemented in the Third World. Conservation in the popular imaginary is often regarded as a beneficent phenomenon that institutes safeguards for a “mute” nature that is violated by unabated human encroachment. Conservation in the Sundarbans, directed mainly toward the preservation of the tiger, reveals the privileging of an animal because it meets a higher aesthetic standard of beauty and prowess, along with the influence of electoral politics. As the national animal of India, the tiger has a special meaning and reserves are especially cordoned off for its protection. But the dwindling numbers of the Royal Bengal Tiger, despite the decades-old Project Tiger programmes all over India, reiterates the importance of conservation. Conservation policies which are mindlessly implemented, disregarding the specificity of a region and the social perils of it—as in the Sundarbans and highlighted in the novel—has huge social costs most often borne by the most

disprivileged of people. On the one hand, it is the traditional cultures of these peoples which have conservative ethics writ into them that have ensured the presence of “wilderness” in contemporary times. To dispossess these peoples for the sake of western models of conservation results in violence, as narrativized in the Morichjhapi incident in the novel. In the case of Morichjhapi, western conservation values served as the perfect pretense for pursuing political ends in the name of the tiger and the environment.

Water as an analytical category reveals problems of conservation from the perspective of both humans and animals dwelling in the region. It also serves as a device to debunk social constructions reified as natural. Water as the agency that brings closure to the novel, with the death of Fokir, also engenders a revised understanding of the Sundarbans. Both the outsiders Piya and Kanai have a deeper knowledge of the Sundarbans and are left with the realization that local participation is crucial for saving not just the tigers but also the people and the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The one cannot be achieved at the cost of the other. The reversal of the social hierarchy that separated Piya and Kanai from Fokir also gradually unfolds with the expedition into the waterways. Their social identities are contingent on their distance from Fokir, who is deemed closer to nature, and Ghosh shatters this contingency at two levels. First, in his complicity in the murder of the tiger, Fokir ceases to be the “noble savage.” And secondly, in the forest setting he is experienced enough to navigate the others to safety. In these contexts a reversal of role occurs, which culminates in the storm and Fokir’s death. Apart from the ecosocial issues that the novel addresses, the *role* of the state in conservation is exposed through the Morichjhapi incident and the caricature of the coastguards—highlighting the collusion of the state in perpetrating violence both on the people (Morichjhapi) and on nature (death of the dolphin calf). The Sahara takeover that loomed large at the time of the novel’s publication further emphasizes the topicality of the violence writ within homogenized conservation imperatives. The publication of *The Hungry Tide* played a crucial role in garnering worldwide support against the Sahara project, which led the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests to terminate the project. The novel’s publication is in this sense political to the extent that the freedom of the fictionalized narrative gave Ghosh the liberty to talk about the violence and hypocrisy of the state, especially the controversial history of the Morichjhapi incident.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the solution offered by Ghosh, with Piya

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<sup>7</sup> Ghosh in his pieces “A crocodile in the swamplands” and “Folly in the Sundarbans” published in *Outlook Magazine* contends that thousands were killed in Morichjhapi whereas Amalesh Choudhury in response to Ghosh’s article argues that only a handful were killed and that it was

deciding to start a conservation project in Fokir's name with close local participation, is rather naïve and simplistic. Sahara India's project proposal had also envisaged close local community participation to promote tourism, which promised sustainable socio-economic development to the people. Given that terms like "sustainable development," "community participation" and so on, are increasingly susceptible to be used by global corporate structures "to classify, colonize, and transnationalize territory in the name of 'eco-governance'" (Goldman 499), it is important to recognize the appropriations of these seemingly eco-friendly concepts. Piya's positioning as a First World ecologist and her argument with Kanai after the villagers kill the tiger throw this into relief.

The immanence of animality and the human capacity for consciousness and cognizance are woven together through the metaphor of hunger in the novel. Differences of all kinds, between people, between species, and between nature and all that is deemed non-natural, are overhauled in the novel at various occasions through the material presence of water. The characters and the land change from victims to victimizers and vice versa sweeping away all cultural constructs of differences. Water becomes the agency that facilitates all transitions, be they from land to sea or urban to rural, eradicating class, caste gender and linguistic barriers. The all-pervasive physical presence of water in a setting such as the Sundarbans makes it impossible for the narrative to extricate itself from the presence and play of water. As Nirmal writes, "*look at the badh. See how frail it is, how fragile. Look at the waters that flow past it and how limitless they are, how patient, how quietly they bid their time. Just to look at it is to know why the waters must prevail, later if not sooner*" (Ghosh 205; emphases original). Water becomes a political entity that writes history; it creates as well as destroys people and places. Scientific, historical, cultural and ecological narratives coalesce through the material and symbolic

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not a huge catastrophe as Ghosh made it out to be, a stand echoed by the government. The prominent newspaper *Ananda Baazar Patrika* printed photographs of the police violence and on Feb. 13-15 and June 2, 1979, also reported the death toll as 239 (qtd. in Elahi 225). Mallick mentions that, though the central government's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Committee reported that there were no atrocities against the Untouchables in West Bengal, their files contained newspaper clippings, petitions and a list of names of 236 persons including children killed by the police "prior" to the Morichjhapi massacre ("Refugee Resettlement" 111). It is also pertinent to note that on Jan. 27, 1979, the government prohibited all movement into Morichjhapi under the Forest Preservation Act and also declared a curfew, sealing off the area from even the press. Commenting on the paucity of academic research on the Morichjhapi incident, Mallick argues that it is likely that more than four thousand people may have died out of disease, starvation and police bullets at Morichjhapi. Therefore, the extent of violence and the exact number of casualties of the Morichjhapi incident remains a controversy.

presence of water, which simultaneously connects and separates the islands of the Sundarbans archipelago and tells their story in the novel.

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