

Reading Environmental Relations in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

by

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Abstract

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Reading Environmental Relations in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Laura Winkiel

This dissertation is concerned with what environmental historian Ramachandra Guha calls a “marriage” of social justice and sustainability in contemporary Indian fiction in English. The project considers how Indian fiction in English represents contemporary environmental issues—including threats, crises, instability, and injustice—as interwoven with policy legacies, culture clashes, and communal activities. I focus on the textual relationships between the human and the non-human that evolving socioeconomic and political contexts in India place in flux, such as the fight for Dalit and Adivasi rights and representation amid calls for environmental conservation. Following from materialist ecocriticism (Alaimo, Iovino and Oppermann, etc.), I explore how humans and nonhumans alike are given agency in the texts, how characters cross into primarily nonhuman spaces, how they reassess themselves as both individuals and parts of human-nonhuman collectives, and/or how their sense of self is informed and destabilized by the nonhuman elements around and passing through them.

Rather than a specific generic or authorial investigation, I seek to privilege the environment itself as interrelational and continually remade, despite being physically and discursively segmented by human action and representation. To this end, the dissertation is organized around specific environmental resources and concerns in India, including forests, rivers, animals, and climate change, though each chapter does privilege one primary Indian English novel. I then intervene in current ecocritical and social justice discourse by using ecology as a lens to examine representations of those resources and concerns within the texts, which in turn combine mythology, history, and

environmental justice narratives. I argue that the inherently relational nature of ecology, which the literature helps illuminate, challenges the anthropocentrism, androcentrism, and classism inherent in Indian environmental policy and politics and, more broadly, also allows us to reconsider humanity's ethical presence on the earth. Through this study, I reconceptualize what environmental humanities critic Rob Nixon calls "site-specific struggles" of environmental injustice while also considering broader cultural and sociopolitical implications.

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INTRODUCTION

In the West, the environmental movement [arose] chiefly out of a desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats. In India, however, it arose out of the imperative of human survival. This was an environmentalism of the poor, which married the concern of social justice on the one hand with sustainability on the other.

-Ramachandra Guha, "The past & present of Indian environmentalism," 2013

Ramachandra Guha's statement above provides, at least in part, the impetus for this dissertation project, his concerns providing parallel to the concerns of a large body of Indian literature written since the late 20th century. Many Indian novels have taken on the important task of illustrating the historical patterns of entanglement between environmental exploitation and human exploitation in India. In some cases, these patterns reveal complex, multi-scaled networks of cause and effect that reach into the Indian past as well as reflect the globalized present. These texts often depict the connection between environmental injustice¹ and state violence against the poor. India's poor is comprised of a variety of communities, including slum-dwellers and rural pastoralists, Dalits (formerly of "Untouchable" caste) and Adivasis (tribespeople, Indigenous to India), and Muslim migrants and immigrants (Biswas)—all communities already maligned by the caste system, colonialism, and/or Partition, and often still at odds with the policies of the Indian nation-state against a backdrop of global neoliberal capitalism. Guha also makes a poignant comparison between Western and Indian environmentalism that launches the question of state violence onto a global scale. In asserting that Western environmentalism did not arise out of direct threats to humanity as Indian environmentalism has, he highlights the particularly intertwined nature of humans and the "natural" environment in India, as well as the particular vulnerabilities of Indians, especially the

¹ Environmental injustice refers to the unequal and unfair treatment of certain peoples with respect to environmental policies, as well as the devaluing of their cultural and material relationships to their environments. In India, this manifests at various times as displacement, the physical alteration of homelands and/or resource loss, and careless administration that results in industrial catastrophe.

poor, who subsist on various natural resources that are under threat. Thus, Guha also gestures toward the uneven power relations—economic and social in nature, national and transnational in scope—that have aided in creating sites of environmental injustice and unsustainable living conditions for poor communities in India.

This dissertation is concerned with what Guha calls the “marriage” of social justice and sustainability in contemporary Indian literature that presents specific contemporary Indian environmental issues, including threats, crises, instability, and injustice, and interweaves them with clashes between cultures and castes, nationalist progress, colonial infrastructure legacies, and globalization. This dissertation endeavors to go further than a simple state vs. local analysis; instead, I link together casteism, colonialism, decolonization, religious strife, poverty, violence, global capital, and environmental degradation by teasing out the layers upon layers of stories offered in a selection of globally recognized Indian novels. I pose questions about power and process, marked by interrelations of both material and discursive networks, by focusing on the texts’ complex layering of local, national, and global interests that present varying and often confusing levels of agency with regard to environmental conditions. In order to understand these layers, I examine the tenuous yet formative relationships between humans and nonhumans, variegated actors within environmental networks that evolving socio-economic and political contexts in India place in flux. Specifically, I analyze representations of particular environmental resources in the novels not as static places or things that reflect the world of humans, but systems that are active in creating the histories of Indian sociocultural and sociopolitical organization. In other words, environmental elements are not simply assigned meaning, but are active in their meaning-making processes. I then use the literature in conversation with environmental policy as a lens to examine India’s profound and variegated relationships to these environmental resources. With this work, I seek to reconceptualize what Rob Nixon calls “site-specific struggles” of environmental injustice through the texts (*Slow Violence* 4) by

exploring the contemporary Indian (Anglophone) literary space as a nodal point of imaginative environmental exchange.

The project also builds from my examination of environmental relations to interrogate the environmental ethics offered to the global reading public of these particular Indian texts, which are heavily marketed toward the West. My primary methodology in this dissertation involves reading environmental relationality as a critical concept that implies that one's story is bound up in that of another; environmental relationality encompasses how human and nonhuman agents and forces, such as weather, water, animals, and vegetation, relate to and within ecosystems, especially the ways in which people interact with and are constituted by the environment beneath and around them (the places in which they dwell, live, and work). It is important here that the environmental resources I have chosen to analyze, forests, rivers, endangered animals, and land, are not just topics, settings, or objects of degradation in the texts, but constantly changing entities in the networks that make up human understandings of the Indian environment. On the one hand, they hold significant spiritual and cultural meaning to Indian people of numerous cultures and religions, and on the other, they occupy significant positions in the discourses of Indian environmental policy and environmental justice. Teasing out these relationships offers a way of reading that rejects the culture/nature binary as an ideology steeped in imperial violence and instead promotes a relational approach to environmental networks. Thus, the primary goal of this dissertation is to extract an environmental ethics that may viably encourage responsible approaches to humans and nonhumans alike, especially formally colonized humans and nonhumans, through the storied concept of relationality.

The chapters that follow this introduction reflect just a few of the important environmental resources and concerns that are steeped in controversy in India, and which also provide both backdrop and character to the principle novels I analyze in each section. For example, forests and rivers alike are sites of pilgrimage, passage, and ritual in India, yet at the same time timber extraction,

pollution, and hydraulic dams constantly threaten both the health of forests and rivers and the livelihoods that rely on them. In chapter one, I close read a powerful passage of falling action that takes place in a forest in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* in order to analyze its relationship to the rest of the predominantly urban narrative. In chapter two, I consider the Meenachal river in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as both context and character in order to illustrate a clash between cultural and political approaches to river degradation and restoration. Certain animals in India are particularly revered, feared, and/or endangered, but these regards are complicated by the tendencies of wildlife protections to impinge on marginalized people, such as communities that have been displaced by tiger reserves. In my third chapter, I look at how tigers are figured in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* alongside another endangered animal, the Irawaddy dolphin, in order to show inherent problems with Indian conservation policies. Finally, agriculture has been a staple of India's sociocultural history and approach toward the Indian landscape since the Bronze Age, or even earlier, and remains the nation's largest economic sector, yet technological innovations and globalized approaches since the Green Revolution have thrown the industry into controversy following a rising farmer suicide epidemic in the late 20th century and the uneven distributions of viable land. In the final chapter, I read Mahasweta Devi's story collection, *Imaginary Maps*, made accessible to global English readers by Gayatri Spivak's careful translation, as a meditation on how culture, community, history, and materiality are interwoven in the physical markings and political insecurities of agricultural terrain.

The separations of these environmental resources into distinct chapters is somewhat misleading of the project as a whole; the dissertation is designed to see all environmental phenomena as bound up together and co-constitutive, connected via physical ecosystems, socioeconomic and cultural systems, and both material and discursive history. The Indian natural environment, like all natural environments, is not clearly demarcated between various resources or

elemental forces. What constitutes the boundaries of a river's tributaries? Rivers depend on forested embankments and change the chemical structures of landscape. How do we conceptualize animal migration patterns that cross multiple ecosystems? Forest animals depend on rivers as water and food sources, and terrain determines animal habitats and mobility circuits. Forests cannot survive without rivers running through them, nor the creatures that populate and pollinate their unique organizations of plant life. The narratives also refuse to draw stark boundaries; *Animal's People*, for example, may be analyzed for its animal descriptors or its themes of urban toxicity, whereas I choose to isolate its gestures toward forests and forest rights. *The Hungry Tide* may be studied for its metaphorical ebb and tide narrative structure that mimics the Sundarbans riverine structure or its mangrove forest setting, whereas I am investigating its representations of animals. *The God of Small Things* is as much about historical cycles of land under siege as it is about river pollution, and Mahasweta's *Pterodactyl* has a living, breathing prehistoric creature to consider alongside its warnings about food insecurity. These overlaps reflect the physical reality of environmental relationality; environments are cyclical and recursive and resist easy categorizations and taxonomies. However, this project focuses on distinct resources in distinct literary discussions in order to allow for more opportunity to put them in conversation with one another and illuminate the micro-connections within and between them. In addition, in narrowing my scope, I seek to privilege previously underprivileged topics of environmental concern and critical conversation in these texts. Much has been written about the question of human rights in Sinha's presentation of a disenfranchised boy who insists he is an animal, for example, but little has been written about that boy's thirteen-page hallucination in the forest. With this dissertation, I hope to provide new avenues of critique to supplement well-traveled critical discussions in order to encourage relational readings of these often-read and often-taught contemporary Indian narratives.

Environmental Relationality as Critical Methodology

According to Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, examining the ways material forms interact to produce structures of power and relation illuminates the way we create stories about ourselves and others; the way we interpret the world. The critics conceptualize this process as “storied matter,” explaining that the world is filled with “intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures. It is through all these natures, agencies, and bodies that ‘the world we inhabit,’ with all its stories, is ‘alive’ (*Material Ecocriticism* 1, quoting David Abram). This is a networked reading, a concept that necessarily eschews simple definitions that equate “environment” with setting, habitat, background, or even place. Instead, “environment” in this project is not so much a thing or set of things but rather a process of co-constitutive existence; that is, it is the things and the way the things interact, relate, and change one another, and it is also the way people perceive the things around them, and how that shapes our notions of place. This is the critical concept of environmental relationality, the lens through which I will analyze the texts and histories throughout this dissertation.

Humans are the stuff of the emergent world, say Iovino and Oppermann. Matter constitutes subjectivity just as human ideas constitute matter. The foundation for this is Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed by Bruno Latour, Michael Callon, and John Law, which proposes that all phenomena be assessed as a series of networks that reveal a layered interconnectedness between human and nonhuman actions. Latour conceptualizes both humans and nonhumans as environmental “actants,” granting them equal amounts of agency within these “webs” or “actor-networks” of events (*Reassembling the Social*). ANT thus challenges anthropocentrism and its dualistic rendering of the world, as everything from anthrax spores to batteries to Thomas Edison are treated as equal as nodal points in a network. It is important to note that “network” is not simply a buzzword in this project, but rather continues to be an integral, interventionist concept within

discourses of marginalization and environmental justice; the decentering in actor-networks is important, since anthropocentrism has allowed for all kinds of harm to the earth, which includes humans, and especially the poor.

Both ANT and “storied matter” are challenges to anthropocentrism, then, but ANT fails to account for social factors such as race, class, and gender – the issue of power. In attempting to decenter the human, it is important not to overlook these human categorizations and conceptualizations that have real, material causes and effects in the world. Iovino explains, “Reflecting on matter means...reflecting on the way the matter of the world is embodied in human experience, as well as in the human “mind” (“Material Ecocriticism” 52). In other words, such that race, class, and gender are discursive social constructions predicated on material inequities, they can and should be examined through material networks. She thus asks, “How do we correlate discursive practices (in the form of political categories, socio-linguistic constructions, cultural representations, etc.) with the materiality of ecological relationships? In what measure is it possible to connect these two levels—the material and the discursive—in a non-dualistic system of thought?” (53). Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality has been integral to this effort, as it extends Iovino’s question about these two levels to the nature of the self. According to Alaimo, trans-corporeality insists “not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world,” which significantly shifts the concept of subjectivity such that “the pursuit of self-knowledge, which has been a personal, philosophical, psychological, or discursive matter, now extends into...[an] investigation into the constitution of our coextensive environments” (*Bodily Natures* 20). In other words, Alaimo proposes to investigate how matter constitutes subjectivity, including the material aspects of the social constructions and power structures that inform subjectivity.

In particular, the anthropocentrism that has guided much of the world's relations with the environment has been a complement to, often even a means to justify, androcentrism, eurocentrism, and imperialism. Ecofeminist Val Plumwood explains that Enlightenment Era thought maintained a supposedly rationalist, anthropocentric culture/nature dualism that was bolstered by and manifested in resource extraction for scientific progress (*Environmental Culture*). Relationships between humans and the nonhuman environment were therefore essentially instrumentalist and exploitative, and this model of "the capitalist/scientific appropriation of nature" ideologically bred exploitative hierarchies of humans over other humans, Europeans over 'others' (Plumwood 101). Plumwood states, "Dominant western culture is androcentric, eurocentric and ethnocentric, as well as anthropocentric. In historical terms, it is reason-centred, where reason is treated, as in the rationalist tradition, as the characteristic which sums up and is common to the privileged side of all these contrasts and whose absence characterizes the Other...Radical exclusion marks the Otherised group out as both inferior and radically separate" (101). This quote describes an 'othering' of *both* the nonhuman environment *and* non-European peoples, which helps situate 19th century European imperial and colonial pursuits, forcibly transforming other people's cultural and physical environments as part of an ideology of "man's" (human, European culture) mastery over "nature" (nonhuman, other). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in their revisionist historical collection on the environmental impacts of colonialism, conceptualize this practice as "ecological imperialism" (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 6); at the ecological level, the "radical exclusion" Plumwood describes requires an imaginative construction of those people living on the land that imperial powers wish to control as part of "nature," and therefore categorically nonhuman.

This dissertation builds upon the exploitative connections between anthropo- and eurocentrism in particular, as contemporary Indian environmental policies reflect both current uneven, globalized distributions of power and resources and legacies of 19th century British imperial

approaches to the Indian environment. Edward Said recounts the systematic dehumanization of nonwestern peoples in 19th century imperial discourse that he insists has carried over, if not in a straight line, to the contemporary capitalist global order. He states:

Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world resources. Why? Because he, unlike the Oriental, is a true human being. No better instance exists today of...anthropocentrism allied with Europocentrism...[t]here is no purer example than this of dehumanized thought. (*Orientalism* 108)

Said's explanation of the dehumanization of "the Oriental" is linked to 19th century imperialism, while his explanation of the Western consumer is indicative of contemporary neoliberal capitalism in which global deregulation and "open" markets result broadly in the West's power to control and exploit the "East" (or the global South).

The question thus arises, what is the role of people in decentering the human, or more specifically, readers? Is it possible to gain an ethics of human relations through a potentially a-human understanding of the world? These and related questions are at the heart of materialist ecocriticism today, and numerous critics have attempted to tackle them in various, sometimes competing ways.² For this dissertation, I contend that it is less important to avoid anthropocentrism altogether than it is to use environmental relationality to illuminate anthropocentric legacies of environmental degradation, imperial violence, poverty, and environmental injustice. A truly inclusive ethics requires a broad approach to the earth that emphasizes both human and nonhuman relations; that is, the layered, networked, storied relations within and across actor networks. But literature is at the heart of this project, and literature is a humanist endeavor that privileges human (or at the very least anthropomorphized) characterization through and around which a story can unfold. Therefore, this

² See Barad, Haraway, Heise, Kohn, Morton, Parenti, and Tsing.

project is interested in various ways of thinking “human” and “nonhuman” through the admittedly anthropocentric yet potentially highly networked form of the novel. Such that novels work by “storying” relationships between characters, spaces, and things over certain periods of time, this relational framework can allow for unique definitions and representations of the environment to emerge according to each novel’s layered approaches to historical and cultural specificities.

Novels are also invaluable for the ways in which they play with scale, and this project draws upon Alan Lester’s networked approach to empire, especially his important reconciliation between network and scale in the introduction to *East India Company and the Natural World*. In it, Lester admits that network discourses seem to elide questions of scale:

If we follow trajectories across space and through points of intersection regardless of where they lead us, we might weave at will through conventional scalar units ranging from the household to the globe. In much of the literature the concept of the network is seen to operate horizontally, while scale is considered to be more vertical and hierarchical. I want to [make] a case for considering scale rather as the product of networked relations...Like gender, race and class in post-structuralist historical thinking, we might productively think of scales as entities constructed through particular projects with real effects in the world.

(Lester, 10-12)

In other words, we might think about scale the way Iovino thinks about discourse or Alaimo thinks about the self: a concept that is always materially inflected, yet always also constituting the material reality of the world. Therefore, in this project I argue for reading the novels as not just fictional worlds that readers temporarily consume or even inhabit, but as representational networks of environmental relations through which we can interrogate and critique uneven power relations on local, national, and global scales all at once. For this project, reading literature can thus be thought of in ecosystemic terms; through environmental relations, the practice of reading literature becomes a

relational responsibility to environmental others, that is, other environmental identities, contexts, and networks. In so many ways, then, this work is rooted in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which he analyzes how the imperial desire to "know" the other is a reconstitution of the imperial power itself.

The Indian Environment and Environmental Policies

How people relate to the environment depends on many things, including history, governmentality, culture, class, and global relations. In India, there are both ecological instability and instability within environmental policy. India's rivers are polluted almost beyond repair; forests had until recently been disappearing at alarming rates and even reforestation practices remain controversial; animal species have also been disappearing, prompting isolationist reserve methods, and the monopolization of international agritech giants have caused immense controversy. In addition, India can be said to be an epicenter for impacts of climate change, which threatens to worsen each of these issues. On the other hand, some of the most successful and innovative environmental movements in the world have been achieved in India, including aggressive resistance to harmful practices and trends, most often spearheaded by the so-called "backward" classes and castes. An examination of Indian environmental policy since India's independence in 1947 in light of the literature examined in this dissertation reveals a nexus of sometimes clashing ideologies about and approaches to the environment according to various Indian cultural interests, colonial policy legacies, contemporary neoliberal capitalist interests, and ongoing environmental justice movements. Though my project is not an attempt to trace an exhaustive history of cultural, ritualistic, spiritual, artistic, or other ways the environment has influenced various Indian people, I nevertheless do attempt in the following chapters to parse some of the disconnects between the meaning of environment for people on the ground and the meaning of environment in official capacities for the purpose of unpacking the environmental images and events depicted in the literature.

Though India's population is incredibly heterogenous, there seems to be a cultural consistency and syncretism to thinking about nature according to the enduring tradition of the Vedas, ancient Sanskrit scriptures that are considered divine, direct from God. "Sayanaacharya, the famous commentator of the Vedas," says Ramnarayan Vyas, "has stated that God created the whole universe out of the knowledge of the Vedas. It implies that Vedic knowledge existed even before the creation of mankind" (15). This is a decentralized human, much different than the Enlightenment era European imaginary. Nature myths abound in the Vedas, and the earth is always considered an important division of the universe, a cosmology that considers all phenomena to have a kind of enduring spirit (Keith, 1989). Beyond a "respect for nature," the Vedas and other forms of ancient Indian philosophy and myth provide the foundations for the ways people "interact with or imagine the landscapes in which they live," according to environmental historian K. Sivaramakrishnan (1261), with a recognition of humans as "creatures of nature, embedded in lifecycles and dependent on ecosystems" (Mary Evelyn Tucker, quoted in Sivaramakrishnan, 1262). Humans are sometimes thought of as stewards of the earth, but more often simply one kind of form and existence with a purpose separate but not altogether unlike all other natural things, which also have their own purpose. Many scholars have directly or indirectly discussed this approach to nature as an "environment ethics" that relates to Hindu vegetarianism³, for example, and common notions of balanced farming and fishing, and Indian environmental scientists and advocates have argued that methods to address India's environmental crises too often elide these deeply ingrained methods of connection and cooperation with nature. In a practical sense, newer efforts to blend Indian philosophy and cultural tradition with environmental science has resulted in partnerships between governmental bodies and small local communities, such as forest service workers pairing up with

³ However, many contemporary cultural practices that purport to respect nature are tinged with political tension and result in problematic conflicts. Vegetarianism, for example, has been taken up by some sects of Hindu nationalists who enact violence on Muslim and lower caste people in the cattle trade in the name of sacred cows.

forest-dwelling people to create forest regulations, or sewage treatment plants collaborating with local fishermen to assess river pollution.

However, more often than not, contemporary environmental degradation and subsequent protections follow a western logic of large-scale categorization and instrumentalization that is inherited from 19th c. colonial enterprise. The colonial impact of ecological imperialism is both an ideological spectre and a material condition of the contemporary moment; European colonialism differed from previous historical moments in how it reframed Indian nature in official capacities. The British gradually implemented a series of environmental policies, the first of their kind, which were oriented toward extraction and monetization—enacting massive ideological shifts in governance based on new methods of record keeping and documentation. At the heart of all environmental policy in India from the British Raj forward are forests. Forests, forestry, and forest conservation are extremely important to the Indian government; the Indian Forest Service (IFS) is one of only three branches of the “All India Services” of the central government (along with the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service), meaning that all members of these services operate under both state and federal mandates. It is important to note that this elevation of forests dictates that the natural elements within and that make up forests—animals, plants, rivers, soil, etc.—are subsumed into the forest category even when those subcategories carry policies and mandates within themselves (which can make for dangerously flexible precedents).

The British recognized the value of India’s forests early in their colonial reign, and general British environmental policy in India was based primarily on commercializing and exporting timber, which was carried out by the dual merchant-state functions of the East India Company. The construction of a major railway, the expansion of colonial agriculture, and the exportation of Indian timber to England all called for an aggressive approach to deforestation, prompting the British to set up a preliminary Forestry Service in 1854 (Oosthoek). Dietrich Brandis, a German botanist and

forester who was later regarded as the founder of modern forestry in India, was appointed as the first Inspector General of Forests. Brandis's main task was to make sure the Raj had full control over forests, and the development of scientific forestry was paramount to this goal (Squatriti). Enter the Forest Act of 1865, which established the Indian Forest Service (IFS) as it is recognized today and became the primary piece of all colonial environmental legislation. Along with its later expanded iteration, the Indian Forest Act of 1927, the policy gave the Raj license to declare any forest area a government forest and consequently enforce exclusive state control.⁴ Says historian Paolo Squatriti, "Even as the administrative machine was being created, legal sanction for taking over sporadically explored territory was being cobbled together" (113). Political scientist Arun Agrawal details these legislations extensively in his book, *Environmentality* (2005), using Foucaultian conceptual principles about the disciplinary nature of forest governance as an institution that organized and governed daily life. Agrawal explains, "In the nineteenth century, governmentalization of environment was accomplished in India by the creation, activation, and execution of new procedures of surveying, demarcating, consolidating, protecting, planting, managing, harvesting, and marketing forests" (12). These procedures and regulations were especially new in that they were "based on statistical representations and numericized relationships" (13), a hyper-rationalist approach to forestry that was part and parcel with colonial discourses of "improving" the colonized, as detailed by Edward Said. As environmental historian K. Sivaramakrishnan explains, "What was happening in the forestry sector was to some extent a manifestation of the larger Orientalist colonial project of constructing

⁴ Clashes between centralized control over forests and local subsistence existed long before British colonialism. The Raj capitalized on an already established tradition wherein Mughal royalty would set aside large forested areas for exclusive royal hunting access. Royalty believed that hunting was their spiritual right, since they were reenacting godly endeavors and helping keep up the balance of nature. Thus, the practice of displacing local people for centralized control was already part of the framework of Indian casteist hierarchies, and the British continued this tradition, just substituting Mughal royalty with the Queen. I expand on this in my third chapter when I discuss tiger hunting in relation to Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*.

India as knowable by representation. The enormous growth, change, and increasing complexity of such knowledge was (sic) of crucial importance to technologies of rule” (6).

After Independence, the postcolonial Indian government continued a primarily instrumentalist and economic approach to the environment under the guiding legislation of the Indian Forest Act of 1927. Still organized around the commercialization of timber, now in an attempt to gain economic self-sufficiency in the global market, national forest regulations restricted local access and auctioned off large swaths of forestland, including all of the nature within forestland, to private contractors. Says Sivaramakrishnan, “Key continuities in the hegemonic discourses about forest management in the aftermath of decolonization may be noticed, and these can help assemble the pieces that went into realizing colonial discourses and their manifestation in state authority structures” (108). Forestry is a perfect example of this, as “post-colonial custodial forest policy in India remained captive to the self-inflicted whittling process set in motion by the ambiguous treatment of customary rights and privileges in the second half of the nineteenth century” (4). The “whittling” to which he refers doubles as a gradual loss of rights experienced by locals who subsisted on forests, as well as a literal carving out of the physical forested regions. Therefore, the early postcolonial years were a time of rapid forest degradation, perpetuated by private land contractors with license to exploit forests at an unprecedented rate (Sen).

By the 1970’s, as a result of intense grassroots environmental activism,⁵ the government finally enacted a host of national and state-level legislations aiming to better conserve Indian forests,

⁵ The combination of rapid forest degradation and accompanied human exploitation in the decades after independence sparked a backlash from forest dwelling communities, including the highly publicized grassroots environmental activist movement called Chipko (tree-hugging), begun in the 1970s in the Uttarakhand region in the Himalayan foothills, then part of the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The Chipko movement was popularized by the transformative efforts of rural women, whose livelihoods directly depended on the trees. The women launched a series of sensational, nonviolent confrontations with loggers, against retaliations of misogynistic taunts and threats of violence, and subsequently gained quite a bit of media attention and support. For more details about the Chipko Movement, as well as Indian environmental movements more broadly, see Haripriya Rangan’s *Of Myths and Movements: Rewriting Chipko Into Himalayan*

including a state-run corporation overseeing timber and resin extraction that replaced the private contractor system, the protection of certain trees and tree heights from felling, and mandatory environmental regulations created to monitor and limit development projects in forest areas. The government also realized it needed to empower local communities in conservation efforts. As Arun Agrawal explains (alluding to Foucault), there is “a deep and durable relationship between government and subjecthood” (167), therefore regulatory strategies must acknowledge and harness the people’s “environmental subjectivity” (how people think of themselves in relation to their environment), which includes their pre-existing community decision making regarding the environment. Historically, forests have been integral to many Adivasis, both in the form of subsistence and struggle for rights. There is a special designation for Forest-Dwelling Scheduled Tribes (FDSTs) in India, who for generations dwelled in and/or relied on forests for both their livelihood and cultural and spiritual understandings of the world. According to historian Sanjukta Das Gupta, though “culturally determined concepts of the forest” vary from group to group, there are consistencies in tribal economies and religions that signify deep forests, forest villages, and sacred groves, as spaces of cooperative living and economic arrangements; forestland was treated as common property (228). Conservation reform therefore came in the form of the National Forest Policy of 1988 (a revision of previous iterations), under which one of the objectives was to create “a massive people's movement with the involvement of women, for achieving these objectives and to minimise pressure on existing forests” (Ministry). Under the policy, the Joint Forest Management Program declared that specific villages, in association with the forest department, would manage

History (2000) and Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan’s *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India* (2000).

specific forest areas. Despite these legislative efforts, however, local-state relations with regard to forests remain fraught.⁶

The reason I dwell on forest governance here (and not in chapter one, which focuses on forest representations) is that all other systemic approaches to India's natural resources, such as irrigation of rivers, cultivation of certain crops such as sugar and poppies, and hunting of large game and other animals, were subsumed into this policy of extraction born of British desire for Indian timber and resulted in similar imaginative shifts. Furthermore, environmental degradation in India is intimately tied with caste and class inequality and injustice; European colonialism also significantly deepened caste and religious divisions by politicizing them, resulting in increased poverty and unrest. Caste is understood as a division of labor; compartmentalizing laborers into a social hierarchy, assigned by birth, according to a dichotomous concept of purity and pollution. The higher the caste, the more the occupation is based in abstract thought, the mind being pure, while sweepers and waste pickers belong to the lowest caste. But caste can also be thought of as an environmental organization, in that the hierarchy segments based on physical proximity to certain materials, touch, involvement in material processes, and access and maintenance of physical resources. "[C]aste created a concept of natural and social order," says Mukul Sharma, "where people, place, occupation, and knowledge are characterized by pollution and ritual cleanliness; where bodies, behaviours, situations, and actions are isolated, 'out of place', and 'untouched', because of deep-down hierarchical boundaries" (*Caste and Nature* 1). In this sense, Sharma, who calls this "eco-casteism," and other critics have made the case for changing industry and environmental change as an indicators of the outdated need to rethink caste further back than British colonialism. However, it

⁶ Hyper-industrialized deforestation still continues, even alongside government-centralized conservation efforts, and according to C.R. Bijoy, the "lives of forest dwellers continued to be wrecked" due to non-recognition of forest dweller rights, lack of notification of forest designations, and exclusionary conservation measures (78).

is plain that the latter's reorganization made a lasting impact, as Anupama Rao explains: "The British complemented their colonial perspective on caste as social totality with perceptions of caste as a unique, unchanging form of Hindu social stratification...By treating caste as both traditional and political, then, the colonial state inadvertently enabled a (new) politics of caste" (5). Thus, the British official legitimization of caste also worked in terms of further environmental stratification; for example, the monetization of India's economy through the consolidation and commercial valuation of natural resources restricted and marginalized many local Dalit and Adivasi communities who subsisted on their material environments, which created widespread scarcity, and exacerbated social tensions and environmental oppression (Gadgil and Malhotra, Umashankar).

Independence saw India struggling to become self-sufficient, which led to the Green Revolution, environmental fallout, & environmental injustice—India's Green Revolution reflects the damage of colonialism, the demands of postcolonial nation-building, and the dangerous environmental fallout of rapid industrialization—By the end of the 1970's, Western discourse about the nonhuman was changing due to active environmental movements, especially in the U.S.; the "talk of the conquest of nature" was being replaced with talk of conservation, of "green" spaces, practices, and attitudes. However, the decades to come would prove that conquest would not be overthrown by conservation, as the 1980's witnessed a rise of neoliberal capitalist approaches to the environment that re-emphasized instrumentalism and a focus on profit, such that environmental relations as inflected by global economics never significantly shifted.⁷ This has become even more apparent in the contemporary moment, which is defined by global economic and material inequalities, the corporate control of large swaths of the earth, and sites of environmental injustice

⁷ Though American environmentalism had its roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and began gaining significant political ground in the 1950s and 60s, the 1970s saw the biggest push in legislation to protect things like clean air and water. However, in the 1980s President Ronald Reagan made a concerted effort to reduce environmental protections in favor of deregulation.

that are disproportionately located in the global South. In fact, Rob Nixon maintains that “the neoliberal era has intensified assaults on resources,” especially in vulnerable ecosystems that are “treated as disposable by turbo-capitalism while simultaneously exacerbating the vulnerability of those whom Kevin Bale, in another context, has called ‘disposable people’” (*Slow Violence* 4). In exploring environmental relations in the texts, therefore, I consider how postcolonial Indian communities, especially those marginalized within India before, during, and after colonial rule, were and are rendered by the anthropo/euro-centric ideology of neoliberal capitalism as indistinguishable from the nonhuman world and as such “disposable,” exploitable, extractable, or in other ways manageable.

Dalit and Adivasi people are those treated as the most “disposable” in India by both global and national authorities alike. It is their marginalization that often exposes the tendency for binary descriptions to emerge in discourse in and about India, such as “developed” vs. “undeveloped,” “man” vs. “nature,” and “modern” vs. “backward.” Further into *The Greater Common Good*, Roy similarly describes the public perception of the infamous Sardar Sarovar dam project as “divided, crudely, into two categories: On the one hand, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of ‘Development’ versus a sort of neo-Luddite impulse—an irrational, emotional ‘Anti-Development’ resistance, fuelled by an arcadian, pre-industrial dream” (4). Roy is speaking of the internal conversation about the Sardar Sarovar dam in India, a large development project that has now displaced tens of millions of marginalized people in order to increase irrigation on the Narmada River and produce hydroelectricity for a number of Indian states. The dam project is one of hundreds of controversial “schemes” (large-scale systematic plans) and policy decisions that have hurt people in the name of helping people by significantly impacting the physical environment. Sardar Sarovar is also a good example of the multiple scales at which these environmental impacts and discourses take place; these schemes are often part of a larger narrative of progress for India

that is directly connected to the nation's perception on the global scale, while at the same time the unevenly distributed impacts give rise to highly local resistance, such as the Adivasi family who chose to stay in their village as it is flooded in protest, the subjects of the 2002 documentary, *Drowned Out*.

In terms of Dalits, after independence, rather than dissolving caste stigma, India instead reproduced it through the “aggressive criminalization of untouchability” through various legislation (Rao 27). Criminality is key here in connecting the ecological structuring of caste consciousness to postcolonial Indian law and thus contemporary environmental policy, which often pairs the construction of Dalit (and Adivasi) criminality with neoliberal economic reforms in order to devalue and displace these communities. Furthermore according to Sharma, in many instances the Western/Northern idealism of “upholding a green village...becomes the repository of an immutable national identity” in India, therefore he warns that, “such discourses fall into a trap of valorisation and romanticisation of tradition, without realising how these have been responsible for making dalits ‘untouchables’ (“Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics”)⁸. In other words, contemporary subjugation of these communities (through dislocation and violence) often takes place under the auspices of environmentalism, a protective “return to nature” that is intimately connected to a history of subjugating lower caste bodies (Ghertner, Imam and Banerjee). Political scientist Arun Agrawal uses the term “environmentality,” a play on Foucault’s “governmentality,” to describe technologies of environmental governance. Agrawal maintains that environmental policies and institutions cannot be unlinked from identity, such that people develop an environmentally oriented

⁸ For example, D. Asher Ghertner’s *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi* (2015) details the state’s rhetorical maneuvering of the concept of “greening” in order to justify slum clearing as both nationalist and environmentalist. Ghertner traces the speculative projection of the city and “green” as a category of infrastructure both natural and desirable, both of which reflect an urban economic crisis.

subject position according to their relationship to the environment – what he calls an “environmental identity” – that shifts with changing governance (*Environmentality*).

This dissertation is not about Dalits or Adivasis per se. Indian English Literature does not have a stellar track record in representing Dalits or Adivasis, but the dissertation is about the interconnections between environmental narratives, environmental degradation, and environmental injustice, which impacts these marginalized communities most intensely. This diss, and the literature I explore, is about how environmental policies still reflect colonial legacies, cultural & religious elision, instrumentalist approaches, and anthropocentric environmental imaginations. More than that, the dissertation seeks to highlight relational approaches to the nonhuman environment in the novels as a way to rethink the seeming contradictions between various competing environmental discourses. The novels imagine alternative environmental possibilities that work *across* supposed local, national, and global boundaries, a co-extensive human and nonhuman relationality that reflects what Greg Garrard calls “the possibility of coming to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility” (*Ecocriticism* 117). This “dwelling,” he says, “is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work” (117). This project is therefore an examination of environmental collectivities, scales, histories, and understandings in India through contemporary literature that gestures toward an ethics of relation on the earth.

Indian literature offers helpful heuristics for extrapolating key ethical imaginaries for particular environmental elements. I will expound within each chapter, but briefly: there are multiple overlapping discourses related to the particular elements I analyze in this dissertation. Firstly, Indian Literature has a long legacy of representing nature in key symbolic and socio-cultural ways. Secondly, novels allow us to look at particular forest scenes, particular representations of rivers, particular animals, etc., and then compare the human and nonhuman relationships that occur within and

among them. Thirdly, contemporary Indian Anglophone fiction's immense popularity is unique in highlighting the consumer appreciation for cultural "others" and for this reason is able to play with that relationship. This dissertation questions how the characters in the novels relate to nature, how they relate to one another, how they relate to the reader, and how should the reader relate to them? I choose to focus on environmental elements in these novels that are perhaps not the principle focus of the novels themselves in order to tease out their representative connections and functions in the narratives. For example, rather than focusing on the prominent slum setting in *Animal's People*, I isolate the thirteen-page hallucination scene that is poignantly carried out in a nearby forest, which is starkly juxtaposed with the urban landscape. And rather than focusing on the mangrove forest or the interconnecting waterways in *The Hungry Tide*, I focus on the representations of animal species in the novel within those habitats.

Chapter Outlines

In chapter one, I argue that Indian forests are places in which multiple fields of representation are overlapping, competing, and even colliding. I maintain that there is a distinct Indigenous forest discourse, a colonial forest discourse, a feminine forest discourse, an activist forest discourse, an industrial forest discourse, and a mythological forest discourse in India. For example, Indian mythology posits forests as places apart, while discourses of nation-building consider forests as integral to national identity. Forests are often understood within either primitivist or bureaucratic discursive fields. But there is something in between and other than these discourses, an overlap in which to locate an ethics of relation. There is something to be found there that bolsters both the individual and the collective, bolsters the local, national, and planetary spheres all at once, because of its connective and meta nature; it is both apart and within. It is an ecosystem containing ecosystems. It contains multitudes; stories within stories within stories; rhizomatic stories. This helps us connect

the Indigenous with the bureaucratic, the past with the present, the written history with the gaps, the subaltern with the modern, the pastoral with the industrial. Just as there are no clear boundaries between human and nonhuman, there are no clear boundaries between these discursive fields. The novel contains a formal paradox – a distinctly bildungsroman, developmental narrative while denouncing international developmental paradigms. But we can still see the way forward, which is in the relationality that locates the individual as part of a discursive and material network of relations. We need to live in the hallucination, live in the disintegration, contend with it, in order to feel whole.

In chapter two, I argue that it is a mistake to read rivers – and people – as temporally and spatially linear trajectories. Rivers connect disparate spaces, but rivers also connect disparate times and disparate histories of materiality and discourse. Rivers have length and also width – there is a flow that cannot be contained without consequences, that does not have a set pattern of coordinates. Instead, rivers show us multiple cyclical and experiential directions at once. Rivers are by nature rhizomatic, not just spatially but temporally. History tries to have a say, people try to have a say. Religion tries to have a say. The Big Things have agendas. But the river does not. The river is something else. Something that allows for the Big and Small to exist together, allows for microscopic as well as macroscopic agency. We can think we know a river, but it is only a snapshot of a river. We can think we know how things work, but it is only a snapshot – a tiny glimpse of something immense and hardly conceivable. Rivers already connect the big to the small – glacial to sediment! Deep ecological time to surface time. It would be a mistake to isolate singular causes and effects because they branch out and interconnect at alarming rates. The river in this novel is painted as passive in a way that challenges traditional deification – but it is still an agent (because it is, after all, like a woman). But it is an impassive, unemotional, and unassuming agent. It acts but is unmotivated. Motive doesn't matter as much as knowing the capabilities and possible outcomes of a network of actions. The simple message here is not to pollute the river, but the more complex

message is that cause and effect are woven together. There is something inevitable, fatalistic about rivers, they are fragile like us...but there is also something interrogative about rivers, something recursive, uncontainable, and everchanging. Rivers are temporally and spatially recursive; so are people and their ideas. Thus, this gives us an ethics of relationality that encourages constant recursive engagement with our understandings of all that we call a river.

In chapter three, I look at the connection between animal conservation and militarization against disenfranchised communities in India through Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel, *The Hungry Tide* and contrast the fictional and real treatments of two endangered species in the novel, the Irawaddy dolphin and the Bengal tiger. I argue that the novel helps articulate vastly variegated instances of anthropomorphism in order to show that the Indian state's anthropomorphism of tigers produces short-sighted animal management policies that fail to conceive of ecosystemic relationality, while the local people's anthropomorphism of the Irawaddy dolphin—enriched by traditional practices and myth—reflects deep relational ties and socio-material understanding of place. It is the contrast in treatment and reverence toward both species that ironically helps conceptualize clearly the material boundedness of the wildly different animals together, and with the people with whom they share an ecosystem.

Chapter four untangles the fraught relationship between land insecurity, food insecurity, poverty, Adivasi land rights, an agricultural sector in crisis, and the highly sensationalized and contentious farmer suicide crisis in India. I explore the history and effects of privatized agritech of India's Green Revolution policies alongside stories of Adivasi precarity and resistance in Mahaswata Devi's *Imaginary Maps*. Each story in the collection is in some way about land and agrarian life and especially illustrate how ecological, historical, cultural and political discourses compete to extract different meanings and use values from the Indian landscape. I argue that that the misconceptions and misrepresentations of people who live off the land are intimately related to the elisions and

disenfranchisement elicited by the state's misguided economic, environmental, and ecological decision making following Indian independence. Mahasweta's texts not only challenge the state's narratives of arable land and Adivasi life, but also challenge the confusing narratives that attempt to separate the clashes between independent farmer concerns and the national goals of technological independence and development from the clashes between Adivasis and the state. I argue that an ecological, relational approach to these histories reveals their conceptual and material interconnectedness, which is more reflective of the lived experience of impoverished farmers.

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CHAPTER 1

Hallucinations in the Forest: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

The description of the forest in *Kādambarī* is based on the concept of an *Āraṇya* [forest]. There are trees, creepers grasses and plants, birds, and beasts and also there are hunting tribes and ascetics who live in it. The human and the non-human, natural, and supernatural beings all inhabit the forest world of Bāna...The description of this forest mentions the activities (sometimes mythical) of cranes, elephants, parrots, peacocks, rhinos, bears, deer, boars, and even forest deities. While the forest seems to be a home to all these beings, it is yet not free of the dangers of predators...It is a place where death is on prowl.

-Meera Baidur, *Nature in Indian Philosophy and Cultural Traditions*, 166

Meera Baidur performs the above analysis of forest descriptions in the 7th century narrative romance, *Kādambarī*, a lyrical prose poem by Bāṇabhaṭṭa (also known as Bāṇa), who invokes typical mythological epic descriptions of the forest as wild, dangerous, and functional as sacred geography. The darkness of the forest, Baidur explains, is balanced by the calm space of ascetic hermitage, represented as a grove “in between the *Nagara* (city) and the *Āraṇya* (the forest),” what Baidur calls an “ecotopia of human–non-human” (165), meaning an ecological space where human beings “live in harmony with nature” (168). *Kādambarī* is a well-known example of an ancient, particularly story-driven form of Sanskrit literature called *kāvya*, but this understanding of the forest as a place that is home to multiple kinds of beings and yet where “death is on prowl” endures throughout Indian mythology, literature, and even policy from before Bāṇabhaṭṭa all the way to the contemporary moment. In Indra Sinha's 2007 novel, *Animal's People*, a fictionalization of the aftermath of the 1984 Bhopal disaster through the titular character Animal's first-person narration, the space of the forest functions in a markedly similar way. Most of *Animal's People* is set in the “Nutcracker,” one of many slums in the fictional city of Khaufpur, a stand-in for Bhopal, capital city of Madhya Pradesh. Animal is our guide through this urban squalor, allowing for a radical re-orientation for the Western

reader consuming a contemporary Indian novel; Animal is violently disfigured, bent-over and forced to walk on all fours as a result of inhaling poisonous gases from a factory explosion as a child, thus his perspective is quite literally “from below.” “The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level,” he explains to his readers. “Lift my head I’m staring into someone’s crotch. Whole nother world it’s, below the waist” (Sinha 2). From Animal’s economically, socially, and physically subjugated position, the novel pairs questions about the ongoing fight for justice in Bhopal with questions about how the poor can sustain themselves in an urban, post-environmental disaster locale. However, the climax of the novel prompts Animal to take flight to a nearby forest, where he endures a life-altering, thirteen-page hallucinatory nightmare. I argue in this chapter that it is here in the forest, juxtaposed with the urban space, amongst “trees, creepers grasses and plants, birds, and beasts” similar to Baidur’s interpretation of Bāna’s *Kādambarī*, that a message of relational ethics takes shape. In fact, it is the space of the forest that enables Animal to embrace his existence as relational, reconstructing himself as *both* unique *and* part of a collective, an integral node in both socioeconomic and ecological networks. In other words, Animal reclaims his status from “othered” in the typical postcolonial sense, simultaneously constructed and elided by dominant, imperial authority, to an “other” with access to, and more importantly *belonging* to “othered” ecosystemic and social histories, forces, and ways of thinking.

Readings of *Animal’s People* not surprisingly often begin and end with Animal as a nonhuman figure, a character who outwardly rejects the humanity he blames for his disfigured body; instead, he counts himself among the animal kingdom (though he can find no other animals like him). Because of the ecological disaster that haunts his past, critics have called Animal posthuman (Mukherjee), an environmental picaro (Nixon), and an embodiment of systemic dehumanization that belies the

privileged premise of so-called global human rights.⁹ All of these readings are in service of a world systems critique that highlights the production of suffering in the poverty-stricken periphery as a result of unchecked corporate offshoring from the core. Immanuel Wallerstein's now well-traveled formulation fits tidily as a metanarrative of the Bhopal gas leak; many have rightfully argued that the incident was a case of an American corporate elite's undervaluing of the peripheral, offshore lives in its care, a clear illustration of the uneven development and inequality of global capitalism in which the core enriches itself at the expense of peripheral economies.

However, these readings tend to over-privilege Animal's eccentric nonhuman self-identification as a productive discursive feat of resistance, setting up a familiar literary path of individual development as metaphor for postcolonial or peripheral resistance and self-definition. Animal's resistance to the world system is evident in how he plays with the concept of storytelling and who gets to tell his story (the story of environmental injustice). His narrative is poignantly removed from the reader; he is supposedly speaking a mixture of Hindi and French into a tape recorder given to him by a nondescript Australian journalist, which has then been translated into English by a fictional editor who suspiciously assures us that apart from the translation, "nothing has been changed" (Sinha "Editor's Note"). Animal is quite aware of the power of the Western gaze this removal implies, which shapes the way his story (and the story of any marginalized identity) may be received and, inevitably, consumed. He calls his audience "Eyes" to invoke this deleterious gaze:

[F]rom this moment I am no longer speaking to my friend the Kakadu Jarnalis
[journalist]...I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words...I am saying this into
darkness that is filled with eyes. Whichever way I look eyes are showing up. They're floating

⁹ A number of critics have posed Animal as a figure outside the discourse of human rights, not having benefitted from its core concepts, and therefore only able to be conceived as nonhuman, including Alexandra Schultheis Moore in "Disaster Capitalism' and Human Rights" (2012), and Jesse Oak Taylor in "Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" (2013).

round in the air, these fucking eyes, turning this way and that they're, looking for things to see...What I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies. (12)

Nevertheless, Animal cannot help but succumb to the will of the story itself. He also explains that the story is “struggling to be free, I can feel it coming, words want to fly out from between my teeth like a flock of birds making a break for it” (12-13). In this way, Sinha also affirms the inevitability and necessity of the novel’s local-global interconnectedness; through Animal comes an embodied local story that seeks discursive, even material escape, even as it risks global consumption and subsequent appropriation on the other side. Thus, Animal relates to his readers, if reluctantly, via a negotiated transcultural translation, signifying what Nixon calls “the occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness” (*Slow Violence* 45) that make up life in contemporary globalization, as well as the various power structures at work within those webs. Animal also attempts to retain ownership of his story by injecting it with untranslatables, crude humor, and reflexive asides; “If you want my story,” he states combatively, “you’ll have to put up with how I tell it” (Sinha 2).

But Animal’s insistence on telling his own story from the position of an animal also exposes his deep depression and self-hatred, which become more and more pronounced as the narrative moves forward. Though he has reappropriated the epithet “animal” as something to boast, something that makes him unique in a world seemingly dominated by humans, it nevertheless keeps him imprisoned in loneliness and wallowing in depression. I argue that this downtrodden affect interrupts the systemic resistance that Animal’s nonhuman status supposedly represents; his confidence in his animalism, which signifies his unique individuality, is actually a bluff meant to lead readers down a familiar path of postcolonial agency through individual power and triumph. Instead, the novel turns abruptly to transform Animal from rogue individual to a figure *in relation with* a complex human-nonhuman, material-discursive network. It is this relationality that promises resistance, not Animal’s individuality itself. After all, while outwardly contending that he is “an

animal fierce and free” (172, 217) throughout the novel, Animal actually longs for human connection and eventually finds happiness in embracing his humanity rather than rejecting it (though he embraces it as something co-constitutive, that is, able to construct and be constructed by his surroundings, and thus not paramount to his existence). This mobilizing feeling of being integral to a network is the most evident catalyst for both his and his city’s anticipated potential for healing at the end of the novel. The people of Khaufpur are called “the people of the Apokalis” (63), the epitome of what Kevin Bale calls “disposable people” in the neoliberal global assault on “vulnerable ecosystems” (Nixon 4). But this important turn toward a relational network, and more specifically human-nonhuman relational potential, helps the community re-envision the future, redirecting common notions of national postcolonial development into a new understanding of local identity formation, one more equipped to be inclusive of nonhuman co-constituents than commonly accepted modes of either national or global inclusion. I argue that this turn takes place in the historically “othered” space of the forest – a historical, mythical, and managed space, but also a relational space – the literary cultural significance of which plays a key role in framing a new way of conceptualizing the marginalization of both humans and nonhumans alike.

In this chapter, I will use the critical concept of environmental relations to draw connections between literary, cultural, colonial, and national approaches to Indian forests that allows for a fresh reading of Animal’s fateful hallucination in the forest adjacent to his slum. I read his journey as one of interconnected becoming in order to illuminate a multiscalar, relational way of reading the Indian environment through Indian English literature. As detailed in the Introduction, the concept of environmental relations works with the acceptance that how people relate to the environment (or reductively, “nature”) affects how they relate to one another. Further, I postulate that how literary characters relate to both their diegetic environment and to other characters teaches readers how to relate to the literature itself, and by extension, the subject matter, environments, and people therein.

The unique relationships that make up Indian environmentalism combined with the global reach of Indian English writing at a time that can be described as anthropogenic, or even capitalogenic,⁴ fuels this investigation into environmental ethics presented in environmentalist, or at least nature-oriented Indian English narratives. First, I will discuss the Bhopal disaster itself and its relation to India's developmental agenda during the Green Revolution, followed by a summary of the novel and its investment in investigating human-nonhuman boundaries. I will then discuss certain mythological, political, and literary approaches to the forest as overlapping imaginaries. I view *Animal's People* as one of a succession of Indian English narratives that utilize the forest in historically and culturally significant ways, privileging the forest as a field of representation, of which there are multiple layers of competing discourses that Sinha's representation is challenging, including an Orientalizing primitivism and a nationalist, casteist commodification. Finally, I closely read the novel's forest retreat section itself, extracting a relational ethics from the hallucinatory depictions of forest elements as they interact with and overtake Animal's mind and body. It is thus in the storied "nature" of the forest that I locate my reading of *Animal's People* as a case for reading through these discursive layers in order to reconceptualize the forest as a relational material-discursive, human-nonhuman space.

Imagining Bhopal: Environmental Injustice, Slum Life, and Animal's Ambivalent Resilience

In 1984, a Union Carbide Company (UCC) gas leak in Bhopal, India became the world's worst industrial disaster. A storage tank in the American-owned, locally-operated factory became over pressurized and quickly released thirty-two tons of toxic methyl isocyanate into the city's atmosphere, killing at least four thousand people outright, injuring tens of thousands more, and affecting innumerable people in the three decades since from long-term saturation of soil and groundwater. This harmful chemical fallout disproportionately affected the cities' poorest

communities, who were living closest to the factory. The causes of the disaster, both widely investigated and widely contested, included the hasty integration of hazardous raw chemical manufacture for pesticides on a site that was originally zoned only for “light industrial and commercial use” (Broughton), the blatant disregard of warnings about dangerous chemical storage methods, and the failure of the plant’s numerous safety systems. The disaster has rightfully been described as an American corporate elite’s undervaluing of the peripheral, offshore lives in its care, since UCC was proven to operate a nearly identical factory in West Virginia at a much higher standard than the one in Bhopal.¹⁰ It can also be seen as an inevitable result of the spatial dimensions of a world system that empowers multinational companies to the detriment of local people in the Global South. And the persistence of the toxic fallout through ground saturation is a prime example of what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” of environmental deregulation in the age of neoliberal capitalism and the subsequent environmental injustice experienced by the poor; thirty years later, toxic agricultural chemicals still pollute Bhopal’s water supply, babies continue to be born with physical abnormalities and developmental difficulties, and survivors are still campaigning and demonstrating for adequate medical and financial support.

The Bhopal disaster was a historic moment for both India and the world, but also a complicated one. The UCC factory itself (operated by Union Carbide India Limited, or UCIL) is linked to India’s “Green Revolution,” a movement started in the 1960s aimed at increasing national agriculture, especially food grain production, in response to decades of frequent famine. India’s economic conditions were at a record post-Independence low at this time, and the nation was heavily dependent on food imports. India therefore turned its attention to gaining food self-

¹⁰ The Dow Chemical Company (TDCC) acquired UCC in 2001 and did not assume UCC’s liabilities. A special page on Dow’s website calls the explosion “a terrible tragedy,” and immediately clarifies that Dow “never owned or operated the Bhopal plant” (*Dow.com*).

sufficiency and sustainability through agro-technology on a large scale. According to Biplab Dasgupta, this decision was at least in part a political one, at the expense of local communities:

One way of achieving [increased productivity] was by arranging a more egalitarian distribution of land under the given technology, as many of the empirical studies conducted during the sixties showed the smaller holdings to be more productive than their larger counterparts; but this could not be accomplished without hurting the rural elite...who formed the backbone of the ruling party's support in the countryside. (241)

Instead, the government turned toward advancing technology for larger holdings (big companies), including increased pesticide production, the purpose of the UCC/UCIL factory constructed in Bhopal in 1969. However, by the early 1980s, pesticide demand in India and across the world had fallen while production continued, leading to increased storage of dangerous agricultural chemicals, including those that resisted storage and escaped the UCC/UCIL facility in 1984. In other words, when UCC profits went down and safety audits began to be ignored, conditions were already prime for the resultant disaster (Sinha 2009).¹¹

As stated, most of the casualties of the Bhopal disaster were in poor slums closest to the Carbide plant, “in flimsy houses that offered little protection from the weather—or from airborne toxics,” Kim Fortun explains (xiv). Labor displacement and migration to slums in cities like Bhopal were already results of pro-industry policies, meaning that “many of those living near the Carbide plant had already been victimized by the same processes that culminated in their 1984 exposure”

¹¹ This is not the only adverse result of policies made during the Green Revolution. The decision to ramp up technological advancement also led to one of the most contentious ongoing environmental battles in India: agro-chemical giant Monsanto's controversial monopoly on selling patented, genetically modified cotton seed to small Indian farmers, reportedly trapping them in a cycle of crop failure and debt, according to environmentalists like Vandana Shiva. Ironically, environmental activism in Europe and the United States in the 1960s was actually a catalyst for multinational corporations like UCC to look to the Third World for less restricted pesticide development at the same time that India was looking to increase agricultural production (Fortun). I mention these connections to also highlight the neocolonial nuances of the Green Revolution's industrial and environmental policy decisions.

(161). Thus, if Bhopali environmental identities¹² before the disaster were already predicated on poverty, displacement, neocolonial demands and degradation, then these aspects of the following generations' environmental identities were exacerbated by their relationship to the consequential disaster itself. These identities in particular are the subject of *Animal's People*, the title a reflection of an American nonprofit medical aid worker's frustrated cry in a moment of cultural bewilderment toward the Khaufpuri locals suffering from a similar disaster: "HEY ANIMAL'S PEOPLE! I DON'T FUCKING UNDERSTAND YOU!" (Sinha 183). The doctor's exclamation reflects the difficulty of comprehending the multi-scale networks of trauma and poverty entangled with environmental disasters on the order of Bhopal. Indra Sinha, a long-time journalist and Bhopal activist, has said that he himself had trouble writing the novel before he found his breakthrough in the character of Animal, the voice that brought the seemingly incomprehensible webs of the Bhopal narrative together.

Animal is a savvy street urchin whose crooked spine, a developmental disability resulting from his inhaling the poisonous gases when he was just a baby, forces him to walk on all fours (hence his adopted name). Through Animal's prostrated position, the novel tells a story of perpetual trauma, rage, and also resilience. The character was inspired by a report from Sinha's friend who had seen a boy going around on all fours in Bhopal (Naravane). Thinking about this boy's daily life and the stamina and spirit he must need made Sinha's story come alive: "We [the character Animal and Sinha] talked at once and had huge arguments. He didn't want a bit part. He wanted to tell it all," says Sinha (Naravane). A 2009 image by Daniel Berahulak featured in a 2014 retrospective photo spread in *The Atlantic* shows fifteen-year-old Sachin Kumar, a Bhopali local, crawling on his hands and knees due to a toxin-induced birth defect. Whether or not Sachin is the same boy whom Sinha's

¹² As I discuss in the introduction, Arun Agrawal uses the term "environmental identity" to describe the way that people develop an environmentally oriented subject position according to their relationship to the environment that shifts with changing environmental policies and institutions.

friend encountered – the real-life link between Bhopal and Khaufpur – the image is a stark reminder that much of Animal’s seemingly exaggerated and extraordinary narration, at least for a typical Western reader who has never encountered trauma of this scale, actually reflects the very real exaggerated and extraordinary circumstances of those who survived the night of December 2, 1984. “I think it was the collective spirit of the Bhopalis,” says Sinha, “somehow got channeled into one character who presumably symbolized just how disadvantaged you can be” (Naravane).

Against this disadvantage, Animal identifies himself as nonhuman, renouncing the humanity he blames for his fractured existence. “I used to be human once” (Sinha 1), he says in the first line of the novel, and he spends most of his narrative railing against the Amrikan Kampani (Hindi pronunciations of “American” and “company”), as well as those around him, insisting that he is “not a fucking human being,” and has “no wish to be one” (23). The survivalism of this strategy is registered in the poetic chant he repeats throughout the novel: “*I am an animal, fierce and free, in all the world is none like me*” (172, 217). Animal’s ostensibly post-human persona, a reflection of his environmental identity shaped by various networks of both materiality and power, registers both local and global environmental processes. In the local, having to walk on all fours, his embrace of the name “Animal” is a direct result of targeted psychological bullying as a child. But the specificity of his interpellated, internalized baseness is also a result of the “death factory” that is a metonym for the wider process of dehumanization engendered by the world system. After all, his body reflects a malignancy set in motion by flows of poorly regulated international capital, and much of his narration can be read as a meditation on the boundaries of what it means to be human in the context of uneven distributions of pollution and risk, as Nixon explains: “[Animal’s] penumbral human/posthuman identity places a constant strain on the idea of limits (environmental, economic, ethical, and biological). In refusing the tainted designation ‘human,’ Animal remains, for most of the novel, defiantly otherwise” (*Slow Violence* 453).

Poignantly, Animal is also not officially labeled as far as religion or caste; the novel crosses these boundaries by mentioning them only briefly, and in vague terms. On telling of his orphaned state, Animal reveals, “Was I Hindu or Muslim? How did it matter?...I’m not a Muslim, I’m not a Hindu, I’m not an Isayi [Christian], I’m an animal” (Sinha 14). He is clearly of a low caste, as are his fellow residents of the slum, while it is hinted that his friend, Nisha is upper caste, having pledged herself to the cause of the poor, and her boyfriend, Zafar, is Muslim (a pairing that by itself crosses strictures of tradition). This murkiness succeeds in adding to Animal’s rejection of boundaries, and the resultant complication of categories, according to Pablo Upamanyu Mukherjee, is key to the novel’s systemic critique, as Animal embodies “absolute difference from those humans who are powerful enough to possess abstractions such as ‘rights’ and ‘justice’” and “serves to confirm the absolute breach, premised on the power that confers entitlement to rights, between some humans and others” (*Postcolonial Ecologies* 149).

However, it is not incidental that Animal likens his narrative to “a flock of birds” trapped inside his body: “words want to fly out from between my teeth like a flock of birds making a break for it” (Sinha 12-13). This simile sets up both singular/collective and human/nonhuman tensions in Animal, while the narrative reveals that his identity is more complicated than simple rejection or embrace of what is supposedly singular or collective or human or nonhuman. Furthermore, critique of the world system reflected in his narration proves to be more taxing than empowering; Animal is actually deeply ambivalent about his identity, his animal status consistently revealed to be studied performance. Most of the time, Animal is not portrayed as a figure of resistance, but a child filled with hatred; his very first monologue reveals that he constantly feels “disgust,” “rage,” and “jealousies:” “I hated watching my friends play hopscotch. I detested the sight of dancers...I envied herons, goalposts, ladders leaning on walls” (2). In moments alone, he shows a tendency toward self-loathing and self-sabotage, divulging some of his deepest, self-pitying secrets: “[Being an animal]

was my mantra, what I told everyone,” he confesses, “Never did I mention my yearning to walk upright” (12)...“Perched like a monkey [at the top of the abandoned factory]...I would look at the lights of the city and wonder if this pipe had been mended, that wheel tightened, I might have had a mother and father, I might still be a human being” (32). He also blames his stature for the fact that Nisha, with whom he is secretly in love, only thinks of him as a friend: “Over and over I’d tell myself, if only I could stand up straight, it might be a different matter” (47). But perhaps the most intriguing insight into his depression and loneliness is the persistence of demeaning voices in his head that mock him at times when he dares to dream of a normal “human” existence. When Animal dreams that Nisha may one day love him back, a voice interrupts, saying, “*Could you be loved?*” (44). When he wonders about the possibilities of Elli doctress, the American doctor who has set up a free medical clinic in Khaufpur, fixing his spine, a voice warns, “*You will be disappointed*” (57). These disembodied voices, calling him at various times “prick,” “schmuck,” and worse, reveal a deep dissatisfaction and melancholy, as well as more of the singular/collective tension within him, and stand as a testament to his isolated, seemingly “defiant” existence in the wake of the factory disaster.

These schizophrenic voices culminate in the embodiment of Khã-in-the-Jar, a fetus suspended in glass on a medical clinic shelf, aborted as a result of the poisonous gas and kept for research about (and perhaps witness of) the disaster. Khã-in-the-Jar appears at the peak of Animal’s dream to be “normal;” after Elli suggests the possibility of his spine being fixed in America, Animal finally bravely broaches the subject with a local doctor, only to be coldly dismissed: “There is absolutely no hope,” the doctor says to Animal’s surrogate mother, Ma Franci, “this boy will never stand up straight again” (57). Just as Animal reels from this devastating news, Khã enters the scene:

“What did you think, it’s that easy?” says a gnarly voice in my ear...Glaring at me from inside the jar is a small crooked man. An ugly little monster, his hands are stretched out, he has a wicked look on his face, as if he’s just picked your pocket and is planning to piss on your

shoe. Such an expression, I forget my own troubles and start laughing. There's something weird about him. Looks like someone's peering over his shoulder, a second head is growing out the side of his neck. (57)

The simultaneously singular and collective two-headed fetus, whose name Animal explains is Khaufpuri for “friend-in-the-jar,” becomes a foil to Animal and the leading voice in his head, later even deeming himself “chairman of the board” of the taunting voice collective (138). The descriptive parallels between Khã and Animal’s self-image are obvious: “crooked,” “ugly little monster,” “a wicked look on his face, as if he’s just picked your pocket.” Perhaps because Khã is an echo of Animal himself, someone who finally truly understands his secrets, Animal is able to laugh in a moment of extreme disappointment. Yet Khã-in-the-Jar doesn’t just parallel Animal’s own “crooked” existence; aborted and suspended before he could even begin his life, he also represents Khaufpur as a city trapped in time in a cycle of suffering. Like how Animal sees himself, he is always never quite human.

The idea of an end to history is a repeated trope throughout the novel; Animal’s acquaintance, Farouq, says, “I curse the day the Kampani came here because its disaster erased our past” (152), and Animal describes the outer wall of the factory as Khaufpur’s “history plus also where its history finished without warning when no one was expecting it” (272). In other words, much like the (re-)defining event in Bhopal, the disaster has become an origin point, the moment at which all Khaufpuri potential ended, and from which only poisoned existence emerges. Because of this, Khã-in-the-Jar’s singular goal is to get Animal to destroy him in order to be set free of his stagnant, miserable existence. This suicidal yearning parallels Animal’s eventual path to suicide as well, closed in by his growing self-hatred reflected in so many ways throughout the narration. Thus, Animal’s strategic posturing at post-human resilience is eclipsed by his deep longing (of which he is ashamed) to *be* human, to walk upright, to be loved and respected in society and to *relate* to other

humans as an equal. This reality of misery simultaneously reveals what is actually his own attempt at self-othering and undercuts his supposed post-human identification, what otherwise could be read as a subaltern strategy of resistance to systemic degradation.

Instead, Animal's existence ends up being elaborated as a node in an integrated human-nonhuman network. Animal is deeply entangled with the placedness of Khaufpur and the factory within it, ground zero for the disaster and creation of the "People of the Apokalis." He dwells in the burnt-out factory itself, sleeping on piles of papers and climbing the labyrinthine piping to gaze at his city; it is his way of reclaiming the space, just as the earth seems to have done: "Under the poison-house trees are growing up through the pipework. Creepers, brown and thick as my wrist, have climbed all the way to the top, tightly they've wrapped wooden knuckles round pipes and ladders, like they want to rip down everything the Kampani made," says Animal (31). And outside the factory, the slum is integral to both his marginalized status and his attempt at resistance; as the lowest of the low, he is ironically the king of the slum, able to weave in and out of both alleys and extralegal situations deftly. It is what lands him his job as a "spy" in local community leader Zafar's illegal activist network, though Elli doctress's declaration of the slum as "flung up by an earthquake" (106) also allows Animal to view (not without difficulty) his home from multiple perspectives. But more than this, Animal's body and its placedness is an important metaphor for Khaufpur's post-disaster ecology. Susie O'Brien discusses Animal's efforts at "resilience" in ecological terms:

Resilience is generally understood in ecology as a system's capacity to retain its basic function and structure in the face of disturbance (Walker & Salt xiii). A resilient system is not one that maintains a stable state in the face of external challenges; rather, it is one that subsists by undergoing constant processes of change and adaptation. Key to resilience science is the recognition that living systems shift between periods of growth and conservation, and

release and reorganization...But complicating matters further is the multiscale nature of systems...such that each system contains, and is nested within other systems. (26)

Clearly interested in the parallel between political resilience and ecological resilience, O'Brien importantly locates a connective tension between environmental studies and postcolonial criticism in her approach to this vacillation between stability and change, both of which, she maintains, are integral to an ecological understanding of social systems. Thus, the tensions I locate in *Animal's* subjectivity, between human and nonhuman and singular and collective, but also between stubbornness and stagnancy, survivalism and depression, are interconnected with this place, Khaufpur, that is both stable and chaotic. It is also inevitably key to understanding the tonal shift at the end of the novel, when the reader gains new insights into the value and strength of *Animal's* (and Khaufpur's) existence as a resilient system amid the wider, more hostile systems of national-international-environmental marginalization.

This tonal shift is the result of an action-fueled drive toward the ending, after the meandering reminiscences of *Animal's* inner consciousness that define most of the novel. Having been unwittingly mobilized into Zafar's social justice activism toward the beginning of the narrative, *Animal* delves deeper and deeper into the community's toils, and as he begins to genuinely care more and more about the lives progressing around him, his hatred, and more importantly his "animalism," begin to noticeably recede. This comes to a head during a demonstration near the factory in protest of a deal between government cronies and Kampani officials to mitigate the latter's responsibility for the disaster: "The ever-swelling crowd is full of energy," says *Animal*, and then, "From nowhere a tide of ragged people surges over the police and sweeps them away. Thousands have come, they have heard of the fight at the factory . . . people have dropped what they were doing and run to our aid . . . never have I seen such fury" (Sinha 314). Despite this surge in collective energy, however, *Animal* is not quick to give up his miserable, individualist hold on the narrative; though he

participates in the riot, he proves unequipped to handle the real stakes of relating to other humans when a number of his newly formed relationships begin to break down. First Zafar is reported dead, then a little girl Animal befriended dies, then another newfound friend Elli doctress seemingly betrays him, and finally all of this loss culminates when Nisha bitterly rejects his declaration of love. Thus, he is not fully pulled into a collective politics. Instead, in typically dramatic fashion, Animal attempts suicide after these unfortunate events, bringing the singular/collective, human/nonhuman tensions within him to catharsis by swallowing *Datura* (jimson weed) in a macabre reenactment of the poisoning that originally twisted his spine. Little does he know that this reenactment is not his alone; as Animal returns to the medical clinic to acquire *Khã-in-the-Jar* before he dies, he finds that the townspeople have set the clinic ablaze, an attempt to destroy what they see as a symbol of the *Amrikan Kampani* that stole their lives. When the clinic fire starts to spread to the abandoned factory, Khaufpur's past trauma, already perpetually present throughout the novel, is now quite literally, materially at hand: "I look behind," says Animal, "there's a glow in the sky, clouds of smoke are billowing upward. 'Run run,' the voices cry, 'the gas has come.' 'Run! Save yourselves!' 'That night has come again!'" (339).

A powerful climactic gesture, the fire symbolizes a re-appropriation of the site at which hope died in Khaufpur, enacting a return to the city's trauma in order to make way for a new beginning. In the midst of it, Animal collects and drops *Khã-in-the-Jar*, finally liberating him from stasis; and now that fire is upon all of them, Animal and *Khã's* individual disrupted growths, thus far signifying a veritable suspension of individual meaning-making, are symbolically merged and released. But for Khaufpur to truly embrace a new beginning of healing, Animal must also experience an ending to his self-proclaimed singular, animal existence. His suicidal trajectory illustrates that he cannot embrace himself without confronting these binary tensions; the narrative must inevitably acknowledge both the human and nonhuman actants and implications of environmental injustice in

ways that highlight the myriad relationships between them. Animal thus retreats to a stretch of lush forest just outside the factory area in order to carry out his overdose, ending in what he perceives as his own death.

Significance of the Forest Retreat: Mythology, History, and Policy Intertwined

Why does this suicide attempt move to a forest? The place of Khaufpur thus far has been described as extremely urban, and it is not until this late point in the novel that Animal even mentions a forest adjacent to the abandoned factory. Khaufpur's counterpart, Bhopal, is a large city, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, and slums populate the area closest to the gas leak.¹³ According to anthropologist Kim Fortun, the city "has never been a pastoral locale. It has drawn people into itself out of violent currents. It has been a place of migrancy, of continual upheaval and of reinscription" (160). Fortun is in part referring to Bhopal's roots as a destination for many Indian Muslims following India's independence and emergence as a Hindu state in 1947. In the frenzy of relocation and violence at the time, many settled in Bhopal illegally, and this contributed to the powerlessness of the residents to protest when UCC's factory safety standards fell over time. But ironically, Bhopal is also considered one of India's "greenest" cities, boasting stretches of natural geography that include sizeable sal and teak forests and large lakes with accompanying lush green areas. Animal, however, singularly descriptive of the urban parts of the city, registers only the boundedness of slum life, despite his declaration of being "fierce and free." In other words, until his suicide attempt, Animal's so-called freedom (a function of his dubious animalism) is in fact geographically limited by his impoverished existence.

¹³ Some slums already existed before the UCC/UCIL structure was erected, while others appeared after the disaster as a result of the plummeting real estate market (Fortun).

The sudden appearance of the forest can then be read as a “natural,” nonhuman space in which to stage Animal’s fantastical sojourn, a pastoral space that emphasizes a division from humanity, symbolized by the urban, from which Animal wants to escape. After all, the forest provides him encounters with plant and animal life that his urban life does not afford, and the space is different enough from the enclosed slums to warrant his expansive expedition into death. This is certainly what Animal expects: “All whom I loved are gone,” he moans on the way to the forest, “lost to me forever, distant is that city of disaster, its streets and alleys I knew so well, a far off and hopeless place, I will not go back, I won’t, never will I return, if I am dying let me die here in the open like a beast, or else let me live here, far from people, never again do I want to look on a human face” (Sinha 341). In one sense, scholars of Western ecocriticism will recognize the rather clichéd, problematic binary in this strategy; humans are not “outside” of nature, nor can “nature” ever be fully conceived as a pristine wilderness outside of humanity’s grasp, though the concept often functions that way. And to posit such a stark contrast between human and nonhuman by emphasizing the wildness of the forest outside of city life seems to undercut the blurring of boundaries to which the novel seems thus far committed. There is a pastoralism here, as Rob Nixon points out, that is not in line with a networked reading.

Nevertheless, Animal’s commitment to the binary is important, as the forest itself refuses this binaristic ideation once Animal arrives there because of the unique ways in which the culture/nature divide is manifested in Indian conceptualizations of the forest. It is at this point that I wish to connect this admittedly small yet transformational section of the novel to wider histories of forest relations in India by reflecting on history, policy and literature to show how forests are importantly *both* integral to the idea of nationhood *and* othered spaces. The clashes over forest meaning, utility, and function illustrate that the way people *relate* to forests depend on cultural, religious, and regional specificity, but also on their investment in a nationalist project that carries

with its legacies of colonial environmental policy and modern industrial degradation. Forests in India carry with them a sense of nationalist nostalgia and pride. At the same time, the forest is the most high-profile and ideologically fraught environmental resource featured in Indian environmental policy, politics, and activism, not least because forests are both vital and difficult to categorize, as they contain their own ecosystems composed of multiple other geographic resources and nonhuman forces. Forests, forestry, and forest conservation are extremely important to the Indian government; the Indian Forest Service (IFS) is one of only three branches of the “All India Services” of the central government (along with the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Police Service), meaning that all members of these services operate under both state and federal mandates. The homepage of the IFS website reads: “India is one of the First (sic) countries in the world to have stated scientific management of its forests” (“Introduction”). Despite or because of this precedence, forest cultural values, utility, and conservation are often at odds, linked to a long history of clashes between local and national imaginations of and relationships to forests, as well as the importance of forest resources for India’s competition in international trade, or its place in the global economic system.

The history of relations between Indian people and a somewhat contrived category called “forest”¹⁴ is far too large a scope to be attempted here. However, such that Animal’s retreat formally aligns with a cultural and literary tradition while also bringing up shades of forest policy discourse, what I will attempt is to create a targeted narrative about some aspects of forest relations in India.

¹⁴ Linguistically, the word “forest” and “jungle” are interchangeable in many rhetorical situations in India, as reflected in many English novels that use both terms. In Hindi, जंगल (jaṅgal), from Sanskrit जङ्गल (jaṅgala, “arid, sterile”), is often used to indicate forest, and is the etymological source for the English word “jungle.” (English speakers may have associated Indian forests as jungles in part because India’s forests are often tropical or sub-tropical, as opposed to the more temperate forests found in northern climates.) However, there is also the Sanskrit word for “forest,” अरण्य (aranya), which has closer ties to ancient Hindu texts.

There are strong cultural, political, and literary precedents for the symbolism of “forest as retreat from humanity” in India that conjure both exilic and ascetic associations. In her study of nature imagery in ancient Indian philosophical and cultural literature, Meera Baindur explains that in epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, important actions by gods and goddesses take place in the forest, often as a result of exile, and particular forests have come to be associated with these actions (*Nature*). Baindur uses the example of Ram killing the demoness Tataka in Daṇḍakaranya (Dandak Forest), a spiritual forested region generally thought to be located in modern Chhattisgarh, where Ram, Sita, and Lakshman spend over a decade in exile (Baindur 111). As exilic destination, these forests are defined as deep, dark, and wild, the dwelling-place of the non-human, as well as liminal, separate from human settlement (Thapar; Baindur; Morrison). Thus, forests often take on a function of hallucination and madness. At the same time, this hallucinatory aspect dovetails into the promise of enlightenment and serenity through asceticism. Forests and areas within forests often serve as a place of hermitage where pilgrims hope to gain spiritual knowledge. Sacred groves, for example, are an especially recognized phenomenon throughout India that relies on and perpetuates this concept of a retreat from humanity. Baindur describes these particular spaces in terms of both religious association and ecological phenomena: “The interspaces between a forest and a settlement are occupied by a series of changing topos, not only divided spatially but also temporally. These interspaces become the places where the human and the non-human encounter each other. [...] The forest thus had its mystical influence on the path of liberation through a symbolic act of leaving the *grāmya* (village) for the *āraṇya* (forest)” in a search for meaning in the unknown (Baindur 111). This shows how these strong associations encompass both the danger of losing one’s grip on humanity and reality and the promise of mindfulness, both functions of extreme transformation. This deeply-embedded mythological association provides the foundation for two other competing threads of forest discourse: colonial and postcolonial forest policy that paradoxically relied on Hindu nationalist

claims over forests in order to justify both massive deforestation, and later, conservation; and modernist and contemporary literature that ironically relied on orientalizing primitivist renderings of the forest in order to evoke ascetic hermitage and otherworldliness in service of a kind of anti-establishment, differentiated Indian identity.

Interestingly, anthropologist Kathleen Morrison suggests a complex connection between those mythological and cultural exilic and ascetic associations and forest conservation management that she deems “the myth of the primeval forest” (3). The myth, she claims, allows British colonialism to stand in as an imaginary origin for all issues of forest degradation, and on the other side allows Indigenous approaches to stand in for an imaginary, idyllic model for sustainability. Morrison and others claim that this was largely established by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha’s seminal *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1993), which posits that British imperialism was an “ecological watershed” in the history of India (Gadgil and Guha 116). This established the idea that India’s once dense, widespread forest cover remained relatively untouched until the development of colonial instrumentalization, when in reality, forests and settled cultivation in India were always entangled (Das Gupta). As Morrison and Mark Lycett explain: “[I]t can fairly be argued that forests and human societies developed in tandem, linking forest history to human history in significant ways” (*Social Lives of Forests* 150). As a result, some forested regions, including Dandakaranya, have come to be imagined as once much larger and more lush than there is ecological evidence to support. Yet, Morrison and Lycett continue, “Modern forests are almost uniformly seen as *remnants* of this history, a simple trajectory of change in which forests stand in neatly for nature and human action, especially agriculture, plays the role of culture” (150).¹⁵ This myth of the primeval forest, Morrison further explains, links to “stories of primitivity and improvement, of

¹⁵ Anthropologist K. Sivaramakrishnan makes a similar argument in his book, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (1999).

nationalism and romanticism, of development and stasis” (Morrison 3) that result in elevating the kind of scientific management of forests valued by the Indian Forest Service. In other words, in romanticizing pre-colonial images of forests in conservation discourse, the Indian government elides the actual ways in which villages interacted with the forest, as well as the legacy of their displacement in pre-colonial, colonial, and now postcolonial forest management.

There is also a complex way in which mythology aids this misrepresentation. In the same epic literature that heralds forests as important interstitial spaces for gods and goddesses (literature that reflects some of the same myths that many forest-dwellers recognize), Adivasis are often depicted as nonhuman or half-human forest inhabitants. Many critics claim that the popularization of these epics, especially as they appear in Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) discourse, therefore aids in keeping Adivasis marginalized. Adivasi activist and political economist C.R. Bijoy catalogues representations of Adivasi forest dwellers in the epics as: “Rakshasa (demons), Vanara (monkeys), Jambuvan (boar men), Naga (serpents), Bhusundi Kaka (crow), etc.” (“The Adivasis of India”). In addition, he claims that, “[i]n medieval India...those who surrendered or were subjugated were termed as Dasa (slave) and those who refused to accept the bondage of slavery were termed as Dasyu (a hostile robber)” (Bijoy). Bijoy relates these depictions to contemporary Adivasi socioeconomic status, as he says they are directly connected to the way the Indian population generally regards Adivasis as primitive and “lesser humans” (“The Adivasis of India”). Therefore, implications of strong exilic associations are twofold and unfortunately betray a stark double standard: when “society” or even “humanity” are already deemed as existing outside of forest life, those who *retreat* to forests are associated with godliness and asceticism (hence the pilgrimage), whereas those who (traditionally) live in and subsist on forests are seen as outsiders, even criminals. This is important because contemporary Indian forest policies and management, while outwardly conservationist, are often wrapped up in Hindutva ideology, attempting to paradoxically create

primitivist narratives about forests that then justify further displacement of forest dwelling peoples, as well as further deforestation for the sake of national economic development. Thus, the clashes over forest meaning, utility, and function illustrate that the way people relate to forests depend on cultural, religious, and regional specificity, but also on their investment in a nationalist project that carries legacies of colonial environmental policy and modern industrial degradation.

Forest Retreats in Modern and Contemporary Indian Literature

In the colonial period, there was a strong move toward primitivism in Indian modernist literature and art that willingly or unwillingly drew upon the myth of the primeval forest. Cultural icon Rabindranath Tagore famously utilized primitivism as a unifying principle for anti-colonial resistance, rejecting colonial urban life in favor of a nationalist environmental embrace of the poor predicated on the importance of the forest (Gupta, Mitter). At the time, modern Indian literature was dominated by the English-educated intelligentsia and was defined by a celebration of colonial modernity. In response, Tagore established a university in Santiniketan (later Visva Bharati University) in celebration of the forest as a space both physically and spiritually unifying. His 1922 lecture, *Creative Unity*, speaks of “the religion of the forest” as an “ideal of perfection preached by the forest dwellers” (Tagore 46), and his famous 1909 literary essay *The Hermitage* champions man’s union with nature through the figure of the hermit in the forest in order to facilitate a desire to protect the natural world. Unfortunately, despite the honest intentions of elevating forest-dweller knowledge, this romanticization of forest-dweller life also perpetuated those already existent stereotypes of forests and forest dwellers as othered, even otherworldly. Still, according to art historian Partha Mitter, the kind of primitivism Tagore championed in the early twentieth century, which could be found in both literary and visual artistic circles, was a “mode of empowerment [...]

the particular Indian expression of a global response to modernity” (33).¹⁶ Again, spatial otherness linked with spiritual transformation was integral to multiple understandings of India more broadly.

Indian English literature that came after Tagore does not necessarily register the forest as a particularly Indigenous space.¹⁷ Instead, the dualistic imagery of exile and retreat, the danger of insanity with the promise of enlightenment, which nevertheless carries with it shades of this history, is recurrent in modern and contemporary Indian English literature. I argue that this establishes another kind of discourse about forest representation that generally understands the forest as a site of terror, hallucination, and transformation, often in times of escape, much like in *Animal's People*. A good example can be found in R.K. Narayan's novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), a story about the trials and tribulations of a young boy, Swaminathan, as he navigates and experiments with adolescent friendships, work ethic, and the violence of nationalist activism. At one point, Swami is caught between the competing demands of his father, his cricket teammates, and his school duties, and in response to the pressure, he lashes out at his headmaster. Mortified, he runs and accidentally stumbles into Mempi Forest. “Night fell suddenly, and his heart beat fast. His throat went dry as he realized that he had not reached the trunk road. The trees were still thick and the road was still narrow [...] here one could hardly see the sky” (Narayan 161). Utterly isolated and lost, Swami begins to hear things: “These noises [...] were like sinister whispers, calling him to a dreadful sacrifice. He clearly heard his name whispered. There was no doubt about it. ‘Swami... Swami [...]’

¹⁶ For other Indian primitivist writers, see Partha Mitter's *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (2007).

¹⁷ One notable exception is Sohaila Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998), which does more directly depict the forest as Indigenous space. *Madwoman* depicts the parallels between waning forest dweller control and rights and the logging efforts of a rising parasitic class in India that was part of the government's increased accommodation for private industry in the early postcolonial period. The titular madwoman, a tribal woman who is the personification of the monsoon season, can also be seen as a physical manifestation of the promise of both hallucination and enlightenment embedded in forest representations, and her death, which accompanies a terrible drought, brings together the Indigenous and development worlds through ecological crisis.

It was some devil, coming behind him noiselessly” (162). Terrified, he breaks down and starts praying to all the gods he knows. But this seems to only make the hallucinations worse: he hears “heavy footfalls,” sees “a huge lump of darkness coming towards him” with “immense tusks” and “small eyes, red with anger” (165). He then sees a series of images:

Now a leopard, now a lion, even a whale, now a huge crowd, a mixed crowd of wild elephants, tigers, lions, and demons, surrounded him. The demons lifted him by his ears, plucked every hair on his head, and peeled off his skin from head to foot. Now what was this, coiling round his legs, cold and slimy? He shrank in horror from a scorpion that was advancing with its sting in the air. No, this was no place for a human being.” (165)

After this, Swami dreams that he is at his cricket match and falls asleep in what ends up being the road out of the forest. A village cart man finds him and takes him to a forest officer, who then escorts him home to his match. The forest here functions as a rite of passage, an unwilling ascetic trial that Swami must endure in order to mature and put right his behavior toward his friends, father, and schoolmaster.

Salman Rushdie also draws upon the aforementioned forest associations in his novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), this time using the fragmentation of an individual character's identity in order to allegorize the fragmentation of the Indian national identity during the violent Bangladesh Wars of 1971. The novel's infamous Sundarbans chapter returns to that hallucinatory function of the forest to describe what Rushdie himself has called a metaphorical descent into hell. At this point in the narrative, protagonist Saleem has already lost most of his family in the war between India and Pakistan and has been in the service of the Pakistani Army, witnessing and inflicting violence and atrocity on a scale that he perceives as inexpressible, even incomprehensible to the human mind. Fittingly, an air raid causes him to hit his head on his spittoon, and he is “stripped of past present memory time shame and love” (Rushdie 343). Empty of memories and history, Saleem becomes like

an animal, entirely submissive and used as a tracker dog because of his magical sense of smell. Even unburdened of his identity, however, he has had enough reality and deserts the army, fleeing to the Sundarbans forest¹⁸ with three other young soldiers, “into the historyless anonymity of rain-forests” (360). This “historyless anonymity” aligns with the forest as an interstitial space, a place that necessarily inflicts an expansive, boundary-less transformation, where both space and time becomes distorted. The group immediately becomes lost in what Saleem calls “a realm possessing the quality of ‘absurd fantasy’” and he surrenders to “the terrible phantasms of the dream of forest.” Upon drinking rainwater falling from the thick trees, they enter a hallucinatory haze filled with ghosts and the spirits of the wives and children of those they have assaulted or killed. Awakening from the haze, the other soldiers have regained their identities, but it takes a bite from a poisonous snake to return Saleem’s memories to him, all except his name. Eventually the group wanders into a temple where they see visions of their own skeletons; Saleem feels that they are turning into ghosts before a tidal wave finally carries them out of the Sundarbans. Here the overdetermined space of the forest helps to express the violence, confusion, and fracturing the nation must face head on in order to move forward and mature.

These hallucinatory “escapes” draw on the idea of asceticism while not directly invoking ascetic status to the characters. Instead, they are sort of ascetics by default, having to endure an otherworldly experience because they happen to stumble into the space. Keeping with the idea that sacred groves are also integral to forest relations as key spaces in between the *grāmya* (village) and the *āranya* (forest), Kiran Desai’s *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) takes a much different tone in directly satirizing asceticism, illustrating awareness of the political complexities that make up the subtext of forest primitivism as nationalist philosophy. *Hullabaloo*’s unlikely ascetic hero is Sampath,

¹⁸ The Sundarbans also provides the setting for Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, which I discuss in Chapter 3.

a lazy government worker attempting to avoid his responsibilities by quitting his job and retreating to live the rest of his life in a guava tree. The tree he chooses lies in an orchard described as “abandoned for many years now, the fruit acquiring the tang of the wilderness, the branches growing into each other [...] The orchard trees stretched almost all the way up the hillside, bordering, at its edge, the university research forest” (Desai 53). When his family hears of his antics and goes to confront him, Sampath does not know what to say, and instead he gazes into the trees: “He concentrated on the way the breeze ran over the foliage, like a hand runs over an animal’s dark fur to expose a silvery underside” (54). Almost by default, Sampath becomes an inspiration. His mother stays to cook for him under the tree, discovering “the relief of space” (78); “the profusion of greenery [...] exhilarated her” (100). Passersby assume he is a guru, and begin to bring him gifts and prayers. Ironically, since Sampath had initially meant to retreat from modern life, a burgeoning market crops up beside the grove, rapidly changing the human-nonhuman relationships of the grove and adjacent forest.

The satire that follows dances between genuine celebration of the forest and mockery of the modern nostalgia for forest asceticism, lambasting overly traditionalist narratives that celebrate religious myth at the expense of real environmental conditions. Complicating the tradition/modernity dichotomy further is a group of wandering monkeys who also decide to take up residence in the orchard because of its new proximity to humans and their food waste. The monkeys’ general ruckus, described as “an onslaught upon the meek landscape” (132), then prompts the government to get involved in attempting to control them, and the resultant “hullabaloo” highlights an inevitable and intimate cycle of influence between “culture” and “nature” that undercuts Sampath’s original, so-called spiritual retreat. At the same time, Desai is careful to remain compassionate to the villagers who both believe in Sampath’s spiritualism and also erect a market that compromises that spiritualism; the novel pulls away from secularist cynicism when the one

atheist naysayer of the story ends up dying accidentally under a spilled vat of oil underneath a guava tree. The novel can be read as depicting complex relationships between humans and, in this case, forest-adjacent ecologies in terms of the overlapping influences of history, mythology, modernity, environmentality and economic stability.

The preceding sections provide a glimpse at how both forest management and forests in Indian English literature are threads in a network of forest representations that crosses both temporal and scalar boundaries and registers multiple competing environmental understandings and approaches, leading us back to *Animal's People*. In the following section, I will return to Animal's forest retreat to show how his extreme urban, corporal, and emotional abjection resulting directly from environmental injustice is connected to India's history of forests as sites of contestation and spiritual significance, leading to a crucial revelation about the porous boundaries and complex environmental networks that make up the narrative.

Animal's Hallucinations: Forest as Network

It is late afternoon when I enter the first trees, thorns, dry grasses, twigs snapping under my feet, howra hoora cries of birds, japing greenly go thus trees through, oh I'll discover my true state, die or live, animal returning to its truly home, four feet have I my eyes are stars my nose is snakes that lick their nostrils, dream lipless dreams, the sun above is like a mouth roaring out flames, the skin of my back is frying, a rod of fire is my throat, each breath is a fire-eater's gush of flame [...] Naked, I lie on my belly drink from a ditch and bite the sonofabitch sun, I feel like my own father whom I have never known. (Sinha 342)

The above passage marks the start of Animal's "trip" through the forest in *Animal's People*. Here we see traces of Baidur's description of the forest in Bāṇa's *Kādambarī*: "there are trees, creepers grasses and plants, birds, and beasts [...]" The human and the non-human, natural, and supernatural

beings all inhabit the forest world [...] It is a place where death is on prowl” (166). Having swallowed datura and escaped the fire in the city center, Animal begins to merge with the nonhuman forest elements here, his eyes figured as stars and nose as snakes. The intense heat of the “sonofabitch” sun, a traditionally oppressive figure in Indian literature and poetry, causes Animal to self-reflexively question his own origins: “I feel like my own father whom I have never known” is a gesture toward both Animal’s orphan state and Khaufpur’s loss of history. The passage also marks a syntactical break in the narrative; though not without street lingo and grammatical signposts that identify him as uneducated, Animal’s narration for most of the novel is actually strikingly clear and sophisticated. He speaks Hindi, French, some English, and can understand the other village dialects as well. His ability with language serves as a reminder to the reader of his squandered potential, and also not to underestimate people rendered “disposable” under the world system. However, as the drugs take hold of Animal’s bodily functions, the forest takes hold of his mind, and his formal syntax begins to disintegrate, as seen in the line “japing greenly go thus trees through.” This erratic stream of consciousness, which blurs the line between poetic and nonsensical, indicates other disintegrating boundaries: of human and nonhuman, culture and nature, singular and plural.

During the next thirteen pages, paralleling the thirteen Datura pills that are hastening his supposed demise, our splintered hero, whose liminal body has thus far been imbued with the potential for both human and nonhuman agency, acts as a pivotal node for an active environmental network in the forest as he hallucinates. What Animal expects, committed to the human/nonhuman binary, is validation from the natural space, to be received as nonhuman: “I will not go back, I won’t, never will I return, if I am dying let me die here in the open like a beast, or else let me live here, far from people, never again do I want to look on a human face” (341). But the forest proves that it is not that simple. The nonhuman elements of the forest do not welcome Animal into some imaginary nonhuman fold, nor do they cast him as an epic hero in exile. Animal looks but can find no animals:

“Where are you, animals, let me introduce myself? I stop and listen, nothing’s there but stirring of leaves [...] I am looking for signs left by hoof, paw, belly of snake, nothing can I find” (343).

Instead, the forest reveals how different it is than his reality, and that he, a child who only knows the boundedness of slum life, does not readily belong there: “This ground is strange to me, gone beedi [cigarette] wrappers, orange peels, plastic, here are bent grasses, twigs in patterns and piles mixed with old leaves on the forest floor” (343).

The forest goes on to very explicitly reject his animal status. This is expressed by the first animal he does encounter, a two-headed lizard that Animal attempts to kill and eat. When the lizard begs Animal not to eat him, Animal complies, saying, “‘Go then,’ I say, releasing it. ‘I am sorry I hurt you’” (346). But the lizard immediately turns the encounter back on Animal: “[Y]our nature you can never change. You are human, if you were an animal you would have eaten me” (346). The lizard’s rejection of Animal’s pretense feels cruel, but unsurprising when read as the inevitable moment of truth about Animal’s extreme self-isolation; finally he has to deal with the fact that he is human, and that means he is a broken human, battered by the poison, by the Kampani, by his childhood peers, by life. Sure enough, Animal climbs into a tree and breaks down:

Grief comes to me, all my rage and fear empty in dry coughing sobs. I call to my fellow creatures, ‘Brothers and sisters, the lizard’s wrong, I am one of you, come to live with you. Show yourselves.’ None come, but there’s a rustling, it’s the lizard whose life I spared, she says, ‘Hey Animal, soon you’ll be a shriveled old sack, I will creep into your dry carcase (sic) and lay my eggs around your heart.’ (346-347)

It is clear that Animal expects a kind of ascetic welcome, only to be thrown off by this existential experience. The forest has rejected the animal status he has used to define his existence, yet there continue to be images like this one of Animal merging with the nonhuman, with other forest wildlife. Before the lizard’s threat of laying eggs around his heart, Animal describes the nausea of

the pills as a cobra coming out of his throat: “its body fills my guts its tail dangles out of my arsehole every muscle in my body strives to expel it, up comes nothing” (344). Though an apt description of what the poison must feel like, there is also something more symbolic to these images of Animal’s body being taken over, from the inside out, by other animals; it is an embrace through negation. Thus, though he is being rejected as an animal, he does not remain totally human either, despite the lizard’s taunting; he is being rewritten, re-constituted.

The trees begin to speak to him as well, in otherworldly voices that add to the jumble of schizophrenic voices we have already known. It is at this moment that we could read Animal’s voices as having always represented a kind of *supernatural* network, not in the vein of being *not* natural, but rather of being *added to* nature, as if nature has been reaching out to him from inside his own mind. Here in the forest, the voices of the trees seem to merge with those “familiar” voices, speaking as if they have been keeping a secret from him all along. But the trees figure most prominently in Animal’s ecological revelation, in answer to his seemingly in-between status. Says Animal about the trees: “their voices are nothing I’ve ever heard, like deep flutes filled with water. ‘Show the animal, show him what he really is’” (343). Despite their call to “show him what he really is,” the trees do nothing to help to clarify Animal’s identity; rather, they figure his existence as something fragile and contingent, interpellating him into their circular ecosystem as “what he really is;” something simply interconnected, not individualized:

Trees are writhing in the darkness I call out are you in pain, it’s me who’s dying. We are not in pain we are dancing. What, dancing with joy? We have no need of joy cry the deep flutes of the trees, we are in need of water and so are you O Animal. Find water if you want to live. Where can I find water on this dry hill? Go down, go up, your choice. My feet are raw with blisters, I can go no further. Then lie here and we shall wrap our roots around your

bones. I need my bones, friends. Lie here, die here, we are no friends of yours, soon you will have no need of your bones.

*You are an animal fierce and free
you shall see what you shall see
que ta chair devienne seche
we shall feast upon your flesh (344)*

The cruelty in this exchange can only be felt if we acknowledge Animal's humanity; the trees do not care about him, they are not his friends. But when read as just another set of actors in the network of the forest, they become simply dispassionate, neutral, which is how his connection to them functions. They, like Animal, need water, and when Animal dies, he will become part of them.

Pushed to the brink of his thirst and the painful merging of his identity into the forest space ("I vomit rainbows, when I dung I make the earth" (347)), Animal finally calls out the question at the heart of his narrative:

"Come out and tell me, am I a man?" "WHAT IS A MAN?" The voice roars right in my ear like a thunderclap, it flattens me. Torn in pieces I'm parts of me break off and float away. My misty thoughts go spinning and become the moon. The glare in my eye's my eye turning into the sun, my breath's a hot wind, riding it is a tiny god drunk with his own power whose body is covered with sores, from my middle parts come gusts of air, our of my head slides the universe. (347)

The trees' reversal of his question reveals that the concept of human/nonhuman boundaries is something constraining and insignificant, too individual and simplistic to pertain to their cyclical ecological framework. They do not give Animal an answer but instead override his question with a larger, more cosmic one, as Animal himself becomes the cosmos, breaking down into pieces of moon, sun, wind, god, air, and universe. In other words, the forest forces Animal to let go of his

singular, self-pitying existence and reveals him to be something much more, something more like the overdetermined network of the forest.

Ironically, it is this dismantling of Animal's conception of humanity that allows for the human to enter back into his consciousness, but not before showing him a demonic version of that humanity and breaking him down into an elemental network in himself. As the trees' voices fade away, he is then visited by a series of ghosts: first his deceased parents, then Nisha, Zafar, Elli doctress, acquaintances Farouq and Pandit Somraj, and then his adopted mother, Ma Franci. The visions are dark, pathetic imitations that make him vexing, problematic offers: his parents offer to take him home (to death?), Nisha offers to have sex with him, and Ma offers to quench his thirst with the blood of a corpse. Animal will not be taken in by these tempts and horrors, reminiscent of what Baidur calls "the forest world [...] where death is on prowl" (166). After he rejects these visions, he decides, "I'll not be bullied. If this self of mine doesn't belong in this world, I'll be my own world, I'll be a world complete in myself" (350). But how Animal describes this new world "in himself" is yet still of the natural world, still part of the disintegrated humanity that allows itself to be part of a network of ecological elements: "My back shall be ice-capped mountains, my arse mount Meru, my eyes shall be the sun and moon, the gusts of my bowels the four winds, my body shall be the earth [...] but why stop there? I'll be my own Milky Way, comets shall whizz from my nose [...] little does this tree realizes that the small thing stumbling at its roots [...] is a fully fledged cosmos" (350).

It is at this point that Animal "dies" and convinces himself he is in paradise. Suddenly the air is cool, and his face is wet with rain. It is unclear whether this is real or still part of his hallucination, but when the rain clears, he finally sees "animals of every kind," including those that cannot be categorized:

[A]mong them are small figures on two legs, except some have horns some have tails they are neither men nor animals, or else they are both, then I know that I have found my kind, plus this place will be my everlasting home, I have found it at last, this is the deep time when there was no difference between anything when separation did not exist when all things were together, one and whole before humans set themselves apart and became clever and made cities and kampanis and factories. (352)

Finally, Animal's hallucination articulates clearly the novel's rejection of enlightenment era rationality that allowed for the supposed separation from humans and nonhumans, the elevation of society that justified British imperialism, and more specifically colonial and national exclusionary environmental policies. In this way, the space of the forest is solidified as a neutral, nonhierarchical network connecting nonhumans to humans, myth to reality, life to death, Animal to everything. It is after all a rejection of the stark categorization of *both* human and nonhuman that allows Animal into "paradise," where he can finally be "reborn."

Animal's rebirth precipitates a quick ending to the novel. Just as he is wondering (in paradise) what really happened to his friends, those friends are revealed to be alive and well. They find and revive Animal, who mistakes them for ghosts again, allowing his cosmic paradise to blend with the real space of the forest: "'Welcome to paradise,' says I, 'there's honey and water for all. The Apokalis and the bad times are over'" (354). With this declaration, Animal solidifies the symbolic sacrifice of his individualism, which has been wrapped up in his self-loathing, his rejection of humanity, and even his desire to walk upright. Once his friends convince him that they are actually all alive and well, they proceed to tie up the loose ends of the story: after the fire, the government officials decided not to make the deal with the American lawyers, and there is to be a marriage between Elli doctress and local musician Pandit Somraj. As they recount these admittedly tidy wrap-ups, Zafar poignantly addresses Animal as his brother, and for the first time in his life, Animal returns this

fraternal human sentiment. He tells Zafar there should be a double wedding, that Zafar should marry Nisha too: “I love the pair of you [Nisha and Zafar] [...] I swear, my brother, may god in whom you don’t believe, be my witness” (358). Thus, Animal finally embraces himself as belonging to the human *in addition* to the nonhuman, and his friends crystallize this new beginning by physically embracing his contorted body. In other words, no longer self-isolating and no longer physically untouchable, Animal finally fully accepts his relationality to a wider human-nonhuman network. But it is in the othered space of the forest where this relational identity must be fully realized. As they head back to the city, Zafar whispers, “hameen ast-o hameen ast-o hameen ast” (357), the second half of a famous line by thirteenth century Sufi poet Amir Khusro: “*Gar firdaus bar rue zameen ast / hameen asto, hameen asto, hameen ast* (If ever there is Paradise on Earth / It is here! It is here! It is here!)”

This symbolic death and rebirth of the individual in relation to and embrace of human and nonhuman others in the historical space of the forest is a crucial revelation of the poisoned-yet-resilient placedness of Khaufpur and its human and nonhuman constituents. More than a typical identity crisis, the fragmentation of Animal’s stubborn individuality in this falling action goes beyond a simple acceptance into society. According to Jesse Oak Taylor:

Accounting for *Animal’s People*...demands something of a reevaluation of the novel as a genre, particularly around its ostensible focus on the individual subject. Nancy Armstrong argues that ‘universalizing the individual subject is . . . quite simply what novels do.’ But what sort of individual subject, and what sort of universalization, especially when the individual at the heart of the matter consistently rejects his humanity? A focus on individuation is inadequate to ecological thinking because in ecological terms individuals matter only in terms of their role in constituting broader collectives. (186)

Ecological thinking is important to the physical and symbolic embrace in the forest between Animal and his friends. After all, the embrace falls short of fully affirming Animal's humanity, but neither does he still insist on his animality. Instead, he is confirmed as an other who does not require wholeness or singular definition, one that registers a diverse web of relations with the humans and nonhumans that make up his city and his life. This is registered poignantly when he decisively alters his self-definition by omitting the indefinite article in the mantra-like poem he chants from the beginning of the novel. Contrast its previous iterations: "*I am an animal fierce and free, in all the world is none like me*" (172, 217) with the chant's final iteration: "*I am Animal fierce and free, in all the world is none like me*" (Sinha 366, emphasis mine). This can be seen as a reconsideration of his own uniqueness and importance in the newly acknowledged network of relations.

In the end, Animal does not take Elli doctress's offer to fly him to America to fix his spine, instead deciding to remain a poisoned body interconnected with Khaufpur's ecological history. "Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? If I'm an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal" (366). This is a far cry from Animal's disgust, rage, and jealousy at the beginning. But what has really changed? The people have not found justice or been adequately compensated. Still, Animal has embraced his relationality, a catalyst for true living and an antidote to the misery of isolation. Through the historically othered space of the forest, this resolution discards the narrative's previously central question about the boundaries and limitations of humanity reflected through Animal's bodily transgressions. Animal, and by extension the community of Khaufpur, are still rendered different than those humans with the power to enact widespread environmental injustice (Mukherjee), but Animal's self-image no longer reflects a human-nonhuman boundary, but rather the ways in which he relates to his community and his environment.

Conclusion: Ethics of Environmental Relations

This reading of *Animal's People* suggests an ethics of relation through human-nonhuman relationality that has thus far been largely occluded in ecocriticism in favor of the more explicitly politicized concerns of environmental justice. Animal's symbolic death and subsequent turn toward a relational network, symbolically releasing Khaufpur from epistemological stasis, reroutes a narrative of individual development into a narrative of how one agent relates to their environment and those around him. In this way, the reading provides a fresh perspective on the global poor in direct dialogue with itself; here I locate a call to read the local not as a bourgeois formulation of narrative individualism in postcolonial society, nor as being caught in a perpetual oscillation between victimhood and political resistance, but rather as a set of relationships within local, national, and global environments and discourse. Despite the incredible resilience in Animal's way of life as presented at the beginning of the novel, his feigned spirited exterior belies a dejected state determined by his relation to the world system – as a victim, as subhuman, as stagnant and unable to mature, as poor, as disabled, etc. But in emerging from his isolation and embracing his relationality within a more local human-nonhuman network, he becomes something else, something the nonhierarchical space of the forest and the heterotopic vision of his drug-induced hallucination allow him to recognize. Like Eduardo Kohn engaging with “how forests think” in order to understand the Anthropocene¹⁹ in terms other than the human (Kohn 2013), this reading imagines how the forest is “thinking through” Animal, or making him over in ways that imagine him as something more than human, more than animal. As Kohn says, “Our human way of being is

¹⁹ The concept of the “anthropocene” takes the nature/culture dualism to its extreme by presenting humans as a transformative geologic force on the planet. Donna Haraway, Andreas Malm, Jason W. Moore and others have recently replaced this concept with the “capitalocene,” which “signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology...of power, capital, and nature” (Moore 6).

permanently being opened to that which lies beyond it” (“What an Ontological Anthropology Might Mean” 2014).

Conspicuously, Animal’s damaging voices are quiet after this incident, cast off along with their “chairman of the board,” Khā-in-the-Jar, and in the final paragraphs of the novel, his entire demeanor has changed. Gone are the sexual innuendos and bombastic crudeness, and in their stead is an appreciation for life on four legs. Animal’s newfound ease is not determined by his human or nonhuman nature, but rather his acceptance of his strengths in relation to both humans (represented by the children he can carry on his back) and nonhuman natural elements (the trees and mountains he can climb, the jungles he can roam) around him. He has confronted not only the supposed human/nonhuman binary, but also the ethical system he had created to determine how to act in a world that did not value him. In other words, his “death” in the forest is a way to purge these binaries, to bring him into an understanding of his relational participation with both his environment and a history of marginalization, which then informs his relation to the wider global system. Animal reclaims the urban space (the slums of Khaufpur, and by extension the slums of Bhopal) in the face of casteism and national and global elision. But to do this, he necessarily reclaims the green space too, or rather the green space reclaims him, destabilizing the supposed “otherness” of the forest in order to decolonize Animal’s body and mind. Following material ecocriticism, this reading of *Animal’s People* shows us that humans are “the very stuff of the material, emergent world” (Alaimo 20). In a way, the forest deconstructs Animal and then puts him back together, releasing him back out in order to do more work in the world. This is simultaneously an invocation of prior understandings of the forest as othered, yet with a new acknowledgment of the forest’s integrally relational nature embedded in these understandings.

It is thus in the storied “nature” of the forest that I locate my reading of *Animal’s People* as a case for reading environmental relations in the postcolonial context as manifestations of specific

historical and cultural understandings as well as contemporary management and policy, work that constructs an ethics of reading postcolonial environments that resists consumption, appropriation, or false notions of “identifying with” the other. Reading *Animal's People* can thus be thought of in ecosystemic terms: through environmental relations, the practice of reading literature becomes a relational responsibility to environmental others, that is, other environmental identities, contexts, and networks. The storied matter of the forest in the novel teaches readers that an ethical system must be determined based on the actual relations between people and things, not on a standard or norm determined by how humans think they *should* relate to each other and to things, which is actually based on power. Another way to express this: if the value of capital often determines power relations between people and things in the world system, then during his hallucination, Animal enters a realm in which *relation* itself is valued, and valuable. As Mel Y. Chen explains, matter, especially matter that is considered inanimate, actually “animates cultural life” in the ways that it is both produced and policed (*Animacies* 2).

In this case, readers walk away with the notion that the forest animates Animal's socioeconomic life, and in turn the novel animates our responsibility to this life, actualizing what Greg Garrard calls “the possibility of coming to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility” (*Ecocriticism* 117). This dwelling, he says, “is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work” (117). Western readers especially cannot *relate* to Animal, and yet we are connected to him via a series of historical, global, and ecological networked relations. International aid cannot be considered unfettered by history or the same neoliberalism that allow for tragedies on the order of Bhopal, but neither can the local be expected to emerge resilient from such networks of harm on its own. Rather, local, national, and global scales must be considered relational, co-constituted by and with one another. Nor can we only hope to solve these issues by considering the human or

nonhuman alone; we must consider that humans and nonhumans alike are part of both material and discursive networks, as are we the readers. In a very real way, this reading informs forest management in India, which requires both an imaginative and practical overhaul. Mahesh Rangarajan reports that a closer union between national and local communities is imperative for new modes of environmental conservation, and that this will involve “working out a new set of relations with the forest which will be enduring both for the people and the natural world” (Politics of Ecology).

Thinking through *Animal's* environmental relations as a methodology privileges the complexities of the environmental history, themes, and identities in *Animal's People* without conscripting it into an already accepted world systems critique. After all, *Animal's People* does not fully subvert the global capitalist system that created and continues to create environmental crisis; Sinha marries the foreign aid worker into its fictional Bhopal and no one in the novel seems bothered that no legal gain has been made for the city's inhabitants. Still, environmental relations instead reveals important imaginative work that informs a global understanding of how the local is both constituted by global networks and concomitantly self-determined. Rather than placing an entire systematic critique onto one periphery figure's already weighted shoulders (something too often paralleled in postcolonial studies more broadly), this reading offers to highlight the novel as a work of “militant particularism” (Nixon, 170) that forces readers to recognize both their connections to and insulation from Khaufpuri (and Bhopali) life.

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CHAPTER 2

‘A Rushing, Rolling, River-Sense:’ Reading the Meenachal in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

There was no storm-music. No whirlpool spun up from the inky depths of the Meenachal. No shark supervised the tragedy. Just a quiet handing-over ceremony. A boat spilling its cargo. A river accepting the offering. One small life. A brief sunbeam. With a silver thimble clenched for luck in its little fist.

-Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 277

Going beyond Heraclitus’ supposed observation that ‘no man ever steps in the same river twice’, we can observe that in the longer term it is not only the moving body of water that renders a river, for example, a dynamic entity, but also the course of its channel as sediment is eroded and deposited in ever-shifting patterns (this is to let alone the point that the ‘man’ himself will have changed between immersions).

-Alan Lester, “New Imperial and Environmental Histories of the Indian Ocean” 9

Sophie Mol’s drowning in the Meenachal River, described in hauntingly peaceful and painfully brief terms as shown above, is one of the key events around which Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* revolves. The little Indian-British girl’s death is set into motion when twins Rahel and Estha Ipe discover a boat on the banks of the Meenachal and later decide to use it to run away. Their discovery also leads to their mother, Ammu, an upper caste woman, and Velutha, an untouchable Paravan to violate the region’s centuries-old “love laws,” an integral rule of caste hierarchy that “lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (Roy 311). It is Velutha who patches and cleans up the little boat for the twins, and Ammu who subsequently uses it to cross the river to be with him over a series of nights. On the night their tryst is revealed, Sophie Mol begs to come along as Rahel and Estha engage in a parallel crossing in the same boat, an attempt to escape their childhood traumas that results in a domino effect that includes Sophie Mol’s drowning, Baby Kochamma’s accusation of Velutha of both kidnapping and rape, Velutha’s fatal beating by police, the subsequent separation of the twins, and Ammu’s eventual decline and death. The figure of the Meenachal is thus integral to Roy’s twisting, nonlinear plot structure that shuttles between

timelines over a twenty-three-year period in an effort to tell a story about trauma and atrocity through the unwitting and unreliable lens of memory.

However, the Meenachal is a paradoxical plot device; it is deployed as both character, a temporal narrative feature usually associated with subjectivity and individuality, and context, a spatial feature usually associated with setting, which traditionally was considered the background for the characters' actions, but can now be thought of as interconnected with the characters' actions and inner lives. This may not seem revolutionary; we are used to thinking of environmental features like rivers, lakes, forests, valleys, hills and mountains both as having particular, unique characteristics, even personalities, while also serving as the broader, material contexts of our everyday lives. But we rarely theorize the overlapping and interrelated nature of these two modes of imagination, and in this chapter, I argue that the novel's formal overlap of these narrative constructs is a particularly productive way to think about rivers, about the discursive tensions around rivers in India, and also what can be learned from ideologically orienting ourselves toward the wider environment as character and context at once. This reading comes at a time when rivers are on the front lines of water crises and questions of water rights and privileges, which are particularly urgent in India, and it allows for a reorientation of environmental reading practices that help us make sense of these issues more broadly. It can also challenge our traditional conceptualizations of and assumptions about formal categories in literature and how those serve to form a basis for how we think about ourselves; if a river, whose real presence in the world affirms myriad interconnected relationships between humans, nonhumans, and discourses alike, can be narratively imbued with both character and contextual properties, then perhaps we can begin to think of individual characters also as

relational networks²⁰ made up of material and discursive actants²¹, which can in turn help us reconceptualize human nature as, ironically, more-than-human nature.

The Meenachal, whose real counterpart is an important feature of the Ayemenem²² village landscape in the Kottayam District of Kerala, India, most obviously functions in *The God of Small Things* as a figure of pollution and decay over the novel's principle two-decade timeline. When Rahel and Estha are children, the river is depicted as materially and symbolically powerful, while in the later timeline, Rahel returns to Ayemenem after a long absence to find that modernization and industrialization have reduced the river to a weak stream: “[I]t greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed [...] Once it had the power to evoke fear, to change lives [...] not anymore (118-119). This is ecologically accurate; the real Meenachal has been described as “dying a slow death” (Mary 51) due in part to dams built to increase crop yields that have stalled its flow. Both at the time of Roy’s writing and still, the Meenachal was and is waterlogged, eroded, and choked with waste, a pressing problem for the tens of thousands of people for whom it is the main water source. This “slow death” of the Meenachal is true of so many of India’s rivers, a paradoxical standoff of values between usage and reverence due to legacies of aggressive colonial river management that privilege large-scale development (like the hydroelectric megadams Roy’s nonfiction work rails against) that remain in Indian environmental policies.

The irony is that in Indian mythology, rivers are depicted as embodied spiritual purifiers who pass through the heavens, the earth, and the underworld, helping cleanse humanity of its sins. The

²⁰ Stacy Alaimo’s “transcorporeal” methodology delves more deeply into how bodies are interpenetrated by processes of material environment happening around them. My focus is not on bodies, but my method attempts a similar internal-external theorization.

²¹ See my introduction for explanation about how I am utilizing the terms “actant” and “network” from Bruno Latour’s contributions to Actor-Network Theory.

²² Many sources spell the Malayalam words for the river and the village in English as “Meenachil” and “Aymanam” respectively, but I will use Roy’s spellings, which appear to be more transliteral.

Rgveda describes part of an origin story of how the world's "waters" were released and formed seven sacred rivers: "इन्द्रस्य नु वीर्याणि पर वोचं यानि चकार परथमानि वज्री | अहन्नहिमन्वपस्ततर्द पर वक्षणा अभिनत पर्वतानाम || I just relate the exploits of Indra, which the bearer of thunderbolt mainly performed. / He struck the cloud causing injury to the waters and cleft the flowing rivers of the mountains" (*Rgveda*, mn.1, hymn 32, Translation by M.P. Pandit, 1976). The "flowing rivers" are thought to be goddesses, as the waters are associated with mother's milk, nurturing and purifying (Baindur, Mehta), and India's many large rivers referred to as "divine waters" or even "divine mothers." Of these, the Ganges (*Ganga*) is primary and particularly captures the national imagination of river mythology which, according to religious studies scholar Diana Eck, continues to create "the mental construction of an imagined landscape watered by divine rivers" (*India* 51). Today, there are pilgrimage sites and religious ceremonies all along the Ganges and other sacred rivers of India; their holy healing waters are used in rituals of birth, initiation, marriage, and cremation. Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was born in Allahabad, a city on the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh, captures this sentiment in his last will and testament: "The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people, round which are intertwined her memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats" (1954). Here Nehru draws on this particularly anthropomorphized image of the river in order to express national identity.

But this nurturing image and its connection to national pride does not seem to help curb river degradation. India's "divine" waters continue to be polluted at an alarming rate, and schemes aimed at revitalizing rivers often run into interference by development industries. India has one of the most dire riverine pollution problems in the world, along with a particularly well-known anti-dam movement (aided by Roy), an intense long-term struggle against intensive hydroelectric dam development projects that former Nehru himself famously endorsed as "temples of modern India,"

a conflation of spiritual imagery and industrial development that together were meant to signify the triumph of the kind of national identity formation he had wielded the Ganges to illustrate. Dr. Brij Gopal, president of India's National Institute of Ecology, put this paradox thus: "The problem is quite severe because we call the rivers as (sic) mothers or goddesses but treat them with utter contempt. In India, rivers have not been understood as ecosystems but are treated simply as conduits of water or wastewater" (Interview 2010). In terms of treating the "mothers or goddesses...with utter contempt," there is a clear ecofeminist²³ reading of Roy's novel that highlights the subjugation of women and the degradation of the environment that "function on a parallel plane," according to Rukhaya Kunhi and Zeenath Kunhi, on which I will elaborate in the following section ("An Ecocritical Perspective" 1). However, Gopal's statement also alludes to the idea that the characterization of rivers as mother goddesses can naturally align with the concept of rivers as ecosystems. This seems to me an imaginative leap that perhaps Gopal, and others who deeply appreciate both cultural and ecological river paradigms, have failed to articulate.

Acknowledging and theorizing how Roy approaches the Meenachal as both goddess (character) and ecosystem (context) in the novel is thus a way to grapple with these tensions through a lens of interconnected relatedness that make up both river ecology and human relationships with rivers. I will discuss the representation of the Meenachal as character, then as context, which I will elucidate in terms of both physical setting and sociohistorical context, as well as the interplay between the real Meenachal and its fictional counterpart in the novel. This reading suggests that the need for categories of social and material life requires acknowledgement of the limits of those categories and the artfulness of their construction. India is an important site for these inquiries

²³ From Kunhi and Kunhi: "Ecofeminism, as a theory, has been widely advanced as one which argues that "the current global environmental crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture" (Salleh, 1988, p. 138). On a broader scale, the theory emphasizes the importance of inter-relationships between humans and the natural environment (animals, plants, and the earth), and is now viewed in a larger perspective as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class, and nature" (1).

because it is a place where environmental, spiritual, managerial, and cultural tensions are playing out in real-time due to the ways in which discourse communities and material practices clash. The idea that rivers act with both singular and systemic properties at once suggests, as does Alan Lester, quoted above, that “ever-shifting patterns” are paradoxically integral to the understanding of a river as a “dynamic entity,” such that a person stepping into a river a second time must acknowledge the fact that not only has she changed in the interim, the river has radically changed as well.

This is a reading of the Meenachal as “storied matter” in *The God of Small Things*, a concept introduced by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann suggesting that the way we create stories about ourselves and others, in other words the way we interpret the world, is illuminated by the ways in which material forms interact to produce structures of power and relation. The world, Iovino and Oppermann explain, is filled with “intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures. It is through all these natures, agencies, and bodies that ‘the world we inhabit,’ with all its stories, is ‘alive’ (*Material Ecocriticism* 1, quoting David Abram). In this formulation, power dynamics such as race, class, and gender are rendered as discursive social constructions predicated on material inequities. Thus, Iovino asks, “How do we correlate discursive practices (in the form of political categories, socio-linguistic constructions, cultural representations, etc.) with the materiality of ecological relationships? In what measure is it possible to connect these two levels—the material and the discursive—in a non-dualistic system of thought?” (53). My reading of the Meenachal as character and context is an attempt to look critically at the clashes between various approaches to and imaginaries of the river and learn from the narrative’s ability to posit conflicting truths through overlapping narrative categories.

More broadly, this chapter is also partially responding to the “oceanic turn” taking place in the humanities, a set of strategies aimed at rethinking large bodies of water like oceans that traverse national and cultural boundaries as containing vast, submerged knowledge and history. Rather than

bounded physically or historically, oceans are being acknowledged as cross-hatched and networked, layered with human-nonhuman, material-discursive connections that challenge our notions of time, space, culture, history, and humanity. As an extension of these concerns, I suggest a “fluvial turn” for the Humanities, as rivers are on the front lines of water crises. Environmental historian Jason M. Kelly explains that “rivers serve...as a useful locus for analyzing flows, intersections, and cycles that are central to understanding the human-environment nexus” (*Rivers* xx). A fluvial turn, therefore, rethinks rivers in terms of being deceptively linear and yet wholly unbounded, connecting glacial melt and other headwaters to the seas, carrying nutrients, sediment, and animal life, but also language, mythology, ritual, and history, and churning them all together as they flow – as such they’re a bridge between deep geological time and historical, surface time. As a fluvial reading, I suggest that the novel’s formal overlaps suggest a *sedimentation* of materiality and discourse. Steve Mentz has pointed out the “conceptual overlap” of Rachel Carson and Edouard Glissant’s notions of sedimentation:

They use the same phrase: the accumulation of sediments. Sediments are real things, rocks and silica and ‘billions of billions of tiny shells and skeletons, the limy or silicious remains of all the minute creatures that once lives in the upper waters’ (Carson 76). Sedimented histories also ‘explode the scattered lands into an arc,’ as Glissant notes (33). All physical and scientific accumulations have a poetics, and all poetic forms reach toward physical things. The task is to think them together, lyrical science and analytical poem, in the disorienting swirl of a global ecology. (Mentz 10)

This chapter, therefore, analyzes the Meenachal in *The God of Small Things* and its ties to Indian ecology and national discourse through our unique ability to hold character and context, actant and network, goddess and ecosystem, small and big together at once – a sedimentation of materiality and discourse that creates meaning. This consideration of rivers suggests that we might still

reconceptualize our individual and collective responsibilities on the earth in terms of our ever-changing environmental relationships to better envision the road ahead.

The Meenachal as Character

Broadly, the concept of “character” in narrative theory in the 20th and 21st centuries has focused on action, interiority, and consciousness. Characters drive the momentum of a narrative. They allow readers to analyze subjectivity and help us imagine ourselves as citizens at different scales of community. However, Alex Wolloch also defines character more broadly in terms of a “distributional matrix” in which any given character in a narrative is “intertwined” with the narrative’s attention to other characters “who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe” (Wolloch 2). As such, a character’s relationship to both space and time within the narrative, according to Wolloch, is key to character interpretation, which for my purposes suggests that character, setting, and narrative arc are interrelated, no matter how a reader chooses to approach or interpret a character. Using the environment as character is a worldbuilding strategy of interest to literature and environment critics, and Val Plumwood has implied that attending to how writers imagine purpose or action in nature can help us deflate assumptions of a strict nature-culture divide, since it firstly allows for nonhumans and humans to possess equal narratological power (similar to Actor Network Theory), and secondly it allows for a networked understanding of how humans and nonhumans come to be, that is, a “human-nature continuum,” according to Greg Garrard (*Ecocriticism* 26). The Indian tradition of imbuing rivers with human-like (or extra-human-like) characteristics as goddesses with origin stories is a tradition Roy reinterprets when narrativizing the Meenachal River as part of the distributional matrix of *The God of Small Things*, therefore I will discuss the novel’s attention to both this cultural imagination and to the real Meenachal river as a source of representation.

The Meenachal is named for the goddess Meenakshi, meaning “fish-eyed,” or “rule of the fish.” Meenakshi is partially known for her powerful eyes, which never stop watching over her devotees and can bring life to the unborn. She is consort to the god Shiva, a warrior goddess who nevertheless has to clean up the mess when Shiva repeatedly takes apart the universe. As a “divine mother,” we can already see the tension in the Meenakshi characterization between strength and caretaking responsibility; Bijalpita Mehta explains how “Meenakshi becomes a global icon for all who deal with the ‘impossible’—male authority or patriarchy that is at once demanding and irrational” (153). The novel explicitly invokes this dual role when drawing the river as a feminine character through Kuttappen, Velutha’s parapalegic brother, when he explains the mysterious, even duplicitous nature of the Meenachal to the twins:

“You must be careful,” Kuttappen said. “This river of ours—she isn’t always what she pretends to be.”

“What does she pretend to be?” Rahel asked.

“Oh...a little old churchgoing amooma, quiet and clean [...] Minding her own business. Not looking right or left.”

“And she’s really a...?”

“Really a wild thing...I can hear her at night—rushing past in the moonlight, always in a hurry. You must be careful of her.”

“And what does she really eat?”

“Really eat? Oh...Stoo...and...” He cast about for something English for the evil river to eat.

“Pineapple slices...” Rahel suggested. [...]

“And minds other people’s business...” (Roy 201)

Critics have pointed out that the river here is analogous to Ammu and her supposedly duplicitous nature; she is a mother, and yet she doesn't conform to her family or society's image of a mother; she does not seem all together domestic, she is restless, impulsive, and dissatisfied, and she is prone to both angry and depressive episodes. She also clashes with all the patriarchal forces in her life – her brother, her abusive father, her alcoholic and abusive husband, the police, and even, at times and in small ways, Estha. In this way, the river's pollution parallels Ammu's decline, both victims of unbridled masculinity, when modernity and industrial development are cast as masculine, patriarchal domains (Anand, Kunhi and Kunhi). "Years later," the novel explains, "when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed" (118). Compare this to Ammu's death described later in the novel: "Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharar Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview as someone's secretary. She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her" (154). In both portrayals, there is an emphasized lack of dignity and power, as well as a lack of warmth, something expected in both cases, and there is clearly a parallel poisoning at work in the novel, due in part to the danger and unpredictability inherent in the divine feminine.

This danger and unpredictability are wholly accepted by the twins, who cleave to the river in times of emotional distress just as they do their mother, while internalizing her mood swings as their own distress. For example, the twins' regard the river as both friend and foe: "The first third of the river was their friend," the novel explains, while farther out, the "Really Deep" began (193-194). The novel continues, "The twins could swim like seals and, supervised by Chacko, had crossed the river several times [...] But the middle of a respectable river, or the Other Side, was no place for children to Linger, Loll, or Learn Things. Estha and Rahel accorded the second third and the third third of the Meenachal the deference it deserved" (194). There is an instructive duality when Kuttappen's

idea of “respectability” of the Meenachal is paired with the twins’ understanding above. In the first, Kuttappen suggests that the image of the river as “a little old churchgoing ammooma, quiet and clean,” gesturing to this as a typically “respectable” image, is an artifice, while in reality, according to the second section, any “respectable river” ostensibly has a “wild” part that deserves “deference.” In other words, the part of the Meenachal that deserves the most respect is its wildness, its invisible ferocity. According to Bijalpita Mehta, there is a historical recovery in this rendering, since contemporary Hindu nationalism in the late colonial period domesticated and desexualized goddesses who were previously accepted as formidable in order to rally people around them as national icons, creating a “Motherland” that both needed protection and was ready to embrace nationalist agendas: “Popular art of the colonial period in India dismantled the irrepressible sexual ambiguity of the divine feminine for the Indian population, and reinvented her as a chaste, mother figure (Bharat Mata, or Mother India), desexualized her, and held her up as an iconic, pervasive figurehead of the Motherland” (Mehta iii). If what we call character in part helps readers imagine or fashion ourselves as citizens, in this case, Hindu nationals’ characterizing of the goddesses was in an effort to imagine a patriarchal citizenry.

The tendency for India’s rivers, as goddess figures, to be deployed as allegories for a larger vision of the Indian population, whether that population be represented as homogenous or heterogeneous, is also found in modern Indian literature. Continuing to serve as symbols of purification, sacredness, and cultural tradition, in sometimes subtle, sometimes complex ways, rivers often appear to help guide characters toward certain transformations, especially in the form of contemplation and peace, and often in response to disillusionment with society or social institutions (this is in contrast to forests in Indian discourse and literature, as elucidated in Chapter 1, which have been represented as *spaces* of often horrific, hallucinatory transformation). Rabindranath Tagore championed this imagery throughout his work. “The river—messenger of the universe,” explains

one poem, “That brings near the Far, / And brings, even to one's door, / The welcome of the Unknown” (Tagore, qtd. in Samantaray and Patro 319). In addition, Tagore repeatedly melds images of flowing rivers and everyday human activities that take place on rivers in his works in order to posit that human lives and rivers have similar trajectories; for Tagore, inspired by the *Upanishads* and other ancient texts, rivers are powerful symbols of life and sustenance.²⁴ In his short story, “The River Stairs,” the narrator describes the importance of the Ganges as both symbol and companion to the life cycle of the sad principle character, a child bride named Kusum: “As the Ganges rapidly grows to fulness with the coming of the rains, even so did Kusum day by day grow to the fulness of beauty and youth” (Tagore). But later, Kusum is struck down by circumstance, and as the river gradually covers up the narrator’s steps as it rises in the monsoon season, Kusum is similarly swallowed up by her plight, only to be shown a way out while she stands on the river-covered stairs toward the end of the play. Though the river is associated with only one character in the play, it serves a larger allegorical function because, like most of Tagore’s works, peasant characters often stand in for larger trends and populations, such as Kusum the peasant child bride. Samantaray and Tames have called this treatment of nature in Tagore’s writing “eco-mysticism,” a way to express the way that “nature” (*prakriti*) and humans (*purusha*), as understood through Indian spiritual inflections, have “co-evolved” to “form an inseparable life support system which is interdependent” (“Code” 318).

An example of a similar eco-mystical projection utilizing Indian river imagery is Raja Rao’s 1960 autobiographical novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. In the novel, a young, frail student named Rama (invoking Ram, or Ramachandra, the central hero of the *Ramayana*), having just lost his young

²⁴ Tagore was also a river environmentalist ahead of his time; he noticed and wrote about river erosion that he suspected was caused by dams as early as the 1920’s. He spoke about it at a seminar in 1922, and that same year, his play *Muktadbara* (The Waterfall) depicted a prince joining local people in an uprising against his father, the king, who is constructing an enormous machine to obstruct the local river’s natural flow. The people are fighting for their water rights, though Tagore does not use these words, and the play ultimately teaches that “Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy” (Samantaray and Tames).

son, returns home to India from studying in France to tend to his father, who is also dying. Rama is in search of spiritual truth that will make sense of his rocky relationship with his French wife, his displacement to Europe, and the deaths all around him. Multiple rivers throughout the narrative bear witness to this search, starting with his own revelation of the importance of rivers to his identity and memory at the beginning of the novel: “Whenever I stand in a river,” Rama says at the beginning, “I remember how when young, on the day the monster ate the moon and the day fell into an eclipse, I used with *til* and *kusba* grass to offer the manes my filial devotion. For withal I was a good Brahmin” (Rao 1-2). But this memory also makes him think of his dead mother – another river-mother connection – and he mourns the loss of her when he was so young. While sunbathing with his wife, Madeleine, on the Durance river, he builds a miniature temple out of small stones and tells her about his home village traditions to send idols down the Ganges. When Madeleine gets involved and pours water on the temple, it proves her love to him; “‘Here is your Ganges,’ she said, ‘*Shiva, Shiva, Hara, Hara,*’ and she trembled as she had that day on the Seine” (181). He continues to remember the Ganges when gazing at European rivers, a symbol of his experience of the intersections between Indian and European cultural traditions, until he finally returns home. Standing on the banks of the Ganges once again, Rama finally finds peace through a powerful feeling of connection to the environment. Later, when his marriage to Madeleine is falling apart because of their incomparable spiritualities, Rama realizes that Madeleine “had accepted Rama, she wanted to possess him wholly, but she could never merge her identity with that of his, she could never become a member of his larger family, accepting his tradition as her own and continuing with that tradition in future; she could never be like the Brahmaputra that merges with the Ganga and conjointly flows to sea” (Bhattacharya 292). Critics have noted that *The Serpent and the Rope* is overall a story of postcolonial identity crisis, and Rama ultimately finds peace in his own Indian identity with the help of the Ganges, the river that shadows all the others he has visited and a symbol for all

of India. The title itself aids this reading; the serpent is the temptation of Western life, while the rope invokes the Indian image of rivers as braided ropes or threads of stories. According to ecocritics Carmen Escobedo De Tapia and Ángela Mena González explains that in the novel, the river, “Mother Ganga” guides Rama to “a self-realization of eco-dharma” (“Poetics” 117). Their term, “eco-dharma” is similar to Samantaray and Tames’s concept of eco-mysticism, an ecological sense of one’s social duty in accordance with a cosmic order.

But the particular eco-dharma/eco-mysticism celebrated in these texts that allow Indian rivers to stand in for all of India is problematic when seen through Mehta’s ecofeminist lens (along with Divya Anand). The idea that river goddesses can purify India of both environmental degradation and a postcolonial identity crisis relies on a flattening of the feminine that Roy’s *The God of Small Things* successfully resists. The Meenachal is not so much a purifier but a mysterious and powerful presence, and the dual, overlapping descriptions in the novel help recover the goddess Meenakshi (alongside Ammu) as once again *both* mother and warrior, proving that the two are not mutually exclusive, which upends the “shackling” of goddesses by Hindu nationalism that Mehta describes: “the makeover of the uncontrollable, “chaotic” feminine into this shackled entity during and after the Indian freedom struggle is just the kind of ambiguity that appears in discourses of nation building” (X). Instead, Roy’s novel is a reaffirmation of “the archaic myths of the feminine,” which challenges a symbolic projection of goddesses as pure and homogenous (Mehta X). The significance here is that as a character, the Meenachal is not simply described in terms of a goddess but instead reimagined and recovered in the complexity of the feminine, highlighting multiplicity, heterogeneity, and overlap that is also more suited metaphorically to the ecosystemic properties of rivers (which I will elaborate in the next section).

However, though the Meenachal acts, as a character derived from a precolonial mythological ideation, of “her” own accord in the novel, other traditional elements of character, such as interiority

and consciousness, remain wholly unrepresented. The Meenachal is presented as the cause of Sophie Mol's death, but despite many critics' assessments (and the foreshadowing of Kuttappen's warnings that the "evil" river "eats" English things), the river doesn't really *kill* Sophie Mol. Instead, there is a "quiet handing-over ceremony," a connection to the local ritual of honoring Meenakshi by carrying idols in boats, sometimes even submerging them in the holy waters. And there is nothing inherently violent or motivated about "[a] river accepting the offering" (277). This arguably integral "event" in the narrative is not described as an event at all. Instead, the novel emphasizes the web of pre-actions and reactions rather than the event itself. In fact, the novel repeatedly questions the conditional and contingent nature of cause and effect; in a particularly metafictional moment, the narrator muses:

In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes [...] Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story. Still, to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it. Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago [...] It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. (32-33)

Here, Roy not only questions the nature of interconnected events through time (contrasted with human History as a "Big Thing" with an agenda), but also leaves the river's part in this process ambiguous. Though we are told, through the children, to respect "her" powerful potential, we are not privy to the river's perspective or motivation. In other words, as readers, we are told to ignore the "event" in favor of the "bleached bones of a story," or the network. In a way, Roy is disavowing the notion of big vs. small, setting up the river as a subaltern character that highlights a gap in our

readerly knowledge, something we know is there but can't quite "know."²⁵ Part of this unknown, I argue, is the Meenachal's environmental relationality, by which I mean the ecological processes of interconnection that continually make and remake the river, and by extension the people associated with the river, both within the novel and without. This is something neither management discourse nor mythology can capture, and Roy's mysterious, even duplicitous characterization of the Meenachal gestures beneath the surface to something more than character: a deep history of Ayemenem's social and environmental landscape and the powerful entanglements between them that nevertheless remain obscured in national discourse. This is against the backdrop of Roy's political project, which shows that caste and class are intertwined, and the Marxist ideals of the rise of the lower classes and the dismantling of the upper classes does not successfully rehabilitate such deeply embedded casteist ideology.

The Meenachal as Context

"Context," from the Latin *con-*, "together," and *texere*, "to weave," literally means a joining together, therefore, I am invoking the idea that a literary context suggests entanglements of the elements in the narrative; and like all aspects of the environment around us, the Meenachal river in the novel is both part of a process and contains processes, entangled with the lives and stories of the characters and the narrative's temporal and geographical landscapes and history. I am in part evoking diegetic setting as a formal strategy (also called narrative space), and as setting, the novel establishes a number of important narrative threads connected to the river: the Ayemenem house sits near the river, making the river witness to the Ipe family's trials and tribulations; the children

²⁵ This is related to Velutha's controversial subaltern status in the novel and the way he is interconnected with the natural landscape, at times even appearing to be part of the river. For a conversation about the pros and cons of how Velutha's brown body, silence, and Dalit status are simultaneously overly sexualized and associated with the earth, see Aijaz Ahmed's "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically" (2007) and Deepti Misri's *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence and Representation in Postcolonial India* (2014).

play and take refuge on the riverbanks (“Here Chacko had taught them to swim,” “Here they had learned to fish” (193-194).); Sophie Mol drowns in the river; and as mentioned early in this chapter, the river is the physical conduit between Ammu and Velutha. But even more than this geographical locating of events, the Meenachal is described as providing a “river-sense” to the Ayemenem house and everything and everyone in and around it:

You couldn’t see the river from the window any more.

You could, until Mammachi had had the back verandah closed in with Ayemenem’s first sliding-folding door. The oil portraits of Reverend E. John Ipe [English patriarch] and Aleyooty Ammachi (Estha and Rahel’s great-grandparents), were taken down from the back verandah and put up in the front one. [...]

Aleyooty Ammachi looked [...] hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn’t. Perhaps it wasn’t as easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away. Her heavy, dull gold kunukku earrings [...] had stretched her earlobes and hung all the way down to her shoulders. Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish.

Though you couldn’t see the river from the house anymore, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem House still had a river-sense.

A rushing, rolling, fishswimming sense. (Roy 30)

This is a clear description; like most of the novel’s lush, meticulous descriptions, it is laden with metaphor, but there is nothing hidden within it. Still, there are multiple layers to it, suggesting a sedimentation of meanings embodied by the river’s network of influence – not hiding, but overlapping. Firstly, the “sliding-folding door,” first of its kind in the small village, establishes that the Ipe family is upper caste, wealthy, and modern. However, Aleyooty Ammachi’s yearning to once

again view the Meenachal from the verandah, as well as the river's ability to still remain visible through her earlobes, despite her colonialist husband and the modern engineering that turned the great-grandmother away from it, show the river's enduring local culture, history, and material connectiveness. Finally, it is the "river-sense" that suggests an ecosystemic property to this connectiveness, a sense of entanglement that contrasts the river's function as character in the novel. Later, the river water is further described as "Greygreen. Like rippled silk. / With fish in it. / With the sky and trees in it. / And at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (123-124). More than invoking the water's reflective quality, the diction points to a simultaneously physical and atmospheric "sense" that everything is *in* the river – not just reflected in it, but part of it. This isn't just metaphorical, it is the real material conditions of the region. Just before the children depart in the little boat, a storm is brewing: "The river had risen," states the narrator, "its water quick and black, snaking towards the sea, carrying with it cloudy night skies, a whole palm frond, part of a thatched fence, and other gifts the wind had given it" (273). Again, the description here is *both* atmospheric and physical, joining together both cohesion and refraction to create this "sense" of the Meenachal, a contextualization for material-discursive connectivity.

This resonates with Sheila Hones's consideration of the interdisciplinary intersection of narrative theory and spatial theory, which suggests that narrative space is not just a container for plot, just as in life, our environment is not simply a container for our lives, but rather entangled *with* our lives, enacting influence (this can also be related to Bakhtin's concept of chronotope).²⁶ A literary environment, like a real environment, is not static but a process, something "mobile and unstable" (Hones 686). "[O]ne way to think of narrative space," says Hones, "is as a contingent dimension produced by fictional action and interaction, something generated out of story-internal

²⁶ I am using Hones's articulation of the ways in which we conceive of narrative space to analogously define "environment," though I recognize that our notions of environment influence our notions of narrative space as well as vice versa.

events, narrative techniques, and text-reader dynamics” (687). Furthermore, when the text’s setting represents real-world places, like in *The God of Small Things*, the “text-reader dynamics” that partially determine the contingent narrative space evoke an interaction between the setting and its real counterpart, a “folding together” of fictional and real locations. Ultimately, she calls for “an understanding of narrative space that allows for heterarchical frames functioning simultaneously” (696). Thus, I discuss the managerial and ecological history of the real Meenachal, as well as river ecology more broadly, in order to attend to what Susan Stanford Friedman calls “spatialization,” a strategy of interpretation “designed to connect ‘text and context, writer and reader’ in a ‘fluid, relational approach”” (688, quoting Susan Stanford Friedman). In this way, I assess the Meenachal as a “heterarchical” context in the narrative that formally resists the socio-historical hierarchies that Roy is intent on rejecting. Rather, like a real river, the Meenachal in *The God of Small Things* defies stability, singularity, and imagined human-nonhuman hierarchical divides.

To return to the novel’s emphasis on the river’s pollution over the course of the novel, it is prudent to acknowledge the real Meenachal’s deterioration, as well as its synecdochical relationship with India’s riverine landscape. In reality, rapid pollution and large-scale manipulation of India’s largest rivers are among India’s most pressing environmental crises. At one time, the Indo-Gangetic plain was home to two of the most ecologically diverse drainage basins, the Punjab and Ganga-Brahmaputra systems. Now, pollution, industrial interference, and climate change threaten all of India’s rivers. The current state of the Ganges is a poignant example of the tragic irony of purity symbolism, as it is now considered one of the most polluted and ecologically-stripped rivers in the world. Ever-increasing population density leading to increased human activity and waste is mostly to blame, along with untreated industrial waste along its banks. Providing water for five hundred million people across eight states in India alone, along with sizeable populations of Bangladesh, Nepal, and China, the pollution of the Ganges is potentially catastrophic. In Kerala, the sacred

Meenachal is “the major river in Kottayam district and lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of people and many major towns and cities like Erattupetta, Palai, Ettumannur and Kottayam depend on this river for drinking water and water for commercial activities,” according to environmental scientist Vincy Mary (*A Watershed Approach* 34). Yet sand mining, deforestation, and pollution has blocked its flow and caused it to become “an almost completely dry bed in summer” (35). This serious threat to India’s water security is similar across the country; says Mahesh Chandra Chaturverdi, “There is an increasing problem of groundwater overexploitation and pollution in many areas [...] Serious technological and institutional shortcomings continue in all aspects of water management” (*India’s Waters* 349).

The “technological shortcomings” to which Chaturverdi refers on the one hand seem to suggest that more technology and development is necessary to save India’s rivers, but this is misleading, as there is also a pressing need to curb technology and development in some cases. One important factor in understanding India’s river crises is to identify the uneven, often misguided ways in which river technology is funded and deployed. A clear example of this unevenness is the government’s willingness to continually develop expensive, large-scale hydroelectric dams compared to its historical unwillingness to invest in waste management and sanitation. Untreated sewage discharge is the largest source of pollution of surface and ground water in India, yet wastewater treatment facilities are few and vastly insufficient, partially because of the complexity of the technology, as well as the complexity of the various environments and communities that need it. Chaturverdi explains, “Large-scale water withdrawals from rivers and polluted discharges...have turned several rivers over long stretches into sewerage drains” (2). Water engineers insist that water treatment and reuse would be a potential solution for most of India’s water problems (Sadr, et al. 1), but historically the government has instead turned to hydropower irrigation as its principle

approach. India's Green Revolution policies of the 60's and 70's,²⁷ legacies of colonial hydrological policies,²⁸ are largely to blame, which Roy herself has spent decades fighting through her environmental activism. Without claiming foreshadowing, there are nevertheless shades of the activist writing Roy had yet to pen; during a time when Kerala's tourism was just beginning to surge, her blatant critique of the Indian government's river management is interwoven within her sensory descriptions of Rahel's return home. Roy has stated, "There is nothing in 'The God of Small Things' [sic] that is at odds with what I went on to write politically over 15 [sic] years. It's instinctive territory" (2014).

Her novel is transparent about these ecological and managerial connections: "Some days," the narrator states, "[Estha] walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (Roy 14). And later: "Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the in-flow of salt water from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river" (118). Roy may be alluding to the Thanneermukkom Bund, part of a development scheme on Vembanad Lake that helped farmers while reducing fish and choking the backwaters with weeds. The river's tragic decline in the novel is clearly as much a material result of river management as it is an allegory for the western-influenced, pro-development aspects of this management, as well as for the characters' unfortunate trajectories.²⁹ The novel therefore posits the river as a vital image and subject of India's internal

²⁷ See my introduction for more on India's Green Revolution.

²⁸ For more on the colonial legacies of India's water policies, see Rohan D'Souza's "Water in British India: The Making of a 'Colonial Hydrology.'" *History Compass* 4.4 (2006): 621–628.

²⁹ There are two important readings bound up in this national allegorical reading of the river that I should acknowledge here. The first is the failure of Anglophilia (embodied by the family's two successive patriarchs, Pappachi and Chacko) and its sociopolitical inflection, western-influenced postcolonial industrial development (embodied by dams and, later in the narrative, tourism), to improve Ayemenem conditions. The death of Sophie Mol, the poignantly hybrid Indian-English character in the novel, adds to this metaphor. The second commentary is on the failure of the Naxalites in

struggle to reconcile development with cultural history. Readers familiar with Roy's activist tract, *The Cost of Living* (containing "The Greater Common Good" and "The End of Imagination"), published just after she was awarded the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, will recognize in these descriptions of the Meenachal's decay the same unapologetic frankness denouncing dam projects found in the latter polemic, and the same condemnation of global networks of capital and aid that lay waste to the "Third World." Though the "barrage" in the novel that cost "the price of a river" is not on the scale of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river in Central India that spawned the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) anti-dam movement that is the subject of *The Greater Common Good*, it is clear that it is connected to the blatant disregard of local reverence and ecological stability that result in large dam projects.

The problem with dams, especially large dams, is similar to the complex problem I lay out at the beginning of this chapter in terms of the supposed distinction between character and context; dams rely on improper conceptualizations of rivers as singular, unidirectional, linear, and governable entities, when they are actually extremely cyclical, relational, and ungovernable ecosystems, even constituting multiple networks of ecosystems. Large rivers are often called "mixed systems" because they change their ecosystemic properties so often during their length that it is impossible to determine precisely when and where transformations occur. They are defined by change: animals, bacteria, sediment and nutrients all interact to form fluid states of constant becoming. David Allan and Maria Castillo explain, "All ecosystems have some flux across their boundaries, but fluvial

Southern India, which provides the historical backdrop for the earlier timeline in the novel. As Marxism was spreading throughout India in the 1960's, Mao Zedong began providing ideological leadership for the Naxalbari movement, advocating that Indian peasants and lower class tribals overthrow the government of the upper classes by force. This led to the Naxalite uprising in 1967, and the resulting state terror against Naxalites became wrapped up in common atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis. Later, the Marxists became increasingly fragmented due to poor leadership. Comrade Pillai is a good example of this trajectory, as his refusal to help Velutha in reference to the intercaste taboo represents the Naxalites' failed promise of caste dissolution.

ecosystems are especially open, exhibiting high connectivity longitudinally, laterally, and vertically” (*Stream Ecology* 6). Geologist Ellen Wohl confirms:

Interconnections are particularly apt for describing rivers. Precipitation, windblown sediments, and atmospheric contaminants enter them from the air. Flying insects emerge from the river, and river water evaporates. Water carrying dissolved elements and compounds percolates down through the streambed to the groundwater, and groundwater seeps into river channels. Microscopic organisms and aquatic insects move back and forth between the river and the shallow subsurface, as do water and dissolved chemicals. Water, sediment, nutrients, and organisms flood across valley bottoms, then recede into river channels. Sediment and organic matter move from adjacent hill slopes and uplands into river corridors. And water, sediment, contaminants, and organisms moving downstream, as well as other organisms moving upstream, stitch together the uplands and oceans along the seams of rivers. (*World of Rivers* 4-5)

What Wohl describes is a vast network of forward and backward motion, not just forward motion. She also describes multiple timelines overlapping in the lifecycle of a river: the timelines of insects, evaporating water, and chemical dissolution all intersect, for example. In one sense, focusing only on the forward motion of river water seems practical in terms of analyzing pollution and water distribution; someone pollutes a river upstream and there are dire consequences downstream; someone dams the flow upriver and there is water storage for later use downriver. But in reality, rivers that traverse heterogeneous areas are not easily analyzed and categorized in straightforward, practical ways. There are too many variables, too much backward and forward motion, too many disparate yet interconnected ecologies to consider.³⁰

³⁰ This upriver-downriver cause and effect narrative is true to an extent. For example, India and Nepal are currently dealing with an ecological crisis in which deforestation in the Ganges headwater regions of the Himalayas is causing erosion, loss of soil fertility, and downstream flooding and siltation in downstream Ganges regions of India. Indian

This is part of the reason attempts to control rivers often fail or cause unintended consequences in later periods of time or in other, related regions. Drainage networks are quite clearly rhizomatic, and river segments inhabit those networks (Allan and Costillo). Different “feeding functional groups” circulate at various points in the network, including bugs darting in and out of the water, fish stirring up sediment, and birds making various transactions, all of which keep the ecosystem in constant flux. Materials do make their way downstream in a generally linear fashion, but they are always changing along the way, such that it is impossible to determine precisely when and where transformations occur. Dams especially often fail, and even more often lead to unforeseen consequences, like the weeds ravaging the banks of the Meenachal as a result of the saltwater barrage. Experts have complained about serious institutional shortcomings that position large-scale hydroelectric dams as the solution to India’s water problems, yet dams are still the leading strategy of water redistribution and energy production in India, and even worldwide. According to geologists Katherine J. Skalak, et al., “one of the greatest modifications of the fluvial landscape in the Anthropocene is the construction of dams” (“Large Dams” 51). Likely this is partially why Roy describes the NBA fight as “the big one. The one in which the battle-lines were clearly drawn, the warring armies massed along them” (*GCG*). She explains, capitalizing “Big Dams” the way she capitalizes “Big Things” in *God of Small Things*, “Big Dams started well, but have ended badly. [...] Big Dams haven't really lived up to their role as the monuments of Modern Civilisation, emblems of Man's ascendancy over Nature. Monuments are supposed to be timeless, but dams have an all-too-finite lifetime” (*GCG*). Roy is directly refuting Nehru’s claim for dams as “temples of modern India”

environmentalists, industrialists, and politicians have put pressure on Nepal to curb this deforestation, encouraging hydroelectric power programs as a way to generate energy, clean water storage, power and irrigation downstream. But experts can’t quite agree on how much the headwater activity is really affecting people in India; downstream changes in population, land use, and river engineering have been concomitant with upstream deforestation, making it difficult to pinpoint clear causes to the negative effects downstream. There are also myriad activities in the tributaries of the larger Ganges river basin that must be accounted for, and even larger considerations like climate changes to headwater glacial melt.

here, an attempt to blend development with spirituality that falls short of its promise in more ways than one.

The other well-known and often controversial social cost to mega dams, which Roy and the NBA movement was really invested in, is human displacement for their construction. I want to explicate this social cost not because it is narratively or metaphorically present in *The God of Small Things*, but because it broadly connects India's environmental policies that value development over the ecosystemic functions of rivers with the ways human history is entangled with river histories and the ways in which human-river relations in India can be seen to be sedimented in the Meenachal as story-space of the novel. All of these elements point to a notion of vulnerability – a shared vulnerability of environment and land that provides context for Roy's notions of scale. As alluded earlier, the narrator's embittered tone when speaking of the Meenachal's pollution in the novel finds an echo in *The Greater Common Good*, when Roy calls dams "obsolete," "undemocratic," "a government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where)," and "a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich" (*GCG*). Large-scale dams demand that local people get out of the way, and these are more often than not already underprivileged, often Dalit and Adivasi people who end up in overcrowded city slums, like in Delhi. Aradhana Seth's documentary film about the protests against Sardar Sarovar, *DAM/AGE*, estimates that up to fifty-six million people were victims of large dam projects from 1947 to the making of the film in 2002, and over sixty percent of those were Dalit and Adivasi (Seth). In her tract, Roy exhibits concern for the thousands of people displaced from the Sardar Sarovar building site, losing both their source of material sustenance and their spiritual center; the Narmada river is considered one of the seven holy rivers of India, a mother goddess who is often referred to as the daughter of the Ganges, and locals believed they needed to protect her, not abandon her to industry. Vulnerability, then, connects the river-as-goddess concept with the river-

as-ecosystem; both are vulnerable to large-scale industry, and both overlap with human vulnerability in the face of both social and environmental hierarchies. However, a network view is needed to curb the short-sighted and singular vision of river development as national identity formation in favor of more objective, systemic approaches.

Another modern text that combats a homogenous approach to both rivers and the Indian nation at the same time is Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* (1993). The short story collection plays with the traditional image of the river, this time the Narmada river, as formal and structural metaphor for a philosophical journey toward transformation, though this time the river leads the main character toward a realization of collective Indian identity. At the time of its publication, NBA protests had been going on for at least a decade, and though the stories do not mention the dam or the controversy, the Narmada connects all the stories in the collection together in a way that highlights its cultural and spiritual value during such a contentious period. Mehta presents her stories as vignettes within a frame narrative; each story is set around a retired bureaucrat who has renounced the world of governmental politics and finance, choosing to live out the rest of his days in meditation beside the river. The "world" is very deliberately figured here as something separate from the natural environment, something purely of human design and function; "Bureaucrats belong too much to the world," says the retiree on the first page, "and I have fulfilled my worldly obligations" (Mehta 1). From his position next to the river, he listens as various villagers and travelers to the area recount their life stories. This casts the river and its relation to contemplation and wisdom as something simultaneously otherworldly and a physical world in itself; its physical, geographical location is what allows for the aspiring aesthete to witness the various stories and put them together in conversation to create a moral philosophy. The braided structure of the novel is also quite literally like a river; "sutra" refers to both a genre of ancient Indian religious texts and to a thread that moves as if through a spinning wheel, turning and returning over and over while changing over time. Sutras

were originally oral traditions, and a “sutradhar,” or narrator, is someone who wove the stories together. Thus, Mehta’s bureaucrat, an unexpected sutradhar, reveals both the physical and social connective tissues of the Narmada River, the network of which includes a wide, heterogenous population while excluding particular constructs that homogenize people, like the government, business, and finance. Instead, there is a more material national identity articulated through the storytelling constituted by real people and their connections and relationships to the environment they share; the river.

As collective identity, then, whether national or local identity in the case of the Meenachal, rivers can be instructive of the relationships that make up human-nonhuman communities, but only if they are not imagined or approached as singular, stable objects. They are often conceived as boundaries for these local or national identities, but according to their ecology, this is tricky since their own “boundedness” is deceptive. They are actually porous and constantly shifting, their messy flood plains part of their ecosystemic properties. “People too often view constantly changing rivers as inconveniences,” says Wohl. “We try to stabilize them by confining them in single straight channels that do not spill across the floodplain or migrate from side to side across the valley bottom. This confinement diminishes complexity and diversity of habitat that nourish abundant and varied species of plants and animals” (Wohl 1). One real challenge in imagining our way out of this approach to rivers is the complex entanglement between humans and rivers deeply embedded in our socio-environmental history. Humans have been modifying rivers as long as we have been relying on them, which essentially means as long as we have been human (the earliest cradles of civilization were all located along large river valleys; large rivers, along with their tributaries and drainage basins, gave rise to Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt (Euphrates, Nile, and Tigris Rivers), Ancient China (Huáng Hé, or Yellow River), and the Indus Valley Civilization (Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra Rivers)). Says Jason Kelly, “Historically, river systems have been central to human societies and their

technologies. [...] [R]ivers are not simply physical landscapes; they are cultural worlds as well—shaped at the interface between humans and nature” (*Rivers of the Anthropocene* xvii). The result is that human history and river history are so entangled that it is now impossible to know if particular rivers should be thought of “either as natural systems with humans disturbing them or as human systems with remnants of natural aquatic ecosystems embedded in them” (Large, Gilvear, and Starkey 24). This means that when it comes to rivers, there is no clear ‘return’ to a pre-anthropogenic, ‘natural’ condition for which it would be prudent to strive. We can argue that this is true for all of the natural world, but with rivers, the entanglement is extremely embedded, which makes the way forward for river management particularly tricky. This “historical interplay between people and rivers” (Scarpino, in Kelly 113) suggests that continued river modification is inevitable, but new considerations of how rivers are imagined and framed discursively are crucial when faced with increasing and increasingly severe water crises.

In *The God of Small Things*, the Meenachal’s representation as both character and context also allows it to function as both boundary and connector at once that seems to point to the contingency of our lives regarding rivers. For example, it acts as a border between the upper caste Ammu’s Syrian Christian family and the untouchable paravan Velutha Pappen’s family, and according to Anand, when Ammu and Velutha begin crossing the river to have sexual relations, breaking the region’s age-old Love Laws, the river then brings together “the touchable and untouchable worlds” (Anand 102). The river thus provides both limit and crossing at once, much like a pivotal node in a network of interactions. Aside from movement across and between, the Meenachal also provides dimensions of inside and below. Returning to Sophie Mol’s drowning, the “event” that is described as more of a “non-event,” the Meenachal is able to transform the plucky little Indian-English girl into something new, something overwhelmed by “river-sense,” as shown when a fisherman finds her body in the river:

Picture him.

Out in his boat at dawn, at the mouth of the river he has known all his life. [...] Something bobs past in the water and the colours catch his eye. Mauve. Redbrown. Beach sand. It moves with the current, swiftly towards the sea. [...] It's a wrinkled mermaid. A mer-child. A mere mer-child. With redbrown hair. [...] He pulls her out of the water into his boat. [...] He rows home [...] thinking how wrong it is for a fisherman to believe that he knows his river well. *No one* knows the Meenachal. No one knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield.
(Roy 245)

Here, under the Meenachal's mysterious influence, Sophie Mol has become flotsam and jetsam, a human to a nonhuman transition with no fanfare. The mystery of what the fisherman has caught is his alone, since the reader already knows. But then again, the narrator tells us that there are infinite possibilities of what can be swallowed up and then churned back out by the Meenachal. Again, no one can really know its true nature, a nature that is both forward and backward, inside and outside, human and nonhuman, character and context, and this indeterminacy helps decenter human individuality and singularity. This points to a larger concept of interrelationality among elements that make up the somewhat loose notion of the river – living and nonliving, all working together to define and redefine it as something new and different at any given point in space and time, a fluid state of constant becoming.

Conclusion: Big and Small

As a novel about scale, *The God of Small Things* does well to overlap the formal conceptions of character and context in its representation of The Meenachal river. This strategy emphasizes our ability to conceptually hold actant and network, goddess and ecosystem, small and big together at once. These seemingly dialectical relationships are actually part of a fluid network of relations;

politics, personal identity, national identity, environmental management – these are all understood in relation to one another. This is a particularly useful thought experiment for Latour’s notion of interconnectedness and relationality; relationality as a critical concept diffuses cause and effect, actor and acted upon, in a similar way to Roy’s novel. If India’s river crises reveal an internal struggle to reconcile industry with cultural and spiritual meaning-making and environmental ecology, then the novel makes space to reinterpret the space between these imagined divides. And the same can be said of the space between “Big” and “Small.” Jane Poyner invokes Timothy Clark’s notion of scale to discuss the notion of subalternity in the novel, suggesting that stories that work on multiple, often conflicting scales concurrently (such as a personal, national, and global scale) “[scramble] normative reading practices,” creating an effect whereby seemingly stable agencies and forces are shown to have differentiated influence in different scales (66). In this way, according to Poyner, Roy’s novel champions “the efficacy of marginalized voices against the “big” voices of corporate and state power that hasten environmental damage” (68). In reality, these scales are not mutually exclusive, but rather can both constitute and clash with one another. According to Clark, a multi-scalar text can produce an effect that should “enrich and derange our reading of a text through multiple, seemingly conflicting levels simultaneously,” and Poyner suggests that in this way, *The God of Small Things* “initiates embedded” readings and is therefore “a lesson in reading scale effects” (65-66).

One of these embedded readings is that the Meenachal in the novel is neither “Big Thing” nor “Small Thing,” but a conduit between them, with the ability to fold them into one another. Roy makes no secret of her judgment between “Big” and “Small Things:” Big Things are society’s organizing principles, like History and Religion, which act like bullies – things with agendas that act with characteristics of moneylenders and businessmen. Small Things, on the other hand, are everyday objects and natural processes: a hair tie, a spider weaving a web, and a child’s feelings of doubt – things that can help us reflect on the world but are too often overlooked. The Meenachal

exists outside of this dichotomy, in part because of the way it exists in time and space, neither Big Thing nor Small but a connection between them. Instead, the river suggests an interconnectedness that, like a pointillist painting, can come to resemble a Big Thing if we ignore that it is intricately constructed of Small Things. Thus, the pollution of the Meenachal in this reading equates to the elision of an ecosystemic view of the Ayemenem material-discursive landscape, the ecosystemic “river-sense” (after all, what is pollution if not the ignorance of a wider, interconnected environmental network as your waste leaves your sight?). This reading is not meant to reject the spiritual characterization of rivers as goddesses just because managerial policy is wrong in treating them like singular, manageable entities; rather, I am suggesting that the spiritual approach to rivers as goddesses who are wild, ecosystemic, larger than life, and unbounded is a more apt expression of river ecology.

The God of Small Things is also about reading and writing; the brief scene of kathakali dancers who “discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets [...] You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t,” (Roy 218) is a metafictional moment that calls attention to the novel’s rejection of narrative linearity by giving away its own ending at the beginning, circling back on itself through words, phrases, and images, and questioning the notion of beginning and end, cause and effect. But the river’s representation also suggests an interweaving of the subjectivity of literature with the objectivity of management policy; the character/context overlay allows us to interrogate how the state’s objectivity-oriented instrumentalist and technocratic treatment of rivers clashes both with the spiritual image of the goddess and the material-discursive image of the ecosystem. The novel’s formal aspects allow for imaginative leaps between character and context, subjectivity and objectivity; readers are tasked with seeing what is unseen, assessing the whole of the text’s sedimented aesthetic and historical offerings. In other words, Roy’s novel gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the Meenachal as a nonhuman environmental subject without

colonizing the river's nature or agency. Roy "embraces an ecological sensibility," says Lobnik, "that casts the environment as a sentient force and, by doing so, not only presents human corporeality as coextensive with nonhuman nature but also helps raise awareness of the unbounded, rather than enclosed, nature of experience and imagination" ("Sounding Ecologies" 131). The representation, then, provides an opportunity, informed by ecology, to work through the tensions between human and nonhuman in addition to the aforementioned so-called dichotomies that aligns with a challenge to anthropogenic thinking, the stability of our environmental categories, and even our own self-definitions, in the way of Stacy Alaimo, Iovino and Oppermann, etc., by imagining these contrasts not as mutually exclusive, but folded and layered like sediments.

This reading is useful because in India, these tensions are playing out in real-time; currently, there are numerous environmental crises and questions that are intertwined with deep cultural and spiritual images and classist and casteist struggles in India that suggest how discourse communities and material practices continue to clash. Secondly, there is another serious tension that plays out in many Indian novels between a national-cultural regard for and interest in "nature" and a long-practiced tradition of reducing India through exoticizing its "nature." Postcolonial Indian writers like those I have mentioned grapple with this tension in many ways, but the particular river imagery in *The God of Small Things* creates a strong postcolonial narrative about time, history, memory, and loss by emphasizing the characters' porous entanglements with the Meenachal and how it is imbued with meaning. The novel's focus on the nonlinearity and indeterminacy of the river thus helps resituate human-river, local-national, and national-international relations, and suggests how we may work to re-conceptualize humans and rivers more broadly as co-constitutive and relational in order to de-normalize overly rapid anthropogenic transformation.

To imagine beyond India for a moment, this reading also has broader ecocritical implications as part of a "fluvial turn" for the Humanities. Though rivers are limited to continents, they

nevertheless cross multiple material and discursive linguistic, cultural, regional, national, and ecosystemic boundaries, even connecting oceans to one another, and Ellen Wohl suggests that there are material cycles that provide ways to think of all the earth's rivers as in actuality one "round river" (quoting Leopold). Rivers contain deeply embedded histories that nevertheless resist totality, and furthermore, oceans are not the only spaces where imperial encounters were enacted; rivers are on the front lines of water crises, imagined as sites of cultural heritage that are materially and discursively placed under erasure by dynamics of power as evidenced by the Suez Crisis, deforestation in the Amazon Basin, and Indigenous resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL). Colonial and neocolonial powers have historically attempted to forestall, block, and re-channel the flows of both rivers and culture; river ecology and co-constituency with human culture suggests a possibility for a flow between the ancient and contemporary, a weaving in and out of totalizing structures. A fluvial turn rethinks rivers in terms of being deceptively linear and yet wholly unbounded, connecting glacial melt and other headwaters to the seas, carrying nutrients, sediment, and animal life, but also language, mythology, ritual, and history, and churning them all together as they flow. As such, they are a bridge between deep geological time and historical, surface time. According to Jason Kelly, "rivers serve [...] as a useful locus for analyzing flows, intersections, and cycles that are central to understanding the human-environment nexus" (Kelly xx), and Celia Deane-Drummond, in the same collection, argues for a focus on "local river systems [like the Meenachal] and specific instances of human-natural interactions" (60). In literary studies, we may interrogate the ecological valences in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to interrogate how slaves were transported down the Mississippi, for example, or Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* to consider how Indian peasants made their way along the Ganges to become indentured laborers. Through literature, we may look at representations of local river systems and their respective material-discursive contexts to help us

acknowledge the relationality necessary in reconceptualizing humanity's ethical presence on the earth.

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CHAPTER 3

Human-Animal Relations in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

'Who are these people I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they not know what is being done in their name? 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 had 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.' (Ghosh 216-17)

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is set entirely in the Sundarbans archipelago, a coastal region that straddles the border between India's West Bengal and Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan. The novel weaves together three of the main, intertwining environmental elements that make up the Sundarbans: a thick mangrove forest (*sundarban* means "beautiful forest" in Bengali); a complex waterway system created by the tributaries of the overlapping Ganges, Meghna, and Brahmaputra Rivers; and an actively interacting animal population including, most famously, tigers. *The Hungry Tide* highlights this intricate ecosystem by detailing the interconnections between all three of these elements. However, this chapter focuses on Ghosh's animal representations in particular because of the way they bring to light a previously elided history of animal conservation as justification for militarization against disenfranchised people. I will explore the novel's approach to animals that illuminates the managerial discourse that has allowed for some animals to be valued above humans, others to be valued below them, and how this relates to wider human-animal relations in India. In particular, I contrast Ghosh's allomorphic representations of the two endangered species in the novel, the Irawaddy dolphin and the Bengal tiger, a contrast that highlights the importance of animal imaginaries in the conception of ecosystemic relationality. I argue that Ghosh's novel foregrounds a way of thinking about human-animal relations that

challenges hierarchies expressed in capitalist relations of exploitation on the one hand, and managerial environmental conservation policies on the other.

In his influential, if romantic exploration of animals, modernity, and visual culture, John Berger theorizes the way humans relate to animals as primarily a relationship of power, due to our limited understanding of gaze. That is, humans think of animals as always the observed, never the observers. “The fact that [animals] can observe us has lost all significance,” says Berger. “They are objects of our ever-extending knowledge. [...] The more we know, the further away they are” (*Why Look at Animals?* 257). Though his analysis is problematically dependent on the isolated, almost heterotopic vision of animals in zoos (Burt), Berger’s emphasis on gaze is useful in considering literary representations of animals; after all, gaze is integral to how animals have often served metonymic and metaphorical functions, and gaze is also integral to how imperial powers have justified assaults on habitats (Said). Like other aspects of the environment, humans have relied on observations and interpretations of animals to build cultural approaches toward them, and conversely, culture has also shaped our observations and interpretations of animals. It is this entanglement that so many philosophers and critics have tried to theorize; problems arise when images of animals are used to elevate the status of humans, a “speciesism,” says Cary Wolfe, that frames our attempts to empathize with animals that nevertheless betrays our ideological production of them as “subhuman” (*What is Posthumanism?*). Donna Haraway’s contribution to critical animal studies, *When Species Meet*, attempts to address this tendency and retie “some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living on the earth” (3) by thinking deeply about how “living with” other species is integral to our practice of world-making. For Haraway, animals are “at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality” (4), and so should be thought of as “companions,” since we are always “becoming with” one another. Colin Dayan (another dog lover), similarly wants to “cast doubt on the robustness and transportability of the ontological partitions

that we so easily assume,” and instead try to “invoke [...] the seepage between entities assumed to be distinct, whether dead or living, animate or inanimate, commonplace or extraordinary” (*With Dogs* xiv). There is an ethics to be found in our need to recognize our encounters with animals and the ontological limitations of the human-centered conceptions of ourselves that these encounters reveal, as well as the need to understand that embedded cultural imaginaries underly all human-animal relations. Literary representation, therefore, is a pedagogical site of inquiry for these relations.

Greg Garrard offers a taxonomy of animal representation that helps us understand this embeddedness of imagination. He identifies four principle types of animal representations that humans employ, all of which are at heart anthropocentric: anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, mechanomorphism, and allomorphism (*Ecocriticism* 154). Anthropomorphism, imbuing animals with human characteristics, is probably the most recognized and ubiquitous trope. “Unless trained not to do so,” says Garrard, “humans infer human agency everywhere” (155). This can prove both beneficial and problematic; people are often more likely to protect animals they feel a kinship toward, and they are more likely to disregard or even mistreat those with whom they don’t. In a recent paper, Danielle Sands calls for a reconsideration of our tendency to rely on empathy as a foundation for ethics, and instead recognize it as just one of many affective tools for cross-species engagement and aesthetic representation. At the same time, anthropomorphism should not be completely disregarded as a pathetic fallacy; there are many ways in which it allows for what Sands calls “an imaginative perspective-making” that can help us understand the world in a responsible way (“Limits”).

Zoomorphism is the inverse of anthropomorphism, the process of describing humans in animal terms. Jacques Derrida famously described zoomorphism as an anthropocentric way of misrepresenting animality in everyday language by ignoring differences between individual animals (2008). It is also often employed derogatorily; one need only think of the many histories of invasion,

slavery, and servitude in which people of certain cultures, ethnicities, colors, and races were likened to the animal kingdom as part of a justification for “inhumane” treatment (including 19th century British documentation of colonial operations in India). However, like anthropomorphism, zoomorphism is not always nefarious; the ways in which it is employed can vary between cultural contexts. Theoretical developments in posthumanism have suggested that rather than dehumanizing characters along social and racial lines, narrative zoomorphic tropes can call into question the very categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal;’ Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is an excellent case for this kind of study. Similarly, mechanomorphism, describing animals as machine-like or having exaggerated mechanical features, can be used both in ways that denigrate animals and in ways that stress, for example, aspects of technological modernity that influence and penetrate the worlding of everyday life.

Allomorphism, which often appears in tandem with other forms of representation, is what I argue Ghosh relies on most heavily (and also problematizes) in *The Hungry Tide*. Allomorphism emphasizes the alterity of animals, or the idea that animals are strange and other, sometimes fantastically so. It can evoke intense respect for animals, an acknowledgment of difference that can inspire caution and care. However, it can also further entrench the false culture/nature divide; the idea that animals may be “otherworldly” reinforces the idea of “the world” being a place exclusively of and for humans, exacerbating issues of misinterpretation and mistreatment of animals. *The Hungry Tide* revolves around Piya, an Indian American cetologist in search of the endangered Irawaddy dolphin, which may or may not have been sighted swimming through the complex fluvial system of the Sundarbans. The dolphins are depicted allomorphically in Piya’s field notes and memories and also in the local Sundarbans lore; in the former, they appear as friendly, playful, yet mysterious and guarded, while in the latter they are a species of benevolent messengers from Bon Bibi, a forest goddess who looks after those who respect the balance of resources under her

purview. The other principle animal in the narrative is the Bengal tiger (herein “tiger” will connote the Bengal tiger), which is depicted contrastingly as dangerously intimate with the locals, a constant threat that is both highly respected and highly feared. Local belief is that “if you see a tiger, the chances are you won’t live to tell the tale” (Ghosh 201). Tigers, in this case “haunt” the novel; in this heightened sense of danger, a tiger’s “mysterious cry” is described as a terror-inducing, uncanny sound, and the animal even appears to one character, Kanai, as a vision.

Ghosh’s contrast between the mysteriously beneficent dolphins and the mysteriously murderous tigers, steeped as it is in anthropological research and managerial history of both species in the region, is a form of questioning humanity’s gaze toward animal life, a reconsideration of hierarchical tendencies that shape how we approach habitat protections, animal allegiances, and the roles of animals in a potential material-discursive network view of the Sundarbans. In each case, I will discuss how Ghosh uses fascination and fear to “call attention to the liminal position” of both the animals and the human characters, though in differentiated ways, as well as to “honor [the] limits of interspecies understanding” (Steinwand 182). In the case of the Irawaddy dolphin, the novel’s representations call to mind enduring cross-cultural imagery of cetaceans as “endangered charismatic megafauna of the sea” (182) that have the ability to both befriend and alienate humankind, a kind of uncanny mirror for our follies. “Living with” the Irawaddy dolphin has proved untenable (or at least unprofitable) for humans in the Sundarbans, hence their endangerment, but Piya’s intensive search for them helps to reveal a wider web of endangerments to the Sundarbans ecosystem, which includes local human communities, which reemphasizes the urgencies of “living with.” The Bengal tiger’s representation also calls to mind cross-cultural imagery of charismatic megafauna, particularly big cats, which have proven successful in driving international conservation campaigns. More specifically, tigers were integral to Indira Gandhi’s legacy of Indian conservation through the enduring organization Project Tiger, which successfully set aside large

areas of land as tiger reserves. But *The Hungry Tide* calls attention to a previously seldom-discussed event in Bengali History known as the Marichjhapi Massacre, a direct result of this kind of sequestering legislation, in which militarized state officials actively blockaded, starved, and fired upon refugees after they refused to vacate a region in the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation. This history adds to the tiger's complex status in the narrative.

Ghosh's representations of the tiger and dolphin respectively also relies on cultural histories of how animals have been generally regarded, approached, and treated in India, which is heavily influenced by ancient spiritual and moral philosophical associations. Imagined divisions between humans and animals are important in this regard and vary across different communities. Meera Baidur suggests that one highly prevalent theme that runs through much of Indian spirituality is the concept of dharma, a sort of "natural law" that guides every thing's purpose and "is determined by one's form, role, function, and innate nature" (Baidur 91). In this widespread formulation, human dharmas "are much more complicated" than animal dharmas, explains Baidur, because unlike animals, humans are "bound to moral choice and action" (*Nature* 91). However, it is also important to note that "[e]ach [dharma] community and its members are bound in a web of relations and functions that are multi-layered" (91). This of course includes humans, and here we can see in this entrenched set of beliefs a sense of interconnected relationality making up the fabric of all things, in which animals help determine human dharma and therefore humanity's purpose on the earth, and vice versa. Though there is indeed a clear separation between humans and nonhuman animals in this mythology, there is no hierarchy, only scales of complexity that guide human ethical action toward animals as compassionate co-inhabitants of the world. It is decidedly unlike, for example, the power structure determined by gaze that Berger suggests.

At the same time, animals in India can have specific discursive and symbolic functions, emerging from a cyclical relationship between spiritualism and socioeconomic circumstances.

Fundamental Indian fables crossing multiple religions show gods and demons taking animal forms, and animals are often symbols of the duties and powers of gods, playing crucial roles in art and literature. But despite the widespread philosophical emphasis on mutual respect for animals, these symbolic associations are often accompanied by anthropomorphism that does, in fact, suggest power disparity, or at least a value hierarchy. Baidur gives one example:

In the *Pañcatantra*, said to have been composed by Viṣṇuśarman, the form of the fable is used to narrate stories about animals that exhibit an almost human behaviour. The animals have relationships with each other, make moral and rational choices, cheat, and also betray each other in human ways. These descriptions show that the animals are deeply humanised. While it is easy to dismiss these fables as literature that only utilises the animals to make a point about human morals, one could suggest that there is a particular stereotype of animals that allows the stories to represent particular human-like behaviour. Some common beliefs about animal behaviour are recounted in the stories. There is also categorisation of particular animals as good, bad, stupid clever or even compassionate. There is also a tendency to essentialise the animals into ‘noble’ or ‘wretched’ categories. (156)

These associations are further complicated by the extension of zoomorphic stereotypes that maintain power disparities between various human communities in India. For example, Adivasis have been routinely likened to animals as justification for their subjugation going all the way back to the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Conversely, even positive associations with animals can cause strife between human communities; cows, for example, are considered divine companions to the gods in certain communities who for centuries have relied on cattle for use in agriculture, but as a result, Muslims and Dalits in cattle industries are often attacked and even killed for their mistreatment of so-called sacred cows, suggesting that some people place a higher value on the lives of venerated animals than those of other people.

These positive and negative associations with animals that cause hierarchical strife between communities can also be exacerbated by national and even international politics and interests. In particular, liberal environmentalist initiatives that have helped secure conservation protections for certain endangered animals (mostly charismatic megafauna like tigers) in India have caused displacement of and allowed for authoritative violence against thousands of disenfranchised communities, especially those subsisting on forested areas that can be suddenly classified as protected. What is especially compelling is that these protections often employ the language of spiritual veneration embedded within the language of environmentalism, two rhetorical frames that can often function as inarguable in public discourse. This can unfortunately elide opposition from communities put at risk by these protections, as they are then cast as anti-environmentalist (or at best, backward in their approach to the environment) and even sacrilegious, even though those communities are often the most knowledgeable and sometimes even already living in sustainable ways alongside the animals placed under protection.

In the specific case of Indian animal conservation, Mahesh Rangarajan and others have called for joint management of animal protections, made up of a cooperation between the forest service and local communities, for decades, similar to the successful (if slow) strides that have been made through joint forest management efforts. Within this effort, there has been acknowledgment of the need to reconceptualize conservation in light of the ideology of this interconnectedness; “The question of how to actualise this vision has given rise to new sensibilities that try to take account of the human dimensions of the wildlife question,” says Rangarajan, and part of this has included an extension of “the concept of equity from across classes and nations to other species and generations” (“Debate” 2391). Annu Jalais adds, “Locally rooted systems are not static reservoirs of tradition. They change over time as people make adjustments to their changed environments,” therefore, she calls for attention “to the way that local people conceptualise eco-

systems and try to deal with their changing world” (*Forest of Tigers* 216). However, currently there are no plans for joint management of either tiger or dolphin conservation between the forest service and locals living on or near the Sundarbans; the approach to, and therefore value of these animals is wholly governed by national and international knowledge and practice. This leads us back to Ghosh’s description of that interconnected landscape in *The Hungry Tide*, as well as the novel’s narrativization of the Marichjhapi massacre, the important historical event that pitted forest officials acting as so-called forest guardians on behalf of tiger and mangrove protections against disenfranchised communities attempting to forge sustainable lives within the mangroves, alongside and in spite of the dangerous tiger population.

It is important to note that this chapter is not about animal rights versus human rights, but rather an examination of how representations of these particular animals illuminate human-animal relationships, which in turn engender rights debates. After all, recognizing the plight of displaced peoples in their fight against policies that prioritize animals over them does not equate to an anthropocentric privileging of humans as more deserving of moral consideration than animals; that would ignore the interconnected and co-reliant nature of human-animal relations. Instead, we must flesh out the ways in which states have elided *both* animals and humans and succeeded in setting them at odds in a competition for both resources and institutional protection. Thus, if it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that animals are just as deserving of welfare and consideration as humans, it is also sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that all humans – not just some – are just as deserving of these things as animals. To do this, we must “dismantle imaginary, pernicious and simplistic hierarchies” (Garrard 151) between humans and animals and instead assess the history of relations that make up these situations. Again, relationality is key here, as “[p]artners do not precede the meeting,” explains Donna Haraway. “Species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters” (Haraway 177). *The*

Hungry Tide reminds us that we cannot simply remove humans in order to re-naturalize nature; humans are embedded in the earth's ecosystems, both materially and discursively, and Ghosh's novel is an effort to break down those capitalistic, state-sanctioned ideological divides that prevent us from recognizing this embeddedness. In this chapter, I will first give a brief overview of the Marichjhapi massacre that lies at the heart of the novel, then I will discuss tigers and dolphins and their respective cultural and representative functions historically and in Ghosh's novel in order to shed light on human-animal relations in India more broadly.

The Marichjhapi Massacre

The Hungry Tide narratively weaves a slow and steady build up to the description of the historical Marichjhapi massacre through fictional diary entries; Kanai, a cosmopolitan Indian writer and translator, recovers the journal of his uncle, Nirmal, who was at Marichjhapi, an island in the southwest region of the Sundarbans, and recorded the entire event. Marichjhapi is notably the least hospitable and most poverty-stricken region of the archipelago, therefore discussions of the incident register concern over the seeming devaluation of humans, specifically lower caste refugees, in deference to animals. Nirmal's journal also expresses this critique, recording a local woman's account of the incident, displayed in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter: "Who are these people I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?" (Ghosh 216). The history of the massacre is complex, part of the long history of Partition and its aftermath, and it is the subject of numerous articles, studies, and volumes in its own right.³¹ However, I will summarize it briefly here in order to provide the sociopolitical and historical backdrop of the novel and to link it to Indian and Bengali animal conservation history more broadly.

³¹ See, for example, Urvashi Butalia's *Partition: The Long Shadow*, which points out that the incident escaped upper caste memories for nearly three decades, only to resurface as a handy image to appropriate and wield over a Leftist government waning in popularity.

When the hammer of Partition fell in 1947, the subsequent division of Bengal forced Eastern Bengali Hindus living in what was suddenly East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to pick up their belongings and migrate west. They joined a migration that was already ongoing due to religious, social, and economic persecution in Eastern Bengal. Upper caste refugees mostly settled in West Bengal, which was (and is) part of India, but lower caste Hindus, who had limited mobility and were slower to migrate, were forcibly settled in the Dandakaranya region, mostly in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. The land was rocky and infertile (having been cleared of most of its forest), and the refugees lived in makeshift camps, in what were sometimes even described as “concentration camp” conditions. Some refugees actively organized to establish squatter communities, attempting political action and hunger strikes to gain attention to their plight. But the migration continued into the 1950’s and 1960’s, registering little improvement for the growing refugee population, and the trend peaked again in 1970 and 1971 during the Bangladesh genocide and subsequent Bangladesh Liberation War.

In the 1960’s, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal, including eventual leader Jyoti Basu, began making bids for power, actively seeking support from these refugee squatter communities who were eager for a leadership change that might result in their increased visibility. The refugees had received no help from the ruling Congress party, and the communists promised them resettlement in West Bengal. The squatter communities complied, and by 1974, Basu himself advocated publicly for resettling the refugees back in West Bengal, suggesting that they settle in the Sundarbans. In fact, Basu openly invited them to start rising up and abandoning their camps, promising them rehabilitation in West Bengal when the communists came to power. The refugees answered the call and started migrating back in droves, and by 1977, when the Left Front party (made up of an alliance of various Marxist parties) swept the legislative assembly election and Jyoti

Basu was made Chief Minister, over one hundred fifty thousand refugees had reverse migrated to West Bengal, many to the Sundarbans, seeking the homes and jobs the Marxists had promised them.

About thirty thousand refugees specifically made their way to the island of Marichjhapi. But here they found an unyielding, inhospitable home; the uneven terrain, intense tidal changes, extreme weather, and aggressive wildlife, including deadly crocodiles and Bengal tigers, challenged the newcomers. The Sundarbans ecosystem is unique because of the constant land and sea overlap. The northwestern islands tend to be safer, while the southeastern islands suffer from the most hardships. Overall, it is a poor and underdeveloped region, lacking basic infrastructure like electricity and drinking water. Furthermore, they did not, as promised, find help from the new Left Front government; no aid or organization appeared. However, the settlers did find friendship from the mostly welcoming communities living on Marichjhapi. Already made up of an impoverished, largely cast-off population (Jalais), the inhabitants by and large empathized with the refugees' plight. Together, they helped the incoming settlers build new embankments to stave off the tides and set up a new, more or less self-reliant village of cooperative farming and fishing. The persistence and dedication of the refugees is reflected in a memorandum they sent collectively to members of Parliament:

We started our new lives with a full arrangement of daily consumption such as living house, school, markets, roads, hospital, tube wells, etc. We managed to find out sources of income, also establishing cottage industry such as Bidi factory, Bakery, Carpentry, Weaving factory etc. and also built embankment nearly 150 miles long covering an area of nearly 30 thousand acres of land to be used for fishing, expecting an income of Rs 20 crores per year. That may easily help and enable us to stand on our own feet. Moreover, after one or two years washing by rain water, preventing saline water to flow over those lands will yield a lot of crops such as paddy and other vegetables. (Sen 116)

By this account, the refugees were doing their best to thrive and prosper in their newfound home, using sophisticated resource management and long-term planning and labor in order to work with the harsh terrain, and they wanted this effort to be recognized by the state.

However, in the Fall of 1978, the Left Front in West Bengal suddenly reversed its policy on the refugees. Chief Minister Basu declared that there was no longer any room for refugee resettlement, and state police began evicting returned refugee communities all across the state. Most importantly to the discussion of environmental injustice, the government cited environmental conservation as justification for evicting all settlers in the Sundarbans, as it was already a protected forest reserve with the primary intention of increasing the tiger population. Chowdhury and others deem this policy reversal a “misuse of forest laws” (“Space” 669). Though the government “declared that the permanent settlement would disturb the forest wealth and ecological balance,” adds Jhuma Sen, “It is debatable whether the CPM placed primacy on ecology or merely feared this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx with consequent loss of political support” (“Reconstructing” 151). This legal excuse allowed for state police to exact punishing eviction practices on the refugees, beating them and forcing them onto trains bound to other states. So unyielding was the forced exodus that thousands of refugees did not survive the trip out of West Bengal.

The Marichjhapi settlers, however, proved defiant. Their new lives were hard-fought, and they weren’t about to be forced out of yet another found home. When, by mid-January 1979, the Marichjhapi communities had rebuffed all police efforts to intimidate and evict them, the government launched a violent economic blockade, on the grounds of the Forest Protection Act. The islanders were deprived of trade, food, water, and medicine. They were also tear gassed, and their boats were sunk. People who tried to leave the island were shot by police, as well as mercenaries and gangs who were hired by police to help encourage eviction. Bodies of those who

starved, gave in to disease, or were murdered had to be deposited in the rivers to the crocodiles. In May 1979, a few villagers managed to evade police in the night to retrieve supplies from neighboring islands. When they were discovered, they were killed. This news traveled back to Marichjhapi and outraged the villagers, but when they attempted to force through the blockade, the police were given license to exact even harsher violence. Later, survivors recounted horrific acts by the authorities, including gang rape and the brutal murder of children. By the end of the ordeal, it is estimated that over four thousand families from Marichjhapi “perished in transit, died of starvation,” or were “killed [...] by police firings” (Sen 162).

This horrific ordeal in Marichjhapi is dramatized in *The Hungry Tide* through affluent writer and translator Kanai’s reading of his uncle’s diary. Kanai discovers that his uncle, Nirmal, documented the entire period, and the diary also reveals that he was close with Fokir’s mother, Kusum, which connects Kanai to the Dalit fisherman through history, geography, and environmental injustice. Nirmal is described as a revolutionary Marxist and would-be poet who was attracted to the ideals of the Sundarbans settlers, especially their devotion to the forest goddess Bonbibi, who reflects a syncretism of Hinduism and Islam. He believes theirs is a model community for the globe, but his idealism and belief in a utopian global vision is belied by the fact that he cannot understand “the vulnerability of the underclasses on whose sacrifice is built this vision of global solidarity” (Kaur 134). Through Nirmal’s journal, Ghosh’s depiction of the massacre that followed is devastatingly true to witness accounts: “The siege went on for many days and we were powerless to affect the outcome. All we heard were rumors: that despite careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. the police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out” (Ghosh 215). But Ghosh also takes the time to philosophize about the environmental injustice implied by what was happening, and he poignantly vocalizes the most

important concepts of this discussion through Kusum, Fokir's the mother, the once plucky utopian refugee now besieged, starving, and desperate:

[T]he 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, were 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." Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words over and over again. [...] No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived -- by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil.' (216-217)

Here Kusum articulates the clash between local human-animal relations and institutional human-animal relations in India and even acknowledges her understanding of its entanglement with international relations and values. Besides the obviously horrific nature of the Marichjhapi massacre, the incident is instructive of how questions about human rights and disenfranchisement enter into discussions of and approaches to animal conservation.

Human-Tiger Relations: Policy and Representation

The Bengal Tiger is integral to India's animal conservation paradigm primarily because of Indira Gandhi, who used the charismatic, endangered cat to kickstart animal protections by challenging the region's precolonial and colonial traditions of exclusionary hunting practices. "Most of today's wildlife parks have been carved out of either princely hunting grounds or reserved forests," Mahesh Rangarajan explains ("Debate" 2392). These areas were sequestered for exclusive use by royalty in the Mughal empire, and their controlled hunting was considered not only an elite activity, but also in deference to the spiritual and ecological nature of the animals; hunting was

considered part of the ecosystemic, interconnected fabric of things, a way to protect animals from imbalance. Predators, they thought, needed to be controlled by hunting in order to protect prey. This was largely the basis for 19th century colonial approaches to tigers and hunting as well, as previously “princely” hunting grounds became grounds reserved for British and elite Indian hunting, which exacerbated the disenfranchisement of communities living in or nearby the forests.

After independence, the first few decades witnessed increased industrial development, which was seen as a priority to establish India as an independent nation, and the Green Revolution in the early 1960’s, designed to address India’s food crisis, further increased this growth (also discussed in the Introduction). With this intense invasion of the land in the form of mines, dams, and other industrial projects, the unregulated export market of tiger pelts also flourished. It was clear that the government needed to put some protections in place to balance its appetite for industry with the health of animals and the environment, but the largely middle-class Indian environmentalism that emerged, says Rangarajan, primarily adhered to colonial, hunting-based approaches to animal conservation. “Wildlife enthusiasts” in the post-independence period were both conservationists and avid hunters, but hunters who denigrated the subsistence hunting practices of forest-dependent communities. These communities instead were blamed for causing a steady decline in tiger and other animal populations. It was clear that tiger protection would be needed to stave off extinction, but protections were defined by eliminating local people from the equation:

Reserved forests were part of the vast network of government forests taken over mainly for revenue and strategic reasons. [...] The appropriation of forest wealth was accomplished by outlawing or severely restricting hunting [...] and use by tribals and other forest-dependent peoples. Though these efforts were often resisted by both overt and covert means, the legacy of the game laws was to be very significant for the early Indian middle class (sic) wildlife enthusiasts. (Rangarajan 2392)

These methods drew from the historical precedent of emperors making royal decrees based on their values and desires. This was a coercive state power that seemed necessary to reach conservationist goals quickly, and the Raj succeeded in displacing large numbers of marginalized communities through these methods.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was the first to establish animal conservation as a real government priority that required a new, non-hunting-based model of environmental protections, including tiger conservation. Gandhi, also a wildlife enthusiast, swiftly implemented what seemed to be a return to traditional ideological and philosophical reverence for humanity's interconnected relationship to nature. She pushed through India's first Wildlife Protection Act in 1972, which banned hunting of wildlife in already reserved areas, even for conservationist purposes. This led to the establishment of the famous Project Tiger in 1973, the largest ever animal conservation initiative in the world at the time. "Nine tiger reserves were carved out in varied ecosystems," says Perna Bindra, "from the mangroves of the Sundarbans to the dry forests of Ranthambhore" (*Vanishing* 82). The project, she continues, "gave India's wild tigers a second lease of life" (75). For about thirty years following the project's launch, the tiger population increased by about two thousand (Damodaran), and according to Rangarajan, Gandhi's commitment to conservation was "symbolic of a new generation of Indians who related to nature not through the barrel of a gun but with binoculars and field guides" ("Debate" 2392). In fact, Project Tiger was "the first organization to recognize predators' role in the ecosystem" (2392), essentially extinguishing the idea that predator populations needed to be controlled by outside means in order to maintain ecological balance by naming the tiger a keynote species.

However, this approach has proven to be unsustainable in the longer term, largely because naming the tiger as a keynote species succeeded in somewhat reifying its singularity rather than carefully considering the entirety of the ecosystem. 'Species selectivity,' as it is called, in the end

overvalues one species to the detriment of the whole habitat; it succeeds in sublimating the kind of ecosystemic approach that acknowledges how multiple species interact and cohabitate. The tiger, like the panda (the symbol of the World Wildlife Fund), is considered “charismatic megafauna,” which means it is a large animal species with widespread popular appeal that can be used as symbols to sway the public into donating to conservation efforts. By the 1990’s, this species-specific approach to tigers in India resulted in another significant decrease in population, largely due to the lack of understanding of how the tiger functions alongside other species in the ecosystem.

Indira Gandhi’s own writings about tigers provides background to this selective policy. In her passionate appeals for conservation, she wrote in a memoir style about her childhood brushes with tigers:

I espied a tiger—the largest I have seen—stepping on to the road. Hearing the car, he paused to look us up and down. So did we. After a while he crossed over but squatted behind a bush by the roadside. We drove as softly as possible and stayed alongside to see more of him. I was lost in admiration of his grace and the controlled strength of the muscles rippling under his splendid coat. (Ramesh)

She goes on to tell other stories about her experiences with tigers, illustrating a relationship to the tiger as an observer and admirer that clearly demonstrates an almost dramatic reverence. The tiger’s “grace,” “controlled strength,” and “splendid coat” hearken back to the nobility possessed by certain animals suggested by Viṣṇuśarman’s ancient text. This nobility is exactly what Gandhi capitalized on when she launched fundraising for Project Tiger, stating, “To us who have had occasion to have closer acquaintance with this magnificent beast, the tiger is not a symbol of fear but of grace and strength. He is king of the jungle. The world, not India alone, would be the poorer if this splendid creature were to become extinct” (Ramesh). This rhetoric of symbolism was quite successful in rallying a national regard for the animal. Furthermore, calling for the global recognition of India’s

tigers strengthened India's growing pride in them while also piggybacking off the world's already established fascination with charismatic megafauna, particularly large cats. In fact, the tiger's status as India's national animal is often invoked as justification for its protections, but the truth is the other way around; naming the tiger as the national animal was actually part of Gandhi's conservation push.

The eventual failures of tiger reserves have since sparked a wave of reconsiderations of the practice of overvaluing the tiger as a keynote species. And a recognition of human displacement as part of tiger reservation has been part of this re-envisioning; efforts to displace village populations from tiger reserves as part of Project Tiger ended up ignoring the wider human dimensions of wildlife conservation, especially the vexed issue of local rights. Rangarajan explains, "Overall, Gandhi was falling into that state machinery history – [...] not succeeding in working with locals, even though she vocally acknowledged and agonized over their plight. Equity was not achieved" ("Debate" 2392). Here Rangarajan refers to Gandhi's unwitting repetition of precolonial and colonial exclusions when it comes to tigers. The idea that villagers were in any way responsible for the decline in tiger population was absurd; this became even more clear in the 1990's when liberal commercial interests resurged and succeeded in lobbying for deregulation of many of the land and animal protections put in place by Gandhi's early government. When animal populations continued to decline as a result, locals rightly denounced what they saw as the government's "hypocrisy of over-managing their usage of the environment while opening these places up to industry" (2392).

Dismissing local, traditional, non-state-sanctioned human-animal relations born of cultural and socioeconomic conditions revealed itself to be a dismissal of the already well-integrated and practiced nature-oriented knowledge of these communities. What were (and are) clearly missing in state conservationist efforts, according to Jalais, were "ethnographies of human/non-human co-existences and conflicts" (*Forest* 217). This fraught policy history provides the backdrop for the

Marichjhapi incident, as narrated in *The Hungry Tide*. The government's official justification for the violence at Marichjhapi was the refugees' violation of Forest Laws. Debdatta Chowdhury explains:

In order to make the refugee resettlement at Marichjhapi look like an illegal intrusion, the Bengal government made use of the then ongoing Tiger Project campaign and declared Marichjhapi as a part of the Reserve Forest area. The Chief Minister declared that the occupation of Marichjhapi was illegal encroachment on Reserve Forest Land and on the World Wildlife Fund-sponsored Tiger Project. He declared that further attempts by the refugees to settle on the island would force the government to take 'strong action.' ("Space" 669)

My emphasis here is not necessarily on the political identities of the communities who resisted the state's bureaucratic approach to animal protections at the time, but rather on the clashing ideological representations of the animals that guided these conflicts, something *The Hungry Tide* helps elucidate. The novel presents local Marichjhapi human-tiger relations with an emphasis on the interconnections and overlaps of ecology, economy, emotion, ideology, myth, oral tradition, and kinship. In this way, a relational understanding of tigers (in relation to humans and nonhumans alike) is pitted against the state machinery of species selectivity that helped elide and disenfranchise local people.

However, at first, Ghosh establishes a selective reverence for tigers through allomorphic representations centered mainly on Kanai, who by his own admission is part of the oppressive class that supports tiger conservation at the expense of underserved human populations. Tigers haunt *The Hungry Tide*, only appearing in snippets and memories and as sounds and footprints, emphasizing the alterity and threat inherent in the animal's metaphorical distance from humans. In this way, the novel turns Berger's description of the human-animal power dynamic on its head; the perceived difference between tigers and humans helps empower the former over the latter. Before a tiger is ever seen in

the novel, it is heard. Kanai is reading in his late uncle's study when the light and generator go out, causing him to contemplate the distinct noises in the night that are then suddenly enveloped in a background of silence:

Each of these [sounds] made themselves heard briefly, only to vanish again into the creeping fog. It was in just this way that yet another sound, unfamiliar to Kanai, revealed itself, very briefly, and then died away again. The echo had carried across the water from such a distance that it would have been inaudible if the generator had been on; yet it bespoke a nakedness of assertion, a power and menace, that had no relationship to its volume. Small as it was, every other sound seemed to wither for an instant, only to be followed by a loud and furious outbreak of disquiet [...] (Ghosh 128)

This description of Kanai's first "encounter" with a tiger is marked by a distinct pause in the familiarity of human experience – the failure of the generator, the withering of recognizable sounds. And though Kanai does not physically encounter the tiger, nevertheless, the big cat makes its dominant presence felt over such a distance. This distance is metaphorically extended to the difference between Kanai's cosmopolitan status and the villagers as well, as it is Moyna, Fokir's wife, who registers the appropriate fear of the sound, while Kanai, on the other hand, does not seem to know how to react to it, so unfamiliar are both the sound and the threat it signifies.

However, the more direct human-tiger encounter in the novel problematizes this allomorphy by focusing on the integration of a tiger into local village trauma. Fokir and their other boatman, Horen, approach Horen's relatives' village to find that the villagers, acting as an angry mob wielding bamboo spears and fire, have a tiger trapped in a mud hut. Piya follows and is horrified at the scene. Like Kanai, her outsider status is made starkly clear, but this time in her registered sympathy for the animal. Kanai attempts to reason with her; the same tiger had been preying on the village for years and had killed two people. But Piya cannot fathom the animosity that

seems to define the villagers' relationship with the tiger. "This is an animal, Kanai," she says. "You can't take revenge on an animal" (242). Her ignorance is further highlighted when she assumes that Fokir will be on her side – on the animal's side. But Fokir approves of the mob, pulling Piya away violently when she tries to defend the tiger. The incident reinforces Piya's distance from Fokir and his way of life, and later, she and Kanai even describe the villagers by invoking a reference to Conrad's complex colonial/anti-colonial sentiments in *Heart of Darkness* through its shadowed subject, Kurtz:

'I keep seeing it again and again – the people, the flames. It was like something from some other time – before recorded history. I feel like I'll never be able to get my mind around the _'

Kanai prompted her as she faltered. "The horror?"

"The horror. Yes. I wonder if I'll ever be able to forget it [...] But for Fokir and Horen and the others it was just a part of everyday life, wasn't it?"

'I imagine they've learned to take it in their stride, Piya [...]'

'That's what haunts me,' said Piya. 'In a way that makes them a part of the horror too, doesn't it?'

This sentiment is cut short by Kanai, whose reading of Nirmal's journal has at this point instilled in him a new kind of understanding that still eludes Piya. He subsequently lectures Piya on the hypocrisy of condemning the villagers for attacking a tiger when the tiger had already attacked two of their own. He then articulates the real international network of discursive and material environmental injustice implied by Piya's "horror:" she is complicit, he says, "Because it was people like you [...] who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're

dying – after all, they are the poorest of the poor” (248-249). Here Kanai is reiterating Kusum’s criticism from his uncle’s report: ““Who are these people I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?”” (216-217). He is also directly calling out Project Tiger for its use of the charismatic cat to secure funding from abroad.

My point in recounting this incident in the novel, which has been analyzed many times, is not to reemphasize the novel’s obvious condemnation of so-called “objective” human rights activists who are systematically ignorant of what Kanai calls the “costs” paid by local people in the struggle to protect wildlife in impoverished areas, but rather to privilege the villagers’ approach to the tiger as decidedly empowering for both the tiger and themselves. The villagers see the tiger as an equal, a viable enemy, not a thing to be either coddled or unthinkingly poached. Their ritualistic anger killing reflects their respect and real embedded material relationship with tigers. Ironically, their anger invokes shades of what Jalais calls the “elected kinship” of the Sundarbans; the inhabitants believe that the environment “brings about an element of ‘complicity’ between people and tigers and, by extension, between people and people. This connivance is expressed in the way tigers are seen to be invested with human attributes (emotions, feelings, thoughts) and in how the Sundarbans islanders see themselves as sharing the ‘bad-temperedness’ of tigers” (10). The incident also reflects a direct rejection of state forest policies; according to the same policies that justified the Marichjhapi massacre, killing a tiger on a tiger reserve was strictly forbidden and brought harsh punishments, and the villagers viewed this as a forced, state-sanctioned interruption of their “natural” relationship with the tigers, an interruption of the life system of the Sundarbans (Jalais).

Added to this is the novel’s emphasis on how tigers observe humans, rather than the inverse – again, a reversal of Berger’s notion of gaze. The power of the tigers’ gaze, it is revealed, is exactly what makes them so dangerous: to be seen by a man-eater is to be its next victim. Kanai’s aunt,

Nilima, explains the various strategies locals had used to outsmart the cats over time, one of which directly reflected a sort of battle of gaze between the tigers and the humans:

[W]hat if people wore masks on the backs of their heads? Tigers always attacked humans from behind, the reasoning went, so they would shy away if they found themselves looking at a pair of painted eyes. This idea was taken up with great enthusiasm. Many masks were made and distributed [...] The tigers, alas, refused to cooperate: “Evidently they had no difficulty in discriminating between masks and faces.” (200-201)

This distance in both perspective and experience is key to the tigers’ power in the text; they are seen as agents and equals to humans, while maintaining a sense of alterity and awe. Thus, the villagers’ killing of the tiger, which goes beyond subsistence, beyond economy, beyond population control, but is rather like a tribalism in which the tiger is an opposing tribe, functions as exemplary of the kind of deep embeddedness of human-animal relations in the tide country, a relatedness that the national and international approaches to them do not reflect.

The third tiger encounter that follows close behind the killing incident is possibly an imaginary one, but it also combines a gaze reversal emphasized by the tigers’ powers of observation. When Fokir and Kanai, presumably competing for Piya’s affections, go to explore another small island called Garjontola, Fokir teases Kanai, daring him to look for what he claims are tiger tracks in the mud. When Kanai becomes angry with Fokir for what he assumes to be a tasteless game, Kanai gestures wildly and falls in the mud. Fokir attempts to help, but Kanai yells at him to leave him be, and Fokir complies. Angry and hurt, Kanai stumbles to a clearing and feels – then sees – a tiger’s gaze on him:

[I]t was as if his mind, in its panic, had emptied itself of language. [...] The words he had been searching for, the euphemisms that were the sources of his panic, had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood. It was

an artifact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely.

He opened his eyes and there it was, directly ahead, a few hundred feet away. (272)

This description of language falling away to pure experience, specifically of fear, hearkens back to the purity of anger of the village mob. Kanai's knowledge of tiger stories, to which he could not up until now relate, are decidedly overtaken by the material presence of a real tiger (at least what he perceives as real), and it is only with this material (or perceived material) encounter that Kanai is privy to the actual experience that conditions the area's human-tiger relations: a locally rooted system (Jalais) that respects the importance of both tigers and humans as different parts of a wider environmental system.

The novel gradually establishes this more relational view of tigers in deference to the wider ecosystem, partially through these encounters, and partially through Kanai's readings of Nirmal's journal, which the novel alternates with the principal narrative. Nirmal is described as an idealist whose Marxist political views were overshadowed by his respect for the interconnected nature of all things; "It was very important for him [Nirmal] to believe that he was a historical materialist," Kanai tells Piya at one point, which for him meant "that everything which existed was interconnected: the trees, the sky, the weather, people, poetry, science, nature. He hunted down facts in the way a magpie collects shiny things. Yet when he strung them all together, somehow they did become stories – of a kind" (233). Nirmal's notebook is essentially an ode to this idealist vision, while also recognizing the inability for this vision to come to fruition through Marxist ideology. Of course, the journal is also Ghosh's way of representing a worldview of a people who have remained elided in historical documents without unfairly appropriating their voices. The failure of language and understanding is a prominent theme throughout the novel, as the pointed representative of the tide country population, Fokir, (Kusum's son) remains mysterious and, by and large silent. In this way, Ghosh

establishes the subalternity of the population, while still providing their alternative ideology toward the tigers and a written account of the environmental injustice inflicted upon them.

Human-Dolphin Relations: Myth and Representation

Though dolphins are often also considered charismatic megafauna due to their typically childlike, seemingly smiling features and their penchant for play, the Irawaddy dolphin (also called orcaella) does not appear in Indian conservation policy history near as prominently as the Bengal tiger. The Irawaddy is endangered, mostly due to overfishing and climate shifts that impact the delicate tide balance on which the dolphins rely for their feeding patterns. But there is considerable lack of public research about the species, resulting in a much smaller scale of conservation effort, and Irawaddy dolphins do not appear in much of the documentation about Marichjhapi or the Sundarbans in general. This is partially due to the difficulty of studying river dolphins; Williams, et. al. report that there is a “lack of reliable information on abundance or trends” in river dolphin behavior, “resulting from difficulty in designing surveys for cryptic species in geographically complex habitats” (“Searching” 136). The Sundarbans is arguably one of the most complex habitats on the planet, and these research difficulties are something Ghosh captures well through Piya’s meticulous and contingent journey in which she partially has to rely on so-called crude measuring methods with the help of Fokir’s local expertise.

It is curious, then, why Piya’s search for orcaella in *The Hungry Tide* is considerably more prominent than the representative human-tiger encounters, when tiger conservation was the catalyst for both wider animal protections in India and for the Marichjhapi massacre. In the novel, Kanai expresses his confusion and disappointment when he finally sees the Irawaddy dolphin, balking at the orcaella’s “pig-like” features and intimating that Piya’s intensive search had built his expectations but turned out to be anticlimactic. “I just can’t believe we’ve come all this way to look at these

ridiculous porcine things,” he exclaims (Ghosh 251). “If you’re going to risk jail for an animal, couldn’t you have picked something with a little more sex appeal? Or any appeal, for that matter” (251). But Piya’s answer establishes the novel’s approach to the Irawaddy dolphin: “Orcaella have a lot of appeal, Kanai, [...] You just have to have the patience to discover it” (251). Kanai and Piya’s debate reflects a phenomenon called the “Bambi effect,” a term that refers to the perceptions of certain animals like dolphins and deer as “cute” or “adorable,” which aids in their conservation efforts. The inverse effect is a lack of empathy for the suffering of organisms that are considered ugly or otherwise objectionable, such as spiders or fungi. Having established that the Irawaddy dolphin was never going to have the “sex appeal” that the tiger does for conservation purposes, Ghosh then builds the reader’s affinity for the “ridiculous porcine things” over the course of the novel through Piya’s fascination and by infusing his descriptions of the dolphins with magical, liminal qualities, which complement Fokir’s spiritual and territorial kinship with them. What Kanai perceives as ugly and strange, Piya sees as a tragic figure undergoing forced transformation under changing socioeconomic conditions. This is all in service of representing an animal that is at once integral, to the cultural and ecological environment of the Sundarbans, and yet underrepresented and underappreciated.

Orcaella have had a distinctly mutualistic relationship with the fisher people of the Sundarbans, existing in cooperation through mutually beneficial activities. Local fishers report that they would work with the dolphins by calling out to them during a catch, and in response, the dolphins would drive fish into the fishers’ nets. The fishers would then reward the dolphins with a portion of the catch (Stacey and Arnold). The novel reflects this symbiosis through Fokir; he and his son are engaged in this activity when Piya first encounters them, and it is Fokir who always knows where to find the few dolphins who are left in the maze of canals. Piya remarks that he seems to have an intimate relationship with them and that they reflect his slow and methodical lifestyle, which

she perceives as an unexpected parallel to her own scientific endeavors. However, historically, the Irawaddy's arguable status as a "companion species" in the Sundarbans began to change in the late 20th century when fishing in the area began to grow and evolve. Gill nets changed into more harsh materials, dwindling profits reduced the incentive for fishers to cut their nets to save trapped dolphins, blast fishing replaced traditional net fishing in certain areas, and increased tourism led to heavier boat traffic and subsequent pollution. Perhaps to maintain the serene image of Fokir's integrated relationship, Ghosh pulls focus away from fishing in order to blame changing tides and the value of dolphin oil on the black market as prominent causes of the Irawaddy's endangerment. Piya recalls her "meeting" of a similar river dolphin in Cambodia: Piya was taken with the animal, whom she names "Mr. Sloane," becoming hyper-involved with its movements, until it finally disappeared into the black-market wildlife trade. The dolphin had swum inland with floodwaters in the rainy season but had then been trapped when the irrigation ditches ran dry. Piya explains that this stranding of Mr. Sloane was a "harbinger of catastrophe" (Ghosh 252) for the rest of the species.³²

Ghosh's insistence on elevating the human-dolphin symbiosis through Fokir is accompanied by the novel's heavy reliance on the Bon Bibi myth, which mixes the socio-material companionability of Irawaddy dolphins with Indian forest mythology in portraying them as Bon Bibi's benevolent messengers. In the novel, Nirmal's journal recounts that as a little boy, Fokir recites perfectly a religious pamphlet called *Bon Bibir Karamoti orthat Bon Bibi Joburanama* ("The Miracle of Bon Bibi or The Narrative of Her Glory"). According to Jalais, Bon Bibi is a forest goddess and "interstitial being," who reflects a blend of Hindu and Muslim mythology and acts as a "forest super-power who

³² Years after the publication of *The Hungry Tide*, efforts began to appear in multiple countries in the region to protect river dolphins like the Irawaddy. Bangladesh began the Cetacean Diversity Project, which resulted in the establishment of numerous dolphin sanctuaries in the Sundarbans in 2011. Still, like other conservation efforts in the Indian subcontinent, there remains controversy about how efficient, equitable, and effective these sanctuaries have been.

extends her protection over individuals of all communities equally” (*Forest* 69). Unlike figures in the prolific *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*, Bon Bibi’s is a decidedly local myth specific to the Sundarbans. Bon Bibi is a part of a very old literature from the Kolkata region called *bot-tola* literature. In the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, Hindi pamphlets were published detailing local folklore from different parts of Bengal, in which Bon Bibi and Dakkhin Ray were detailed as local mythical beings. Fokir’s memorization of the narrative pamphlet reflects a deep cultural history within Fokir that seems to be awakened when Piya first shows him her Irawaddy dolphin flashcards. His extensive affinity and knowledge is especially intriguing because of his illiteracy; “Suddenly a thought struck me,” reports Nirmal in his journal, “I said to Kusum, ‘But you told me Fokir can neither write nor read.’ [...] She smiled and patted him on the head. ‘It’s all inside here. I’ve told it to him so often that the words have become a part of him’” (Ghosh 206). Though presented as a written artifact, Fokir’s knowledge of Bon Bibi is a result of a distinctly folk and oral tradition.

In Bon Bibi’s origin story, the goddess is abandoned as a child in the forest and is raised by a doe. Later, she travels to the Sundarbans, which is under the control of a demon king named Dakkhin Rai. Dakkhin Rai takes the tigers and spirits of the area under his control and urges them to “terrorise and feed on humans,” breaking the previous “trust that had existed between tigers and humans” (Jalais 70). Bon Bibi, who represents the people, confronts Dakkhin Rai and ends up killing his mother, Narayani, in battle, after which Bon Bibi graciously concedes half of the forest kingdom to Dakkhin Rai. When recounting some of this to Piya, Fokir explains that the Irawaddy dolphins are Bon Bibi’s messengers and that he trusts them completely. Through a translator, he reveals:

[T]he dolphins who live in these waters, I knew about them too, even before I came here.

These animals were also in my mother’s stories: they were Bon Bibi’s messengers, she used to say, and they brought her news of the rivers and khals [scoundrels]. They came here during the bhata [ebb tide]...so they could tell Bon Bibi about everything they had seen. During the

jowar [flood tide] they scattered to the ends of the forest and became her eyes and her ears.

(Ghosh 307)

Thus, Bon Bibi is the key to Ghosh's focus on tigers and dolphins as the principle animals that roam mysteriously throughout the Sundarbans, affecting the local ecology and culture respectively. The inhabited part of the Sundarbans is said to be protected by Bon Bibi, while the deep forest belongs to Dakkhin Rai, and the tigers are still at his command. In this way, Bon Bibi and Dakkhin Rai represent a balance of peace and violence as projected by the two animal species.

Another key to the myth is that this balance is said to inspire a distinct environmental ethics of sustainability and equitability in the region. According to the myth, once Bon Bibi comes to share the forest with Dakkhin Rai, she reportedly tells humans to "consider the forest as being only for those who are poor and for those who have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive. This is the 'agreement' between non-humans and humans that permits them both to depend on the forest and yet respect the others' needs" (Jalais 73). Therefore, hoarding is culturally frowned upon in the Sundarbans; if a fishing vessel or forager acquires more than what is immediately needed, the fishermen are to distribute the acquired food to the community or risk bringing bad luck upon themselves. In "Wild Fictions," Ghosh explains this tradition:

In a region where several hundred people are annually killed by predators, no local person will ever venture into the forest without invoking the protection of Bon Bibi. But Bon Bibi's indulgence is not easily granted, it must be earned by the observance of certain rules that derive from the parables contained in the legend. Take for instance the belief that the wild parts of the forest are the domain of Dokkhin Rai: the corollary of this is the idea that to leave signs of human penetration is to invite retribution from the demon. (Ghosh)

Though in material reality, overfishing and other "signs of human penetration" persist, in the novel, Fokir seems to embody the sustainability projected by the traditional cultural myth, particularly when

juxtaposed with the corrupt police that attempt to swindle and abuse him due to his presence in legally protected waters, once again a reenactment of the inequities of state manifestations of environmental conservation.

Ghosh's rendering of the Bon Bibi myth as combining the magical with the material human-dolphin relations also evokes wider transcultural societal tropes about cetaceans (dolphins and whales) that emphasize alterity and liminality. "So much like us in some ways and yet 'uncannily other,'" says Jonathan Steinwand, "cetaceans have come to represent both the human animal and a mysteriously 'fascinating alterity' beyond terrestrial knowledge" ("Home" quoting Buell, 182). In various cultural traditions, whales and dolphins have been represented as noble savages, sacred prophets, tricksters, and even cyborgs. For its part, the novel takes great pains to draw out Piya's search for and observations of the Irawaddy dolphins in ways that heighten their mysteriousness. At first, this seems to reinforce Berger's discussion of gaze; hours, days, and weeks are described as Piya searches for the orcaella, and then when she finally finds them, she measures their movements slowly and with great detail. But in their own way, the dolphins, like the tigers, seem also to reduce the power of this human gaze in lieu of an embedded relatedness that, though material, also produces an affect of wonderment. First, Nirmal recounts his spotting of the dolphins in his journal:

Suddenly, [...] I turned around in astonishment, just in time to see a patch of black skin disappearing into the water. [...] All the time our boat was at that spot, the creatures kept breaking the water around us. What held them there? What made them linger? I could not imagine. Then there came a moment when one of them broke the surface with its head and looked right at me. Now I saw why Kusum found it so easy to believe that these animals were something other than what they were. For where she had seen a sign of Bon Bibi, I saw instead the gaze of the Poet. (Ghosh 194-195).

Here we can relate the “gaze of the poet” with that uncanny knowledge to which Steinwand refers, a way of knowing and interpreting that fascinates. Similarly, when Piya and Fokir finally find the dolphins’ secret pool, Piya’s attention is primarily on how they communicate with one another through vibrations in the water: “She imagined the animals circling drowsily, listening to echoes pinging in the water, painting pictures in three dimensions – images that only they could decode. The thought of experiencing your surroundings in that way never failed to fascinate her: the idea that to ‘see’ was also to ‘speak’ to others of your kind, where simply to exist was to communicate” (132). This melding of sight and speech as a communication that is felt and lived humbles Piya, defamiliarizing her own gaze, which is as much figured as distinctly human as scientific and Euro-American.

The novel’s descriptions of the dolphins then continue to become increasingly awe-inspiring. Piya wonders at the orcaella’s migration patterns by comparing them to “their Mekong cousins,” and asks herself, “Had they found a novel way of adapting their behavior to this tidal ecology?” (104). Later, Piya listens to Fokir hum and describes the moment as a great “happiness” and a “magical hour,” with the “serene sound” of the dolphins all around them (131). Still further, when recounting the harmony between the dolphins and the locals, the narrator exclaims, “There was truly no limit, it seemed, to the cetacean gift for springing surprises” (140). These descriptions of the dolphins as novel, facilitating happiness, magic, and serenity, and bestowing their surprising nature on Piya and Fokir together create a combination of kinship and fascination, companionability with alterity. Both Piya and Fokir experience different levels of both material and spiritual connection with the Irawaddy dolphins that in some ways mimic the local kinship with tigers, and in some ways differ sharply. Certainly, the tigers are terrifying while the dolphins are pleasant and helpful, but both are importantly interconnected and embedded with the local community. Kinship, the novel seems to suggest, cannot be formed in isolation. The dolphins and tigers, like Bon Bibi and Dakkhin Rai,

represent a harmony, a balanced interconnectedness; both work on a level of the unseen, and yet both are always present in the innerworkings of the Sundarbans ecosystem. But this is a balance that is threatened by various interconnected forces, both as represented in the novel and in reality: modernity and overpopulation, bureaucratic interventions, global networks of both trade and protection, and an overall lack of respect for local knowledge and the inclusion of local humans as part of the ecosystem.

Conclusion

Through Fokir and her journey into the Sundarbans, Piya realizes that the orcaella she has come to observe are, firstly, not an isolated species in danger and in need of protection, but rather a vital part of a larger ecosystem in danger, and in which humans are also a vital part, and also threatened. Secondly, Piya's realization is made possible by a lived experience, a sharing of knowledge and a reversal of gaze that reveals Piya to also be part of something larger than herself and her studies; her science, also, cannot be performed in isolation. And thirdly, while the Bengali tiger and its communal significance seem to drive a wedge between Piya and Fokir, the dolphins seem to draw them closer to one another both literally and figuratively, partially as a function of their unique form of intelligence, which helps Piya recognize and embrace her newfound proximity and intimacy with Fokir and, by extension, the ecosystem. Also important is Kusum's articulation of a traditional, ostensibly "natural" approach to life through integration with the environment. This allows the novel to elevate the real history of the Marichjhapi settlers' integration with the Sundarbans ecosystem, particularly its tigers, an integration that is wholly different than the state's representation of the settlers as somehow encroaching on the tiger habitat. "[T]his is how humans have always lived," Kusum reminds us. According to Janais:

The Sundarbans [...] has two parallel but segregated histories, one relatively well-endowed relating to wildlife; the other, rather sparse, concerning the region's human inhabitants and their transformation of a forested landscape into a cultivated one [...] Present-day studies of the Sundarbans follow the lopsided structure of their nineteenth-century precedents very closely: fascination with the natural aspects of the Sundarbans but an unsettling silence on the social and human facets of the region. (*Forest* 5)

This is decidedly a non-ecological, non-relational, and even ahistorical way to approach the area, since, as I have already discussed in previous chapters, humans are an integral part of natural history and cannot be readily divorced from the environments in which they live, dwell, and work. Indeed, the settlers on Marichjhapi were already thinking of themselves as interrelated with the environment when they were besieged, leaning heavily on the myth of the forest goddess Bonbibì, who professes environmental balance and harmony.

What *The Hungry Tide* gives its readers through its animal representations is a sense of the scales of misunderstanding of human-animal relations that pervade contemporary approaches to conservation. The forest department remains a constant hindrance in the novel, while the intimate encounters between humans and animals are instructive, in both a mythical and material sense. What is important here is that both the tigers and dolphins, though distant and largely unseen in the novel, are nevertheless an important part of both the ecosystem and the cultural mythos of the area. Like the villagers with the tiger, Fokir relates to the dolphins with a respectful intimacy that reflects their material interconnection and mutual lived experience. Unfortunately, like the dolphins and the tigers, Fokir is also endangered, and the outlook for him and fisher folk like him is not good. But the novel expresses that understanding these relationships with the two primary species of the novel does not require metonymy. Instead, they require a reverence for the ecosystem and their respective parts within it, parts of the ebbs and flows of daily life in the Sundarbans. The animals, says Nirmal in his

journal, quoting Rilke, “already know by instinct / we’re not comfortably at home / in our translated world” (Ghosh 172). Tigers and dolphins are both part of the landscape and also actors within it. They are privy to the constant, violent change of the tide country, as well as the constant, violent change of history and modernity. They draw the curiosity of the west, but this is not enough to define them. Instead, they dwell somewhere beyond national and international relations, an existence that above all reflects a symbiosis with local humans.

The novel teaches us that we can learn from the Sundarbans that humans are inevitably part of “nature” and cannot be divorced. The only separations are imaginary and discursive, not material, and it is time that we make sure our discursive trajectories of our environmental relations match our material ones. Above all, the tigers and dolphins are not caricatures in this text, nor are they metaphorical tools to be used and abused for mythical or historical purposes. They exist as functions of myth and history, but they also have their own trajectories, lives unknown to the characters in the book and the readers. Their large absence in the novel highlights this separate, unknown trajectory. They represent an “environment” that is not so much a thing or set of things but rather a process of co-constitutive existence, encouraging a relational approach to animals that reflects cyclical, symbiotic possibility.

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CHAPTER 4

Poverty and Agricultural Insecurity in Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*

“People of Mumbai, meet the people who feed you. Or better yet, people of Mumbai, come out and feed the people who feed you,” begins Rohan Venkataramakrishnan in his 2018 *Scroll.in* article on the Kisan Long March, a large scale movement in which 40-50,000 farmers and supporters marched from Nashik to Mumbai, a total of 180km over six days, to protest the failure of the Indian government to implement a loan waiver scheme for much-needed debt relief. The promised scheme followed a decades-long increase in farmer suicides, particularly in Maharashtra, due to crippling debt resulting from failing crops, reduction of agricultural subsidies, and divestment of land for industrial purposes. Westerners have mainly learned about the “farmer suicide crisis,” as it has come to be known, through environmental activist Vandana Shiva’s passionate and public rally cries against agri-tech giant Monsanto. Monsanto’s monopoly on the Indian seed market is highly controversial, as the company has supposedly pushed unsuccessful genetically modified cotton seed where it isn’t wanted, plunging thousand of small farmers into debt. The truth is much more complicated; Monsanto’s evils are many, but their GM seed has actually been consistently embraced by Indian farmers. Rather, Monsanto, Shiva, forest rights, farmer suicides, climate change, and economic reform are all wrapped up in a historical knot twisting back to the Green Revolution, resulting in a food security issue urgent enough to rally one of the biggest peasant marches of the last decade.

When Venkataramakrishnan gestures to the “people who feed” Mumbai, he is referring to farmers who grow commercial crops for the country, a sector of Indian labor that has dropped in profits over the past few decades to an alarming degree. A crisis in agriculture has far-reaching implications. “It is argued that the consequence of agricultural crisis in India is very vast and likely to

hit all the other sectors and the national economy in several ways,” says Albert Christopher Dhas. Specifically, “it has adverse effects on food supply, prices of foodgrains, cost of living, health and nutrition, poverty, employment, labour market, land loss from agriculture and foreign exchange earnings. In sum, [...] the agricultural crisis [affects] a majority of the people in India and the economy as a whole in the long run” (13). However, the Kisan Long March and other movements like it also includes thousands of small subsistence farmers, Adivasis from scheduled tribes who farm for personal consumption, not for commercial purposes. The invocation of the “people who feed” Mumbai, though well-intentioned, is a flattening of the differentiated agrarian sector, where there are historically different issues faced by different farming communities. Adivasis are often flattened out of agrarian considerations in India, though they make up a sizable percentage of farmer suicides due to a history of forest clearance, repeated displacement, and water shortages (all discussed in the previous chapters). However, the wider kisan (farmer) community itself recognizes the intimate relationships and the need for alliances between failing commercial crops, the lack of land rights for Adivasi subsistence farmers, and other issues, which is why Adivasi rights was one of the primary goals of the Kisan Long March.

This chapter considers the intersections of contemporary agricultural and agrarian issues in India in the context of Adivasi food and land insecurity through a reading of Mahasweta Devi’s well-known collection of stories, *Imaginary Maps* (1987). Mahasweta doubtless remains the leading non-tribal voice concerning tribal issues in India; her breadth of fiction and essays are the most well-known literature both in India and the West on the subjects of Adivasis and Adivasi resistance to land-grabbing, displacement, gendered discrimination, and other exploitations. This is not least due to Gayatri Spivak’s translations and critiques of Mahasweta’s work in the 1990’s and early 2000’s; Spivak translated *Imaginary Maps* in 1993, five years after its first publication in Bengali, and famously included a slew of paratextual material, including a conversation between the author and translator, a

Translator's Preface, and an appendix containing Spivak's commentary on the collection. For this reason, most critics consider Spivak's role in bringing Mahasweta's work to the western academy as an important part of reading the work itself. *Imaginary Maps* contains two stories and a novella, all in their own ways about tribal land insecurity connected to a longer history of colonization and decolonization and a deeper history of geologic change. This chapter will analyze the three narratives in turn - "The Hunt," "Douloti the Bountiful," and *Pterodactyl, Puran Sayah, and Pirtha* - while considering the larger environmental and political histories they invoke, particularly in terms of agriculture. In particular, this chapter is interested in how tribal agricultural insecurity is connected to wider Indian land issues. I will first provide a brief discussion of agricultural activities and policies that greatly influenced the contemporary agrarian crisis, followed by targeted readings of the narratives.

Agriculture in Contemporary India

Soil and land are two concepts that together are essential parts of the basic conceptualization of the mother Earth in Indian spiritual and cultural traditions. Nature, in the sense of *prakṛti*, refers to a primary essence, a whole and also the parts of the whole, and a general materiality. *Prakṛti* is an ontological principle, and soil, land, and earth are all important in their fruit-bearing capacity, which subsequently sustains the world (Baindur). Plowing, irrigation, and crop cultivation are prominent images in Vedic literature, and in Indian poetry, landscape is a primary theme, not only in a pastoral sense but also in a metaphysical and biogeographical sense; soil is said to be spiritually pure, and land is often thought to be divided into four or five types, or landscapes, which help classify not just the physical but also the moods and spiritual aspects of the terrain (roughly: hill, field, pasture, seashore, wasteland (Baindur 112)). Related to this is the idea of *sthala*, "a terrestrial-linked term and a shared cultural kind" that can be translated as sacred landscapes, or sacred places where the sacred

boundaries of a place are as amorphous as the landscape they designate” (127). In this conceptualization, the land surface itself carries sacred significance, which then includes everything on and in that surface, including humans and human-made structures. Agriculture, in this formulation, is fundamentally sacred in that it is a cultivation and celebration of soil/land, which is already sacred. Much like a temple built is considered sacred by being created on a holy place, the mythos of geography is that it is already sacred, and humans and human activity are then part of that spiritual significance.

This is how land is also intimately related to pilgrimage. Diana Eck shows how the imagination of India as a place is firmly rooted in the shared meanings created by geographical landscape, each place anchored by a myth or story, and connected in turn to another place, myth or story. “The storied landscape of India enlivens every hill, mountain, city and river with the presence of Gods and saints,” she explains, “an environment where mythological tales are firmly grounded in the physical geography of the country for pilgrims to traverse” (X). Eck’s study is a useful reminder of the fact that national identity is actively constructed by people through their everyday experiences and, more importantly, their understanding of the spaces they inhabit. In fact, she maintains that since the time of the *Mahabharata*, the entire Indian subcontinent, “from the Himalaya Mountains that stretch across the north to the Malaya Mountains that provide the backbone of the peninsular south and into the sea at Kanyakumari” (x), has often been imagined as a single land, despite various political boundary-making enterprises. “Land” here is partially a practice in imagined landscape but also must inevitably be tied back to actual land, or earth, which includes dirt, soil, and crops. Land is certainly an active participant in this mythos, as well as an inevitable participant in the modernity that reshapes it.

It is no wonder that this soil/land/geography mythos is so prominent; scientists and historians alike have confirmed that agriculture was widespread in the Indus River Valley from some

of the earliest records, far earlier than other regions across the globe. Much later, in the pre-British period, agriculture was still the main occupation of most of India. Both population and agricultural production grew under the Mughal Empire, including wheat, rice, barley, and cotton. Indian peasant farmers were highly skilled compared to those in other regions, and, though viciously taxed by the Mughal land revenue system, villages were relatively self-contained and self-sufficient in terms of food crop (Guha). Farms were small with small holdings. The most significant change under colonization was the Zamindari system, in which the British introduced a landlord class whose sole purpose was to obtain monetary gains from the land. Previously self-sufficient peasant farmers became landless tenants paying rent to the British Raj through the zamindars (landlords) and subject to eviction and debt. Food crops were sent to market rather than put back into villages, and Indian farmers were forced to produce cash crops to feed British industries. “During the later part of 19th century, the production of commercial crops increased by 85 percent and that of food crops fell by 7 percent,” reports Harish Sairam. “This had a devastating effect on the rural economy and often took the shape of famines” (“What were”...) Furthermore, when the world wars took hold of Europe, food shortages in India dramatically worsened, as they did around the globe. In 1926, the British appointed a Royal Commission on Agriculture to address some of these problems, and by 1942, a Department of Food was created to try to ensure food security.

With independence came a re-designation of the Department of Food to the Ministry of Food, which worked together in various degrees with the Ministry of Agriculture throughout the following decades. Famine became increasingly common in independent India due to a lack of self-sufficiency inherited from the British Raj, and everywhere Indians were still facing food shortages, especially wheat. Suddenly, internal Indian migrations started to encroach on already tenuous tribal lands. In his study of the Wayanad district in the northeast part of Kerala, Edwin Belton Moore documents continued tribal land alienation in the early independence era, “when settlers from the

plains moved in on [Adivasis'] ancestral lands that were fertile (Suchitra, 2013). The good-natured Adivasis shared their land with the settlers and the settlers took advantage of the fact that they did not have documentation proving that their ancestral lands belonged to them" (x). Finally, in the 1960's, came India's Green Revolution, the primary goal of which was food security. This was achieved through multiple five-year schemes in agriculture, always attempting to alleviate insecurity through a focus on agricultural technology investment and industrial development to improve the national economy. The Green Revolution did drastically increase food security, but as previous chapters have addressed, there were several stark problems it created, including regional income inequalities, especially felt by Adivasi farmers. In fact, by the 1980's, the Green Revolution started producing diminishing returns, but policies failed to recognize this or come up with alternatives.

The 1980's and 90's witnessed the first contemporary farmers' movements in India led by an agricultural sector that wanted more control over agritech decisions and industry trends. But these protestors were primarily a class of propertied farmers produced by previous land reforms. The movements put forth a very stark rural vs. urban agenda, a challenge to the Westernized elite of urban India. However, these movements elided marginalized Adivasi farmers and the agrarian working class that had also sprouted from the Green Revolution. A dark undercurrent of these movements was increasing loss of tribal land; in 1982, an Integrated Tribal Development Programme reported that between 1960 and 1977, approximately 10,000 acres of land had been grabbed from tribals in one region of Kerala alone (x). But eventually, further increases in droughts, lack of agrarian aid, excessive development, and food insecurity created a situation in which the differentiated agricultural communities in India began to view one another as allies. Problems and policies enacted in the early 2000's, including seed, fertilizer, and machinery monopolies by western corporations (like Monsanto) and credit restraint under bank reform led India to its present farmer suicide crisis. Now, large-scale movements like the Kisan Long March combine food insecurities and

tribal rights under the same agrarian banner, a diverse movement that is showing representation from small and marginal farmers, landless laborers, Adivasis in various sectors, and even rural youth who have relocated to urban centers.

In terms of Adivasi farmers, Belton Moore comes to the simple and obvious conclusion that tribals would be able to be more food secure if they had more land. “In other words,” he says, “if the Adivasis had a sufficient amount of land they would be able to grow their own food instead of depending on other sources, thus becoming food secure” (x). An Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme was enacted in 2008, which enabled small and marginal farmers to restructure their loans and receive government subsidies, and it was also supposed to address Adivasi land rights. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, farmers continue to protest the lack of implementation of these promises. “This year’s Union Budget was billed as a document aimed at addressing this crisis,” explains Venkataramakrishnan, “yet a look at the actual allocations suggests it does not do enough and what it does do will not have an effect anytime soon” (x). Indeed, in Belton Moore’s interviews in Kerala, a number of Adivasi farmers reported that they were never allotted the lands promised to them under several government schemes, and some felt forced to sell what they did have to non-tribal people at unfair prices (x). In short, there is still not enough investment in the agricultural sector in India, and like in many other situations, Adivasis are the most at risk. At the same time, there is currently a much more diverse farmer vocalization of protest and change than ever before.

Imaginary Maps

Mahasweta Devi’s sobering collection of stories in *Imaginary Maps* shines a light on the poverty and food insecurity of tribal people in India and puts forth an ecological conscience of crisis regarding transforming Indian land and landscapes. All three stories are set in the tribal areas of

eastern India, with tribal people as protagonists. When the first story, “The Hunt,” opens, the Oraon community has already suffered great losses of land, resources, and means of labor, as well as self-sovereignty and subjectivity under powerful hegemonic influences, including colonialism and a lecherous landlord class. Though “The Hunt” is not about agriculture per se, the story poignantly illustrates how tribal land loss results in a lack of placedness - an obscurity of land, and therefore of people. This obscurity is introduced with the first lines of the story: “The place is on the Gomo-Daltonganj line. *Trains* stopped at this *station* once upon a time. The expense of having *trains* stop was perhaps too much. Now one sees a stray cow or a goat in the *station* room, in the residential *quarters* and the porters’ shanties” (Devi 1). Here Mahasweta establishes that the story is about a place that has been, for all intents and purposes, stricken from the map, and therefore lacks designation as a place. Trains no longer stop there because the place is not worth it, and the place lacks worth because trains do not stop there. The people are, officially, not worth the train stop.

A lot of words are spent on the train and the station, both italicized, according to Spivak, to indicate the use of English in the original. This is important because the lack of train makes the area ripe for contractors and brokers who want to profit off the village’s main export, timber from the local Sal trees. Afraid of not having any buyers at all, the villagers harvest the Sal and sell to anyone for any price, even if it is less than its worth. Again, for land, place, and people, obscurity likens to worthlessness. To make matters worse, the story reveals that, “Nobody around here obeys the land *ceiling* laws. All the far-flung bungalows of the old *timber planters* have large tracts of attached land” (6). This reflects the landlessness of the tribals compared to the lawlessness of the landed class, which puts them at the mercy of these wealthier landowners who are more likely to work with lecherous brokers and contractors that descend to exploit the land and labor all around them. In other words, rules that are meant to protect tribal communities are bypassed, aiding to the vicious cycle of obscurity.

At the heart of the story is Mary Oraon, a proud and willful tribal girl who works as a fruit picker for the middle-class Prasad family. Though she doesn't seem to quite fit into her own community because of her hybrid identity (her father was an Australian soldier), Mary ends up charged with a cultural mythography of sorts, acting as both cultural safeguard for the village and catalyst for change. Mary works hard and takes advantage of a rule that says she is entitled to the extra mahua fruit that falls from the Prasad trees:

Everyone is afraid of Mary. Mary cleans house and pastures cattle with her inviolate constitution, her infinite energy, and her razor-sharp mind. On the field she lunches on fried corn. She stands and picks fruit and oversees picking. [...] It is Mary who picks the fruit of the four mahua trees on the Prasad property. No villager has been able to touch the fruit even in jest. Mary has instantly raised her machete. This is hers by right. This is why she works so hard for no wages at the Prasad house. (4-5)

The worth of the mahua fruit is explained in scenes that take place in the local Tohri market, where people buy mahua for a wide variety of purposes. Mary sells her carefully guarded fruit in order to save up enough money to marry a young local man, Jalim. Her level head and willingness to make her own money for her dowry sets her apart, on top of her intimidating demeanor and oft-raised machete. Mary is also the only tribal villager who sees through predatory contractor, Tehsildar Singh, the primary antagonist of the story.

Tehsildar Singh is a typical middle man reflective of the exploitative moneylender class that colonialism and the Green Revolution helped engender. Singh comes to town to profit on the village's Sal trees, and he uses shrewd business skills and bribery to secure local laborers in order to fell the Sal trees quickly and cheaply. The story announces him thus: "Tehsildar Singh descends with Prasadji's son, and Mary's life is troubled. A storm gathers in Kuruda's quiet and impoverished existence" (7). Singh approaches the local landowners, like the Prasad family whom Mary works for,

with his promise of profits in return for their Sal trees, and he approaches the village elders requesting use of tribal laborers for felling the trees. But like other contractors, he pays just enough to make the work enticing, but not enough to bring them out of poverty. It is this poverty that convinces the village elders to allow Sal exploitation from these kinds of contractors, yet it is these kinds of contractors that help keep the village in poverty. Singh proceeds to bribe everyone with any shred of power. He brings with him fast cars and trucks that boast his wealth and influence and tells the village elders that his wages will make the villagers able to eat plenty. “The elders’ heads turned with the trucks’ speed and efficiency of fast work. So they couldn’t think that the contractor’s words were untrue” (8), the story explains. Only Mary sees that Singh’s efforts betray how much the village’s Sal timber is really worth to outside regions. She urges the elders to let the villagers sell the timber themselves, rather than entrust it to this middle man, but they are swayed by him: “After the final agreement the contractor gave six bottles of number one country liquor to the six elders” (8). Later, the story, from Singh’s point of view, reveals that Mary was, of course, right: “The entire venture is highly profitable. [...] The idiots don’t even know what goods they are abandoning” (9).

As a parallel to Singh exploiting the land and the tribals, he also tries to seduce Mary into sleeping with him. Mary, of course, sees through him and continues to threaten him with her machete whenever he approaches her. Her machete becomes a warning both to other fruit pickers in the fields and to Singh; in both ways, she is protecting what is hers. Here Mary’s body and strength, her labor, is likened to the ground, the land, and her territory. A hybrid product of rape by an Australian soldier, Mary nevertheless refuses any more exploitation; though she does not own the land, she lays claim to the fruit that falls on it, and in this way Mahasweta figures Mary as part of the landscape, a strident protector against continued unwanted exploiters. Singh fixates on her as the one tribal who does not succumb to his bribery and power like a tree being felled. At one point he tries to trap her physically, the way he has figuratively trapped the village into his dealings, but Mary

fights him off. Mary realizes that she will not be able to rest while Tehsildar Singh is around, and that the villagers will not be able to make what they are worth either. The land, to Mary, has value when worked, and worked hard and fairly. Labor on the land here is thus also juxtaposed with Singh's financial exploitation.

When it is time for an ancient ritualistic festival in the village, it happens to be a rare year when gender roles are reversed; usually the men go out on a great hunt while the women prepare the fire, but this time, the women will go out on the hunt. When the night of the hunt comes, Mary experiences a wild freedom as she runs through the forest with her trusty machete. The women have already danced and drunk wine, and now they are hunting. The scene is exhilarating: "Mary ran on. The women are all going up Kuruda Hill, entering the forest, going to the side of the cut [the river]. Mary is laughing. They won't find a kill. Like all games the hunt game has its rules. Why kill hedgehogs or hares or partridges? You get the big beast with bait" (12). This leads to the exciting yet subtle climax: it turns out that Mary's "big beast" is Tehsildar Singh, whom she lures into the forest with the promise of sex only to hack him to pieces with her machete. The killing is swift and subtle: "Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Collector is laughing, Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers" (11). The lifting and lowering motion is described in such mundane terms, reflective of Mary picking fruit in the fields - she uses the same machete for both - and thus Singh's killing is likened to working the land. Though the situation is heightened with the gender reversal, the wine, and the music and dancing, nevertheless Mary's killing of the contractor is everyday and ordinary, so brief that the reader might need to read the passage again. Mary then returns to the women and dances with them around the fire, cleansed of her predator. She plans to leave with her beau that very night and make a new life for herself; "Now, after the big kill, she wants Jalim," the story concludes.

Having killed “the biggest beast,” Mary feels free, and it is a freedom brought about by her embrace of her cultural and ecological knowledge of the land, which allows her to utilize that knowledge against an individual who represents her oppression, both sociopolitically and physically, thus reestablishing her agency and ownership of that land. Land is not simply a metaphor for Mary’s or the village’s connections to their histories or their survival in the text; rather, land is a key source of conflict and potential grounds for conflict resolution and political transformation. Mary’s ritualistic cleansing of murder and revenge through swift yet narratively understated violence becomes the climax of her resistance, thus metaphorically interrupting the slow violence being levied against the tribal community and entrenching her in the story of her tribe’s resistance to oppression. In this way, the story, which connects tradition and transformation by illustrating the interconnectedness of narrative and history, also becomes a way of correcting discursive discrimination and demonstrating a model for the future.

When discussing Mahasweta Devi and Indian land representations, one cannot ignore her commitment to the gendered nature of tribal violence and poverty. Like “The Hunt,” the second story, “Douloti the Bountiful,” centers around a tribal girl who’s as much at risk of male violence as her village is at risk of famine and land insecurity. But in this story, the tribal girl is not outwardly powerful, at least not a killer. Instead, Douloti is a victim of circumstances brought about by corruption and land and labor insecurities. Douloti’s tribal community is typical; the story reveals that they were once forest-dwellers who were displaced and dispossessed and sent to live on converted land without means to subsist. Impoverished and at the mercy of the lecherous class, Douloti’s father, Ganori, is lured into a debt trap by local landowner Munabar Shing Chandela, and once in debt, the family is unable to escape. Douloti, as a result, becomes a bonded slave, a prostitute. Critic Sung Hee Yook describes the web of connectedness between the story and the wider national development programs thus: “The fictionalized village Seora, a backward, feudally

oppressed rural village in the Bihar district, functions as a metonymy of tribal India, showing the changes in social and economic relations and their impact on the social status, culture, and economic performance of tribals” (Yook 6).

Like in “The Hunt,” “Douloti” describes a stark gendered division of labor represented by the exploitation of Ganori through bonded debt compared to the exploitation of Douloti’s body through prostitution. “The dynamics of Paramananda Mishir’s whorehouse,” explains Yook, “likewise expose the ways postcolonial capitalist society capitalizes on tribes, in particular tribal women, through the mechanism of bond slavery” (7). Even more than this, the story reflects the tendencies of colonialism to elide and objectify women in imagining colonial lands as feminized and therefore ripe for plunder, as well as the tendencies of western feminism to elide the real circumstances of Third World and subaltern women. Douloti starts out young and naive, prepped and pampered for a marriage that doesn’t happen. But in prostitution, she is “drugged and left bloodied.” Mahasweta crafts a powerful allegory about tribal women’s bodies and the land; her pimp, Munabar, the story says, “plows and plows their land and raises the crop” (59). The constant abuse on Douloti and the other prostitutes’ bodies for profit is likened to over-plowing, overdevelopment of agriculture. Douloti, who remains almost unnervingly sweet and quiet throughout the story, is eventually riddled with venereal diseases that steal her body and mind. Finally thrown out of the whorehouse, she tries to make her way back to her rural village to see her parents one last time, as she knows that she is dying.

Douloti’s death, however, is far from ordinary. It illustrates that the narrative is not so much about agriculture, but certainly about cartographic imaginaries of land, national landscape, and placedness. Unable to walk anymore, Douloti stumbles and falls one night, succumbing to her disease. In the morning, the narrative perspective zooms out to show that she has fallen in a

schoolyard, right on top of a map of India painted on the ground. Her body has expired atop the country's likeness:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on August 15th, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan [the village teacher] for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (94)

The image here is inescapable as Douloti's spent body takes up the whole of India, connecting her poverty, her tribal heritage, the history of Adivasi displacement and dislocation, and India's post-independence exploitative classes descended from colonial hierarchy. Douloti was robbed of place, but in the end she occupies all of India as a place, the whole of the Indian landscape.

The final story, Mahasweta's novella, *Pterodactyl, Puran Sabay, and Pirtha*, is a careful meditation on the implications, both personal and political, of representing another's cultural history. The story is set in 1987 in the throngs of the Green Revolution and examines notions of misunderstanding, authenticity, and truth, as well as the interconnectedness of narrative and history. At the epicenter of the story is a pterodactyl, or pterodactyl-like creature, that alights upon the village of Pirtha, a drought region where the people are slowly starving to death, largely due to governmental failure. Bhikhia, a young village boy, begins to watch over the pterodactyl in a small hut. He falls mute under his task, yet inscribes the creature's likeness on the wall inside the hut. Puran, a journalist from the urban center far over the hills, arrives to document this strange occurrence, but what he finds is something he can't put into words. The pterodactyl is described as the 'soul of their ancestors' a shadowy figure, haunting the villagers while they struggle to comprehend its meaning and its mark. The image calls to mind the haunting described in Spivak's

later text, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. As Spivak attempts to recover the Rani of Sirmur from the historical archives of colonial India, she imagines that the Rani haunts her, a constant reminder to resist the dangerous temptation to rewrite the past. Mahasweta Devi, in the conversation that precedes the text, explains: '*Pterodactyl* wants to show what has been done to the entire tribal world of India [...] Modern man, the journalist, does not know anything about it. There is no point of communication with the pterodactyl. The pterodactyl cannot say what message it has brought' (xiv-xv). Thus, like Spivak's recovered image of the Rani, the pterodactyl is a silent, stoic creature that seems to harbor a message or story about Pirtha's cultural history that it cannot or will not convey.

The narrative is committed to portraying the realities of land insecurity for tribal people. Like in "The Hunt," the titular village, Pirtha, is extremely remote. But this longer narrative contains much more information about the land itself, such as: "The soil of Madhya Pradesh is rich in iron, manganese, coal, limestone, and tin ore. Large scale, medium range, tertiary range, and small industries are developing fast. Agri-business is also developing apace, every day" (109). This description of soil given before Puran meets Bikhia and the other villagers is reminiscent of an encyclopedic brief. Though the story isn't about drilling per se, the litany of minerals reads like a shopping list for developers, an emphasis on the use value of the land, which of course, also includes the people. It gives an impression of a place ripe for exploitation. Then the story describes the people in conjunction with the land: "In Abujhmar there is a huge depression in the rock like a well, or like a monster's bowl. The sunlight never reaches its belly fully. The Adivasis live in the land of that primordial dusk. In some remote day they were invaded and they crawled into the earth's womb for safety, never to emerge" (109). Again there is an obscurity here, this time described through rock and darkness which are physical environmental obscurities that are then combined with metaphorical ones; the sun never reaches the land's belly just like food never reaches the tribals' bellies, and the tribals' description as "never to emerge" describes their political and representational

plight. Much is said about the rocky terrain that prevents crops from growing and results in tribal starvation. “Rocks everywhere!” warns one character. “You won’t understand which rock is good, which bad. You might fall” (138). Later, Puran asks another character why the people don’t try to leave Pirtha. The character answers, “And that stone! How can there be a move away from Pirtha, tell me that?” (178). Rocks are both the physical and social environmental image for the tribals of Pirtha; the community is stuck, unable to move forward, unable to move backward.

This commitment to obscurity and its relation to prehistory is continued in Puran’s interactions with the local SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer), who fulfills bureaucratic functions for the region. Through the SDO, we learn that it isn’t just the terrain that prevents Pirtha residents from thriving, but the infrastructure. Firstly, the story inverts the idea of roads introduced in “The Hunt,” the lack of which aid to the tribals’ exploitation. But in *Pterodactyl*, the narrator explains, “Whenever [the tribal people] come up they see the broad arrogant roads. These roads have been built with the money sanctioned for tribal welfare so that the owners of bonded labor, the moneylender, the touts and pimps, the abductors, and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after tribal women can enter directly into the tribal habitations” (109). David Farrier connects the representation of the roads with the policy history explained previously and the specter of seed injustices:

The Green Revolution transformed the ‘common genetic heritage’ of thousands of years of seed cultivation into the private intellectual property of multinational corporations such as the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) (Shiva 1989, 33). Thus the presentism of the road, which bisects the forest just as the split induced by the ‘time of capital and development’ casts the Adivasi in an abject relation with modern Indian society [...] contrasts with the pterodactyl’s profound dislocation of space and time; and Puran’s encounter with the pterodactyl, and indeed the story as a whole, invites us to read it not only as an examination of the violence

of the Green Revolution or of the alienating effects of Colonial Forest Law, but as an uncanny eruption of the untimely inherent to the world-ecology. (457)

The story also details more direct instances of government corruption. The story explains, “For a long time people have been dying in Pirtha. Well, the Chief Minister of the state, who built himself a luxurious residence after the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster, is certainly not about to declare Pirtha a ‘famine area’” (98). And when Puran sees a map in the SDO’s office, he observes: “The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast has fallen on its face. The new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature had fallen on its face then. Such are the survey lines of Pirtha Block” (99). This prehistoric imagery is always accompanied by stark, everyday accounts of current suffering. In the same interaction, the SDO reveals why nothing is being done for Pirtha even though there is obviously a drought crisis: “Imagine someone going to see Pirtha in Shaon or Bhadro—the fourth or fifth months—at the height of the rainy season, and then such a view he would have. No way to guess there’s a water problem...Journalist! Why come in the rainy season to inspect a drought area? [...] So OK, they said there’s lot of water in Pirtha. Nothing can be done” (100). But the SDO also talks about what happens when it does rain; when the government heard that crops weren’t growing in Pirtha, workers came to fertilize the hills. But what happens to a drought area when the rains finally come? Landslides and floods. Therefore, the wells were full of poison, and people began dying of enteric fever. “When it rains, the water flows down the hillside,” says the SDO. “How do I know if something poisonous came with the water?” (99).

Pterodactyl, though it contains subtle imagery and an almost frustratingly subtle titular character (the pterodactyl), is unsubtle when it comes to its polemical intentions. Laments about these and other land issues are matter of fact, unobscured. It is also clear on its history of India’s

developmental boom post independence; as one character observes: “Now the big landowners have to raise the price of tractor cultivation, shallow tubewells, artificial fertilizer on each bale of parched grain. The green revolution means revolutionary prices as well” (124). When Puran finally sees the actual pterodactyl after receiving an almost mythic account of its presence, he exclaims, “This is the unearthly terror? This is an embodied creature, that can spread its wings and fly.’ Far from a metaphorical threat or an otherworldly figure, it is most importantly an anachronism. Indeed, a prehistoric creature, the pterodactyl gestures toward Pirtha's pre-history. Its corporeality and anachronistic presence, then, along with its silence, create a narratorial paradox that highlights the inability for the past, especially the subaltern past, to speak for itself. Therefore, its death is a sobering message about the village’s exclusion from the development of the rest of India and the future of the tribal villagers, and of indigenous Indians in general. Puran implores the pterodactyl, ‘Have you come here because Pirtha is also endangered, its existence under attack...?’ But of course the creature has no answer to give, and the message about Pirtha’s cultural history dies with it. But Puran’s occupation is words. As a journalist faced with the problematic situation of the tribal people of Pirtha, he must grapple with the complexity of what is true, what is myth, and what is in between. Throughout the text, Puran is unable to relate to the villagers, at times shocked, frustrated, and sickened by their plight. He is separated by class, by appearance, and ideology. The Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) exclaims, ‘You will understand them with your urban mentality? You will fathom the Indian Ocean with a foot-ruler?’ Even the difficulty of their topography is a metaphor for this failure to relate: ‘The way to reach them is so inaccessible.’

Yet the pterodactyl chooses Puran, an outsider with a complicated relationship to truth, interpretation, and text, to bear witness to its life, and its death. The story ends on a strange, inconclusive note, pointing the reader in a direction outside the text. Mahasweta, through writing, attempts an entirely new history and we, to the best of our ability, attempt to read and understand it,

gaining a new perspective on Pirtha, on tribal India, on land insecurity, and on the inherent difficulties in the narration of history. The truth, the pterodactyl seems to suggest, is the existence of a soul, a real connection to the past, however impossible to grasp, that though it may not be *grounded*, is after all *landed*. The text asks us to embrace that impossibility, to approach complex problems (about history, writing, and the subaltern, as well as seed cultivation and agricultural injustice) with complex solutions. There can be found in the strange life and death of the pterodactyl a paradoxical space in which our questions about the limitations of writing and history are part of a fluid process of understanding. Similar to Moore and Patel's ruminations on the limited timeline on neoliberalism's exploitations of cheap food, cheap energy, and cheap people, *Pterodactyl's* narrator gives one explanation to the creature's vacant stare:

What does it want to tell? We are extinct by the inevitable natural geologic evolution. You too are endangered. You too will become extinct in nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong as it obliterates the weak, which finally turns you naked, barbaric, primitive, think if you are going forward or back. Forests are extinct, and animal life is obliterated outside of zoos and protected forest sanctuaries. (157)

Thus, there is more to the spatial complexity of *Pterodactyl* than the tribals' plight. Pirtha is a node in a network of spatial formations of geographic and geologic risk. This is what connects us all together, the reader to Mahasweta and her subjects, and the tribals to the rest of India and the world.

Conclusion

In their *Down to Earth* article, "Reverse the Learning," Malvika Gupta and Felix Padel argue that Adivasi knowledge may be the only hope for India's agricultural and environmental future, because of their anti-capitalistic emphasis on sustainability of land. More than this, they are intertwined with larger agrarian insecurity in India, seed crises, and environmental policy history.

Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* draws these points together, showing the connections in a way that emphasizes land, road, stone, and soil. Sonali Perera explains:

Devi's writing directs attention beyond the conjunctural limits of "the revolution" to the daily, unglamorous, unrewarding, unfinished business of the everyday. [...] [The character] Shankar speaks for the collective subject, articulating the present (the event of the pterodactyl) with the present continuous—the quotidian tasks of the everyday: "We will do what we used to do. We've got water, we'll work the field. One thing is true, we must plant the Khajra that keeps us alive. If Baola keeps us alive, we must plant Baola. Otherwise everything will be desert, and we will have to leave" (184). (X)

What we can take from *Imaginary Maps* is a cartographic exploration of geography and geology alongside culture and myth; this is a lived cartography, an image of bare feet on the ground. Her stories of hill states and rocky terrain, exploitative roads, drought, famine, and ground are at once both grounded in the everyday lives of tribal people and populate the sociopolitical landscape as well. These are instances of people who are one small part of a larger land epidemic in India, and they represent a node in the interconnected network of neoliberal conditions and deep geologic history. Critics since Spivak have considered the concept of postcolonial cartographies in the context of interrogating intersections of geography and law, economy and ecology, and history and myth. In this landscape, the idea of reconstructing geographic space is a way to critique colonial cartographies and the tendencies to map subjects through a colonial gaze. But in *Imaginary Maps* we also see a focus on land insecurity and Green Revolution history that weaves through gendered violence, tribal violence, and a loss of cultural sustainability. There is more lost than food and land; there is a lost cartography of humanity and dignity, a lack of spiritual reverence for the people who make up the holiness of place.

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