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Ecological Stress and Ecological Crises: Lived Realities in Irai Anbu's *On the Banks of the River*

Dr. M. Rosary Royar

Associate Professor (Retd.), The Research Centre of English, Fatima College,
Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

The article focuses on the bureaucratic power creating ecological stress to the tribal community living on the bank of the river. The tribal group's opposition is not a matter of significance for the state authorities who orchestrate every event to win the forthcoming election and retain its power. One group of villagers get evacuated and settled in barren land; the people on the banks of the river resist but the authorities construct the dam; eventually the flood washes away the entire village for the natural flow of the river has been obstructed; the people wait in a place for relief measures from people and organizations and refuse to accept it from the government which has destabilized them once and for all. The open ended note depicts the devastation caused willfully against a powerless sect by the powerful people. Mere existence itself poses a threat to them.

Keywords

Ecological Stress; Ecological Crises; Gaia consciousness; Dislocation;

Resettlement; Environmental Degradation; Irai Anbu; *On the Banks of the River*.



On the Banks of the River (2011) by Irai Anbu, a translation of *Athankarai Oram*, echoes these words:

The river flowed as a stretch of water before these villagers, but by its inherent kindness, it was a mother, a goddess, the life force for them. The news that the government intended to shift them from this river and settle them somewhere a hundred miles away came as a great shock to them. (*On the Banks of the River* 3).

The villagers of Sindhur living on the banks of the river through one voice, Govind Bhai, express their relationship with the river. The river is the source of their life. But they do not look upon it merely as a source for their existence but revere it as a goddess. They have lived with it for so long that it is intertwined in their lives. They have valued it, not because they are taught to, but it was inherent in them and it became embedded in their culture. Government's plan to build a dam across the river causes chaotic disorder at different levels. Sumathy says that the text is a re-enactment of the Sardar Sarovar fiasco and the author has framed the characters in such a way that they represent the multiple facets of the dam issue (100). Dam construction destroys forests and natural resources. Forests are natural wealth and destroying it for a project and then trying to create it artificially is a meaningless endeavour of the humans. What is ecological stress? How is it caused? What is ecological crisis? How does it affect?

Jorgen Christian Bang and Jorgen Door define ecological stress as a state of a group or an individual in terms of:

- the *pressure*, i.e. the degree of tension in relationship between the internal and external contradictions;
- the *demands* (sensed, perceived or formulated) to the group or individual by itself or by the Other;
- the available bio-, socio-and ideo-logical *resources*; and
- the *constraints* on coping.

Ecological stress is constituted by antagonistic contradictions. To be stressed has become the mode of being. 'Gaia consciousness' tells quite explicitly that everything is part of something and nothing is totally independent. It cannot be refuted and in that case each bears relation to the other. 'A stressed existence is an expression for unhealthy relations and an unhealthy way to relate to relations'. It needs to be distinguished that this is not the *eustress* that is healthy and fulfilling. Any development is no longer sustainable but pathological; existence and reality encroach upon the critical limits for the carrying capacity i) within the person ii) between persons, and iii) between persons and the environment (180). At different levels ecological stress consciously or unconsciously caused. Bang and Door state that 'The biological crisis is not just a bio-logical crisis. All spheres of our social praxis are marred by the ecological crisis which is manifested in various contexts when a specific phenomenon is considered as being independent of its various surroundings *et vice versa*' (182). Everything takes place in an environment. The ecological biotope and social praxis are core categories. "The earth was not made for man, man was made for the earth" (178) and that is 'Gaia consciousness' which relates the fundamental relatedness of all things, persons and events. Ecological crisis means the endangerment and destruction of the natural living conditions of plants, animals and humans.

In the text chosen for analysis the government machinery thrust the pressure on the tribal community of Sindur and they demand that they evacuate and their desire / willingness / opinion is totally negated; they are forced to cut off from the bio- socio- and ideological resources; they are given vague promises of settlement but their culture and nature, their vital system of interrelationship and interdependency are core points that neither the Collector Kulkarni nor the Irrigation Minister of the State, Shukla try to understand or get a glimpse of that binding deep relationship. The ecological stress is violently thrust on the tranquil life of the tribal group and as a result the ecological crisis pervades at various

spheres at each stage. The tribal group is sensitive to the crisis in different forms but the officials are indifferent to it.

An evacuation that had preceded, stands as an epitome of ecological stress. In Ramgarh taluk ten villages of four hundred families belonging to Rangapur were evacuated. Two and a half acres of land for all of them and five thousand rupees each were the enticing prices they paid to rehabilitate them. Unable to cultivate the land, they have become hired labourers. “They have been distributed over twenty to twenty five villages for resettlement” (46-47). “There was tremendous pressure that all the people of Rangapur should move out, bag and baggage, before the stipulated dead line”. Sudhir, the newly appointed officer to carry out the dam project, tours around the twenty villages and realizes ‘what a great fraud had been perpetrated in the name of rehabilitation’. The land had an abundant growth of a thorny, red-berried plant. It is a poisonous plant that when cut, it sprouted afresh from its root. “The people had spent all the money the government had given them, in battling this plant. There was no irrigation facility available; nor were the promised school and piped drinking water supply provided” (59). In a matter of six months they had been reduced to such a cruel condition. It is this bitter truth that choked Sudhir. Irrigation Minister visited the rehabilitated people to enquire about their well-being but it is only ‘a political stunt’ (93). Ensuing that the Chief Minister’s announcement of twenty thousand rupees to each family as relief measure denoted the hidden agenda for the election was to be conducted within a short duration.

Radha Pathankar, an activist, joins the tribal group in their protest against the dam construction. She addresses the people along with representatives from the social welfare organisations, and individuals with committed concern for environmental protection. She informs that in China they have small dams. ‘When the dams are small, there is no danger of problems like water-logging or salination of soil cropping up’. A large dam naturally requires the destruction of thousands of hectares of natural forest and many species of flora and fauna. Further, she vouchsafes,

From time immemorial the tribal people have taken care of these natural resources. For generation they have drawn sustenance from nature without destroying its resources. To resettle all of them in a new place, alienating them from these surroundings, is against all tenets of humanity. (18)

They raise their voice against total bio-degradation. Teak trees are cut down to provide furniture for the West. World Bank advances heavy loans for construction of dams. She strikes the key note “Developed countries derive economic benefit only when developing countries are prevented from becoming developed countries, because of environmental degradation” (19). This consciousness raising attempt never reaches the walled-in bureaucrats. When the protest gains momentum, the Minister Shukla calls Radha and tells that the party High command wishes to nominate her for Rajya Sabha. The sugar coated suggestion reveals the underlying motive of quenching the fire in her. The arguments present the complexity of the web like connections and the intricacies of the system that functions at a global level. What evinces is the selfish desire and benefit that govern their action plan and the total disregard of values and the mass that gets afflicted but has no means of communication at decision making forum.

Chiman, a tribal youth, manages to collect five thousand people from various villages and leads them to the Taluk Office to stage their protest. The Chief Minister calls Shukla to warn that the local elections are round the corner, “Till now the tribal votes have always been ours. If the opposition parties turn them against us, we will be helpless” (25). Shukla opposes saying that the neighbouring state Broach cannot be supplied with drinking water, as they have promised, if the project gets delayed. “If the industrialists from there do not give us funds, how can we tackle the elections” (25)? It is explicit that their focus is on personal ambition and success. Caring for the people never gets registered in their agenda. Radha argues at a later point, when called for a dialogue, that she cannot agree to the “proposal to ravage one region in order to save another. It is

the so-called development projects in every region, with total disregard to environmental degradation that has resulted in shortage of potable water” (55). The centre and state officials create demands and exert pressure on the tribal group. One evacuation has proved to be disastrous but they pay no heed to their living condition.

They do not cease but perpetuate the same act and the victims are unable to cope with living conditions. They have shielded themselves with self-indulgence that they are callous towards destruction of natural bio-resources, which cannot be regained at any cost. In Raymond Williams’s pithy sentence this seems to be “the morality of a relatively, consolidated, a more maturely calculating society” (63). As he analyses “a normal poverty was built into the expected order, and abnormal poverty had to take its chance, in a gratuitous system” (83). The people of ten villages and now the people of Sindur are brought ‘under the pressure of the general contradictions of the system’ with ‘actual inhumanity’ of the State and Centre power that ‘the great majority of the poor and oppressed were without a connecting voice’ to make clear of their daily experience. The ruling class has now succeeded in ‘turning protest into retrospect’ (83) and then the event dies away. The ruling class adopts seductive measures-inviting Radha to stand for election, giving cash to the oppressed, transferring the officer Sudhir who pleads the cause for the oppressed and cutting power and water supply to his house, not to harm the tribal youth leader Chiman-and in proffering it gives a different coverage. The sad demise is that the reality gets buried, especially of the evacuated, but projects in the name of progress sprawl around the country causing damage and ruin.

It is disheartening to know that in the contradiction of the system where an individual’s progress versus oppression of thousands of tribal groups and destruction of the environment, the individual seems to win in the historical scheme. The text narrates: ‘The collector’s overweening desire was to get the tribal people to vacate their land, by fair means or foul, so that the work on the dam could start during his tenure as the collector’. The paradoxical truth is that

he is the native of that State but had “neither love nor loyalty for his native soil, and was impatient to dam the river that flowed through his State”. He had the urgency because he cared not for the people but sought his own selfish end of obtaining ‘privileges from the Chief Minister’ and if he becomes his secretary, “his position would be as secure as that of the snake around Lord Shiva’s neck” (65). He reports the Chief Minister, in spite of the people’s agitation, that there was no physical resistance and the preliminary work and the selection of the site got completed. He suggests that without the fanfare, they can carry on the work quietly.

In contrast, Sudhir drafts a letter to the Chief Secretary analysing the reasons for giving up the project. He states about the disturbance of the tribal group at being ‘shifted from the banks of the river that had nurtured them all their lives’. The land allotted for their settlement is

...fallow, rocky and totally unfit for cultivation’. When the dam is completed, the neighbouring State, whose vote bank decides the ruling party, will have water for irrigation; the rich can add to their luxuries; they will have additional power supply; ‘but over a lakh of tribal people will stand bereft of their land, their houses, their calm surroundings, their peace of mind, their culture and tradition, the bonding features of their community-everything that makes life worth living’(68).

Two lakhs and sixty thousand hectares of land are threatened with inundation by the dam. The government has proposed to create new forest twice as much as the area inundated but so much of area is not available.

He proposes that the hilly regions of Lakshman Nagar, ten kilometers from Sindur, will be suitable for dam construction. This place has not been chosen for inundation for inundation of Lakshman Nagar will affect “the industrialists, the influential people, the political big shots, and they are capable of bringing down the government” (69). He also hints that the loss would be greater than the commission that can be obtained in the dam construction. He raises

rhetorical questions “Do beautiful forests and the very many unknown, beneficial plants and herbs that grow in them, have to be destroyed? Do the precious bio-species have to be killed” (70)? He appeals to him as to an intellectual for fruitful outcome. But before his letter could reach even, the scheme of his transfer has worked out in no time.

Intellectual radicalism works in a destructive manner for they proceed with the dam construction. All the villagers gather and a large procession marches to protest but the work progresses. It is a structure where individual appeals to the rationality and morality of people in power; tribal group in a disciplined manner present their case for opposing but the other group carries out the order and reaps its own benefit. The layers of society come into the construct opposing each other but the violent, powerful, destructive code under the sham of benevolence carries on unhesitatingly and unobstructed. The procession shouts slogans expressing logical, rightful demands: ‘Don’t snatch away the rights of the tribal people’, ‘don’t try to uproot us’, ‘don’t inundate our villages in the waters’, ‘don’t cause environmental degradation’ etc (129). The police arrive on the scene to intimidate them and unable to arrest the crowd, they arrest Chiman and Radha Pathankar. On hearing the progress of the event, Sharma, who had played a “significant role in the campaign against the denudation of trees in the Himalayan ranges” (132) went on to fast unto death. The workers continued the construction. The public protest goes unheeded.

The opposition is against the exploitation of environment. The metropolitan intellectuals unaware of the tribal ways tend to disregard and hold in contempt of their link with the environment. The ‘progressive’ measures and the implementation shows “an unreflecting celebration of mastery-power, yield, production, man’s mastery of nature-as if the exploitation of natural resources could be separated from the accompanying exploitation of men” (Williams 37). Again, under increasing pressure, the text shows that in the long process of choice between economic advantage for the rich along with power lobbying gets the upper hand and promotes a society which has thrown values overboard.

The tribal group, the activist and the environmentalists resist the government force by different but peaceful ways. “The wealth of resources that nature had slowly and painstakingly built up over millennia must not be discarded in one thoughtless moment” (27) is the propelling force behind Radha and two other persons joining the tribal group in their protest. They plan to highlight the protest at national level and collect fund. On the other side, on an auspicious day, the workers perform the puja and it is “customary to offer a live sacrifice...sacrifice of one life will ensure safety for all lives”(78). It is Gokul, somewhat mentally retarded young man of Sindur who is trapped as a human sacrifice. It is pathetic for it is a tribal who is offered as a sacrifice, and the people of power go unscathed and progress in life. The judiciary power dismisses the tribal group’s case. They expect to get at least a stay order but the judge declared: “The dam is being constructed with national development in mind and should not be viewed in terms of narrow local interests. The case is dismissed. Chiman collapsed, a weary, disappointed, defeated man” (118-19).

The sight makes Govind Bhai’s eyes brim with tears and speaks to his son Chiman. “In a way our traditional culture is also like that drying banyan tree. Our culture, our customs, our capacity to move freely with each other without guile, may soon slide down to disappear into the earth” (73). Radha hears the mournful tune of the bird as if it sensed the impending danger. The Chief Minister- Kulkarni and Shukla become worried about the electoral prospects for the peaceful display of opposition has gained momentum on the Independence Day. Sandeep finds that at nullah long, red fish leaping out of water to get morsels in such gay abandon could not be seen and they seemed to have sensed the danger through the vibrations in the flowing river.

Govind Bhai informs Sandeep that there is something in their blood that they can assess the rainfall or the failure of it. He confesses, “we are uneducated people, but our lives are so intertwined with the sounds and the life cycle of the objects of nature, that we have all this knowledge at our finger tips”(133). He senses danger with the coming rainfall. The dense growth of trees has been

completely cut down and the big barrier wall has also come up. The various nullahs help to draw the excessive water but now they have deepened some and blocked the others. So the water will lash against the barrier wall and get diverted to Sindur and the situation portends the danger. But the officials and the workers do not realize the impending danger. The untaught Govind Bhai looks at the surrounding, understands and perceives beyond in a simple but astounding manner. He foretells but unfortunately the group that stands opposed fails to recognize its deed and its wreckage.

The heavy rains continue the fourth day. The Chief Minister hurries Shukla to make Sharma end his fast and he has to make a press-release soon. In the village Govind Bhai instructs Sandeep that it is imperative that people pack as much of household goods and move to the safer place.

The embankment may be breached any time. The time for Sindur village to be devastated and wiped off the face of this earth has started. These beautiful trees, our cane forests, our humble dwelling, our live-stock, are all going to be swept off. Let us at least try to save as many human lives as possible. The government could not do anything to shake Sindur, but the dam has done it. (136)

Govind Bhai refuses to leave and in the darkness of the evening “the river that had nurtured him had taken him away” (139). Chiman, who is in prison, is unaware of the calamity and his father’s death. He saved others by using his sense knowledge and acting on time but he loved the land and died there. It is doubtless that he and the villagers possessed the ecological wisdom for they inherited it from their environment. The environmental degradation in Sindur, caused by man, shows the multiple levels and Sindur once a beautiful village looks like a graveyard.

The people who left the place wail to Sandeep of their means of survival. ‘The dam, a symbol of progress and modernity, stood triumphant’ (144) but the children were crying of hunger and the hapless, weeping mothers began to beg for food. At this juncture, Chiman has been brought out of jail on bail. Even

at this condition, Radha thinks that anyone in the ruling party or the opposition parties will not voice support for it should be 'politically suicidal' (141) for them. She gets released after a few days. In the starving condition, the villagers refuse to get the aid from government for their struggle continues against the government. They face loss and suffering fighting for a just cause- their desire to protect their environment.

It becomes evident that the ecological crisis has affected the environment and the society. Destruction of forests has altered the course of animal species and in turn the flood itself became a watery grave for Sindur. The people are stranded and with no sound economic basis, they cannot visualise their future. Everything of the community has been erased. The government may appear to be in a flutter but the havoc and the loss cannot be measured and life cannot be reconstructed with the same binding values of harmony, faithfulness, peace and loyalty. Their culture, as Govind Bhai envisages, will be erased. They have lived a quiet secluded life unnoticed by the government and the government has caused this great devastation and unsettled them. Uprooting people, either enforced or due to natural calamity, makes people feel a sense of loss in the psyche and the self becomes fragmented. Ecological crises do not confine to the natural surroundings alone. On the other hand, it impinges on the mental ecology of the self and none can ever cure it.

Bang and Door argue "Human cultures are intertwined in the rest of nature and unfold in cooperation with nature's parts and wholes. To believe that we exist outside of nature is the highpoint of mental disorder and carries with it insane patterns of action" (84). They stress that this mistake arises due to the misconception that we are not a part of nature and nature is not a part of us. The wrong perception needs to be re-oriented and requires a re-evaluation of our cultures. It also implies the individuals and groups need a reorganization. Human culture is part of the rich biodiversity which is Gaia. They reinforce that selfish desire or any form of greed becomes the symptom which distorts humans

capacities to be participating and participants in Gaia's transformative processes (84). Ecological co-existence is the central norm of our life.

Human nature in *On the Banks of the River*, especially of the administrative officials, fails to recognize the value of nature and the unique life of humans. Driven by greed for wealth and power, they act in a dominant manner. Their governance is not an isolated act but floods the entire area and devastates it. People who valued the river and the trees and everything in nature are forcibly driven away and are left stranded. The development project in the name of progress turns out to be an insane act for they never gave heed to the opposing views nor ever considered the part of nature that would get affected. It is due to felling the huge trees, blocking nullahs and building the dam wall that caused the flood to ravage the village. The nullahs and the trees have been natural substances that leveled the rain water. They have caused ecological stress and ecological crises in Sindur and it is irreparable and the cost of the loss cannot even be estimated. Involuntary displacement of people from their habitat has become a continuing challenge all over the globe. Hence, Sumathy says that dam building frenzy has encompassed the globe and it still rolls on in the name of hydroelectric projects, irrigation projects, flood control measures and leads to inconceivable consequences (92). The disastrous effects on the ecological balance is never taken into account and analysed.

In *Mankind and Mother Earth*, Arnold Toynbee, as cited by Glen A. Love, makes a crucial observation that humankind now has the power to

...make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by shortsighted human greed. (14)

Almost a quarter century after the observation has been made, the condition has in no way changed but has become worse. Love refers to the critical remark

of Alison Hawthorne Deming who posits, “if we reported each year’s progress not in terms of fiscal loss and gain but in terms of the earth’s biological and cultural loss and gain, we would have a more accurate assessment of human success” (14). Daily life itself counts the ongoing crises. If this yardstick were to be used to assess success, can mankind’s appalling failure be gazed?

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