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The Human Spirit and its True Measure in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is the most cosmopolitan of contemporary Indian English writers. His significance has its roots in his cosmopolitanism, for he is a writer who travels and re-maps the world drawing connections across the boundaries of modern nation states. It is in this clearheaded erasure and redrawing of cultural and political lines that divide and unite that Amitav Ghosh finds his mission as a writer. *The Hungry Tide* has been Amitav's most popular novel. Its title is highly suggestive and symbolic. This novel shows a division between people and nature, spiritual and humanity. *The Hungry Tide* is the work of a novelist at the peak of his powers. This novel is about one such community

who live on the peripheries of the Indian subconscious-out in the untamed areas where India's mighty river drains out into the sea, where sweet and saline water have no boundaries, and where tigers and snakes, crocodile and fishes roam free. This is where islands are submerged and where they reemerge, where people eke out a living from the bountiful yet threatened forest produce, where animal and human, myth and reality merge and overlap each other in the ritual survival for existence. This research paper will focus on The human spirit and its true measure in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.

Keywords

Human Spirit; True Measure; Amitav Ghosh; *The Hungry Tide.*

The Hungry Tide talks about the internal struggles which man has to face in a completely different environment. Our personality does change with respect to the change in the surrounding environment. Ghosh's most persistent theme is of the ephemerality of concepts of national and ethnic identity. The multiplicity of names for the Sunderbans is a metaphor for that ephemerality. Another metaphor for ephemerality, albeit one which has a great deal of material heft behind it, is the fact that the land itself is inconstant subject to sometimes radical alterations as a result of late summer storms. Whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in with huge tidal surges. Thousands of human beings and animals routinely die in these storms.

The Hungry Tide captured the essence of the precarious existence of the inhabited islands of the Sunderbans with remarkable accuracy. Ghosh has changed the real name of his island. To a reader unfamiliar with the tide country, it would be difficult to imagine what the daily onslaught of tidal water means for the island population. These low-lying, half-formed, mangrove-dominated mud-flats were reclaimed for cultivation about 100 years ago.

Human settlement on them was made possible only by building earthen embankments all around them. In this watery labyrinth, the embankments run up to 3,500 km in length. They were the lifelines of human existence in the islands. Aila cyclone damaged an unprecedented 400 km of the embankments, of which 139 km have reportedly been washed away altogether, with their bases. The damage is fairly uniformly distributed across all the islands. None of them was spared.

The hours are slow in passing as they always are when you are waiting in fear for you know not what: the moments before coming of a cyclone, when you have barricaded yourself into your dwelling and have nothing else to do but wait. The moments will not pass; the air hangs still and heavy; it is as though time itself has been slowed by the friction of fear.

Though the cyclone had been predicted, the people and the administration had no clue what a 100-200 km/h wind speed would mean for this inter-tidal zone when combined with an unusually high tide.

The fateful day was a no-moon day – a day when the high tide water level reached its maximum, almost licking the upper fringes of the embankments around the juvenile islands. In the Indian part, the islands float like lotus leaves in a shallow bay of sea-water.

The average height of the upper surface rises barely 4 meters above mean sea level. With a tidal amplitude of 8-10 meters, most parts of the islands would have been submerged twice during the day had the embankments not existed. On full moon and no moon days, with tidal amplitude exceeding the usual margin, the rivers look like high watery expressways. And expressways they are; they are the only means of transportation across the islands. During high tide, standing on the inner basin of any island, one can see country boats of all sizes moving over the foaming, undulating waterway seen over the embankments' rim.

From a boat on that high river, one can see what Ghosh described- the interior of islands awkwardly holding on their lap a freshwater ecosystem and a dense population. The ever bending rivers coil around the island like a mythological serpent that could crush the fragile embankments at will but perhaps refrains from doing so out of mercy for the poor people. For around 100 years of their existence, nature's mercy remained intact. But normal life on these islands has always held a deep insecurity. On May 25, nature did not do anything unusual. It just matched the timings of a no-moon high tide with a cyclone blowing all through the day. This part of the Sunderbans has withstood cyclones before. It is true that cyclone storms generated in the Bay of Bengal mostly veer away to make land full on the Bangladesh and/or Orissa coast.

Though outside the storm's eye, the Indian part of the Sunderbans has faced winds of greater velocity than the winds that blew that day. But those were in times when tidal amplitude did not peak. That made all the difference. The islands in the Sunderbans survive on two vital man-made factors – embankments and village tanks. While the embankments stand guard against saltwater, the tanks store rainwater for year – long use. The islands are dotted with tanks of all sizes. In earlier times, some of these village tanks were reserved exclusively for drinking water a very precious item on the islands as the groundwater, for the most part, is saline too.

On these premature islands, lifting groundwater for drinking and irrigation purposes is not feasible with shallow pump sets. Only at certain places on the bigger islands can an underground stock of freshwater be found and lifted by deep tube wells. Some of these tube wells were built over time by government departments and NGOs. Where they came up, tanks reserved for drinking water were gradually allowed to be used for other purposes as well. Even now some islands are still totally, and some partially, dependent on village tanks for drinking water.

These village tanks provide a vital service to the islanders throughout the year. They provide drinking water for livestock, the water is used for bathing, washing clothes, cleaning utensils and nurturing freshwater fish stocks. Some of the stored water is also employed to grow vegetables and other crops in the dry season. But mostly the islanders practice rain-fed mono-crop cultivation.

Typically, the dwelling units are simple mud huts; mud applied to a bamboo skeleton makes the walls. The roof is mostly dry straw, occasionally earthen tiles or corrugated tin sheets. The huts usually stand on an elevated earthen platform.

Although the immediate impact of Cyclone Aila is tragic, on the television screens it does not look very unusual. The fallen trees twisted and collapsed huts, and a landscape strewn with debris of all sorts. So the villagers robbed of their belongings huddled in groups on a relatively high village road or surviving embankment, or clinging to their rooftops just above the water, the large pools of water trapped in rice fields and village tanks, or flowing in a stream carrying the carcasses of livestock, occasionally even a human body.

The first shock was the stench, which recognized to be that of rotting fish. Perhaps also the smell of rotting livestock, but lots of decomposing fish dumped on the riverside of the village. All stocks of freshwater fish had died within a day, when the tanks were overrun by saltwater. Marooned and displaced villagers could not use them immediately. And they knew that eating dead fish after a day was dangerous. The best way to dispose of rotting fish is to bury it. But there was hardly any ground left above the water.

All the grass, standing crop and shrubs that were under water for more than a day and looked like they had been burnt by acid. Juvenile trees with their leaves and branches 4-5 feet up showed the high water mark by their burnt black – brown colour. Some of the dead carcasses were trapped in the island's interiors, though most had flowed out into open rivers. But in this 4,500 sq km delta, water doesn't really flow out; it circulates like a whirlpool,

moving back and forth every 12 hours with the turning tide. Bodies that were washed away by the river in the ebbing tide came back with the high tide. And so they circulated within the region until they were completely decomposed.

Almost all the mud huts that managed to withstand Aila were under a few feet of water for a couple of days. The mud at their base had washed off, baring the bamboo skeleton. That none of them could be repaired because the mud had soaked in too much salt and the fresh soil does not mix with salty soil. Salt changes the texture of the soil; it makes it brittle and eventually turns it to dust when it is dry. All the standing huts in the villages, therefore, would have to be completely rebuilt.

Aila is unique in other ways as well. It is practically impossible to repair the protecting embankments within a short time. Many parts of the islands remained devoid of any embankments even a fortnight after Aila, with saline water regularly coming and going with the turn of the tide. Even though there were no fresh storms of heavy rain, the islands received another big splash on full moon day, June 7. No one can say how many days will be needed to complete a patchwork of the entire length of the embankments. It is like having an open wound in sultry weather, with no hope of it healing naturally.

The obvious fallout of the event is the nerve-wracking shortage of drinking water. Many of the tube wells are submerged and all the village tanks lost their fresh water within an hour. Regular trips by relief vessels from the mainland keep the surviving islanders with food and drinking water. But no amount of portable relief supplies is ever enough for a disaster of this scale. There is tremendous damage everywhere and no signs of any restoration. People spend nights and days in the open, mostly gathered on surviving embankments, looking for the relief boats. They are unable to initiate any restoration by themselves as they were crippled by the exposed lands that are regularly swept by water from the high tide.

The scale of the disaster has been recognized in the concerned government quarters. Relief supplies are forthcoming, many civil society organizations and NGOs have pitched in with the relief operations. But in this chaotic situation it is obvious that supplies are not always equitably distributed or given to the most vulnerable. Many people remain in makeshift relief camps housed in village school buildings. Nobody knows when they can return home, or where their homes once stood.

One impact of the huge drinking water problem is widespread diarrhea. Thousands of people are affected, with no official estimates forthcoming on this. An official estimate of livestock loss is also not available.

Relief supplies in other natural disasters are a temporary lifeline, to be followed by gradual restoration of normal life. Recovery from floods in other parts of the mainland is a uni-directional process. It means gradual restoration of order and livelihoods – with outside help. Immediate crop losses from freshwater floods are usually followed by a good harvest during the next season.

But the situation in the Sunderbans is different. As long as the embankments are not fully restored all over the islands, no improvement is possible. Floods will continue to recur. Every fortnight there will be flooding due to the lunar boost in water levels.

Salt deposits in the soil will mean nil or little agricultural activity for at least a couple of years. One can hardly imagine the implication of third on half-a-million people, over 90% of whom are directly dependent on agriculture. This event has crushed the very backbone of the islands' economy, after the cyclone, that almost one quarter of the people of the village had vacated the islands and had moved to the mainland.

Scientific research has already established that the greatest threat to the future of the Sunderbans is posed by continued global warming and the resultant increase in sea level. Apart from this, more short-term threats to

human lives and livelihoods could come from an increased frequently of cyclones, even super cyclones. This also means greater probability of their coinciding with extreme high tides. Cyclone Aila has shown what this means for the delta. If Aila is a forerunner of many such events in the future, one has to seriously re-think the present method of repairing the embankments. At stake is a population of half-a-million. In a densely populated state, rehabilitating all these people on the mainland would be a difficult prospect.

The Sunderbans have a much older history of human settlement. Historical findings in the region bear convincing evidence that the area was populated even at the time of Ashoka (273-232 BC), though the evidence so far has failed to add up to a comprehensive account of continued civilization in the delta. It would appear that the British started an economic venture – almost a gamble against nature's wishes – that somehow held its own until now. That black Monday, the island's luck finally ran out.

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