



Dams, Displacement and Devastation: A Study of Na D'Souza's Dweepa

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Abstract

While other organisms merely adapt themselves with changing conditions, human beings are capable of adaptation with as well as alteration of their environment. The industrial revolution introduced artefacts that were irretrievable, changing the course of nature in ways that were beneficial for some but detrimental for others, human as well as non-human. Rivers have been harnessed by human since the birth of civilisation, but the construction of dams for irrigation, power generation, etc have also adverse impacted the ecosystem, not to speak of marginalized communities that lead a hand to mouth existence.

The proposed article critically engages with 'Kannada submersion novelist' Na D'Souza's novel Dweepa to study the variety of effects which the construction of a dam on the river Sharavathi has on the life, property, family relations, profession and habitat of residents of the village Hosamanehalli in the Malenadu region.

Keywords: Dams, Submersion, Ecology, Conservation, Agriculture, Wildlife, Modernisation.

Introduction

Introduction and Context

Ecocriticism attempts to ingrain among individuals the notion of sustainable progress, thereby securing a more inclusive future. Living beings are supposed to enjoy their right to survive and thrive as they naturally have. This can be materialised only if the resources available are utilised cautiously, exercising restraint.

The first Prime Minister of independent India urged citizens to relinquish their land and property, for the process of building up dams and reservoirs, thus contributing to the greater goal of nation-building. He and his government pledged to provide adequate compensation to people who would be displaced for dam construction. As the novel under present discussion poignantly shows, obtaining compensation from the government is a tortuous process, which often involves greasing the wheels of government machinery. For those who are bereft of money or possessions, acquiring compensation does not smoothly follow displacement. Big projects such as dams require huge tracts of land. Most often these tracts of land are obtained in small parcels from villages where local communities have long been engaged in farming and allied professions such as fishing, weaving, animal husbandry, etc for generations, thus making change in profession caused by loss of land untenable. Due to any one or a combination of the aforementioned reasons, local communities often engage in anti-eviction or anti-displacement mass movements, which are dubbed as anti-progress by the government or its mouthpieces.

The Sharavathi river basin has witnessed the construction of several hydroelectric power projects, beginning with the Mahatma Gandhi Hydroelectric Project. Thereafter, the Sharavathi Generating Station, the Linganamakki Dam Powerhouse and the Sharavathi Tail Race Project (alternatively known as the Gerusoppa hydro-project) came up. These projects account for approximately 45% of the cumulative hydroelectric power generated in this region.

Collateral damage encountered has been significant, leading to submergence of close to two hundred villages in the Sagar and the Hosanagar areas of Shimoga, besides uprooting thousands of residents from there. Furthermore, the setting up of these projects has resulted in the inundation of many square kilometres of tropical evergreen forests, causing irretrievable damage to the environment.

Introduction to the Novelist

Na D'Souza i.e. Norbert D'Souza (1937-) served the Karnataka Public Works Department for 37 long years, trying to improve the infrastructure and uplift the lives of the needy. Simultaneously he was also an acclaimed author competent across genres such as novels, stories, drama, and children's literature. He has more than 94 books to

his credit and has been the recipient of awards such as the Bala Sahitya Puraskar. Two of his novels- *Dweepa* and *Kadina Benki* were adapted into feature films by the famous director Girish Kasaravalli. He has also taken up numerous social issues, often participating vigorously in mass movements and agitations. One can discover a continuum between his writings and his activism. Most notably, three of his novels namely *Dweepa* (1978), *Mulugade* (1984) and *Oddu* (1990) present poignant pictures of people evicted from their native place to make way for a dam, which causes inundation of agricultural lands and forces them out of their generations-old abode and profession. His critical literary engagement with the adverse effects of dam construction has earned him the epithet-‘submersion novelist of Kannada literature.’ In an interview he has admitted how submersion, an adverse offshoot of modernisation results in forced displacement and has been a cause of concern for him.

Discussion of the novel

The title of the novel *Dweepa* literally means an island-a landmass that is cut off on all sides by vast bodies of water. There are seven chapters in the novel, paralleling the seven stars that are believed to guide and control the seven different stages of the monsoon. In Na D’Souza’s novel this titular island is called Hosamanehalli, which is situated beside the Sharavathi river and initially is abode to three families of landowners (Ganapayya, Parameshwarayya and Herambha Hegde) and two families of agricultural labourers (Hala and Byra). The novel begins in medias res, with government officials pouring into the village for the purpose of survey and supervision of the under-construction Linganamakki dam, on the Sharavathi river. They had assured the villagers the previous year that the dam would not fill up. Although certain individuals such as the postman from the Submersion Office at Kargal had prophesied the contrary, the residents of the village constituting the landowning families- Ganapayya, Herambha Hegde and Parameshwarayya as well as those of the bonded labourers Byra and Hala, had continued living and cultivating in the same place as they always had.

With the dam-walls erected and the water in the dam reaching its brink this year, the two other landowning families of the village- Herambha Hegde and Parameshwarayya decide to move out, using their respective amounts of compensation received. They cite the red stone planted at the base of the hillock named Sitha Parvatha to denote the level the water would reach during/after the monsoons, to conclude that inundation of the village was merely a question of time. Rather than cling to their land and face the inevitable, both preferred to make use of the little time in hand to set up their homes and prepare their fields in the new location, before the onset of the monsoons. Ganapayya, whose compensation file has apparently been lost/misplaced by the clerks at the Submersion office, suggests that Herambha Hegde might have bribed the officials to expedite the process of receiving his share of the compensation.

Ganapayya’s elderly father Duggaja loves the land like “a woman loves (*sic.*) her mother’s house” (13). Ganapayya’s emotions are not too different either. Moreover, his failure to secure the compensation amount leaves him no other option. Although his wife Nagaveni warns him of the perils of being marooned without food and other amenities, in case the floodwaters really rise as high as Sitha Parvatha, Ganapayya decides to stay back. With a gritty determination, he tells himself:

Even if the government compensates me with land and money right now, I’m not the kind who’ll get up and go immediately. I’m going to stay here this monsoon and reap a harvest on my land. Let whatever happen, happen.” (D’Souza 15)

The monologue uttered by Ganapayya shows the resilient attitude developed by the individual who finds himself on the brink of displacement and possibly erasure. When the novel begins, D’Souza clearly mentions that Ganapayya “is neither rich nor poor” (1), but whatever little he earns is by virtue of his farms. When those farms are under threat of being flooded and there is no sign of the compensation arriving, he musters courage by discovering a conviction within himself-that in some inexplicable way, he and his farms would survive the brunt of the floods. He even contemplates cultivating the now owner-less lands of Herambha as an incentive for staying back. The helplessness and poverty of Ganapayya are corroborated by the fact that his father Duggaja, suffering for a long time, neither gets nor hopes for treatment of his serious physical ailments from reputed medical practitioners. The lack of money and modern amenities leaves him to his fate, trying concoctions and herbs suggested by random people.

Under significant amount of emotional duress, Ganapayya forgets to consider the fact that cultivating additional tracts of land would necessitate the supply of more agricultural labourers at a cheap rate. But with the threat of imminent floods looming large, it was impossible to coax the men in the neighbouring villages to come to Hosamanehalli and work as hired hands. They all feared being marooned from the rest of the world by the rising waters.

~~The hardships brought about by flood or drought are not unknown to the Indian farmer. But the massive changes~~
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brought about by the man-made dam leave Ganapayya and the vulnerable Indian farmer in the midst of a predicament that is more severe and has effects more long-lasting than any other struggle he has known before. The displacement of neighbours Parameshwarayya and Herambha Hegde caused by the construction of the dam leads to alienation. Earlier women from these families as well as the women from the Hasalaru community who came to work as hired labourers, could provide Nagaveni company; now there are no other women in the village, with whom she may discuss feminine affairs. This lack of friendly conversation heightens Nagaveni's sense of loneliness and frustration.

In order to search for farm-hands who would be willing to come and work for them during the monsoons, Ganapayya leaves for Talaguppa the next day. His wife Nagaveni also accompanies him, in order to visit her mother one last time before the five-month long monsoon sets in and inundates the village. D'Souza poignantly portrays the plight of the common, marginalized Indian farmer as he is plagued by the spiralling effects of the dam project in more ways than one. When Ganapayya and Nagaveni undertake the journey, they discover that their familiar eight-anna ferry ride was no more possible. In its place, they are forced to take the longer bus route which costs them one rupee and eight annas. At Talaguppa, Ganapayya faces further disappointment as he is unable to get any farm-hands to work for him in Hosamanehalli during the monsoon. D'Souza mirrors the grim developments at Talaguppa with the arrival of the Mirugi phase of the monsoon, marked by long and heavy spells of shower, thunder and lightning. Moreover, it marked the beginning of the most torrential few months of unceasing monsoon to follow:

Heavy wind, thunder, and lightning were harbingers of the Miragi phase of the monsoon. Once this intermittent rain became incessant, it would stop only after four months. (D'Souza 35)

Ganapayya's rock-solid conviction of staying back and cultivating his fields in Hosamanehalli take a blow due to the twin setbacks of the inclement weather and the inability to find agricultural labourers in Talaguppa. He awakens to the necessity of stocking up necessary supplies such as groceries, farm needs as well as providing the house with a new thatched roof before the unceasing rains set in. Nagaveni suggests acquiring the help of the dexterous Krishnayya-who was ten years older than her had been raised as a family member by her parents. The author suggests the emotional proximity between Nagaveni and Krishnayya-of which Ganapayya is also aware and possibly a little uncomfortable. However, with no other alternative in sight, they decide to call on Krishnayya and he arrives after a few days. But he brings the grim news that due to the dam, the Sharavathi river, which overflows its bank on one side of Hosamanehalli on other years, has spread out on both sides and will soon engulf the Sitha Parvatha on all sides.

But now that her flow was blocked further down, she had begun to spread out, encroaching the neighboring forest and valley. Trees, shrubs, and bamboo were already knee-deep in rainwater, in red muddy water, still and silent.... Who ever thought the government would bring us to this state, Ayya?". (D'Souza 45)

Abandoned to his fate and deprived of his compensation amount for not being able to bribe the clerks, the government and its functionaries have left Ganapayya and others like him in this perilous situation, where their lives and livelihoods are at stake as collateral damage of developmental work. His situation worsened due to the torrential Aridhraa rainfall, which took toll on Duggaja's failing health and he breathed his last. Cut off from the neighbouring communities, Ganapayya could not even inform his kin of the passing away of his father. The water kept rising steadily, now threatening to engulf Herambha's farm. The once-lively but now deserted village reflected a sorry state of affairs, where the remaining three human beings-Ganapayya, Nagaveni and Krishnayya, lived and breathed uneasily, constantly fearing for their lives and belongings.

Development in the form of the dam-construction not only takes its toll on marginalized human communities like farmers, but also evicts wild animals from their natural habitat. D'Souza intensifies the grimness of the situation for Ganapayya and his family, when he portrays how the unrelenting Aridhraa rain flooded even the Malenadu forests at a distance, forcing the tigers, cheetahs, bison, wild boars, pythons, etc to seek refuge in the surroundings of Hosamanehalli, searching for higher ground (D'Souza 51). Nagaveni reports having seen a python enter the woodshed; she also suggests that the unnatural sounds uttered by the cows might have been a result of a tiger or a cheetah lurking nearby (D'Souza 52). Ganapayya's resilience was on the verge of breaking down. The helplessness he felt now was unprecedented. His earlier resolve to stay in Hosamanehalli and cultivate his fields had almost gone completely. What he lamented now was the inexplicable delay in the arrival of the compensation.

Nagaveni, in her conversations with Krishnayya, blames Ganapayya's stubbornness for their present misery. Nagaveni had suggested Krishnayya to move in with her parents for the monsoon. But the thought must have hurt Ganapayya's male ego and he refused; moreover, most of the saplings had been planted before the rains arrived-therefore, leaving them to be inundated and leaving for Nagaveni's hometown would have surely destroyed the

crops and jeopardized their financial condition further (D'Souza 54-55). Ganapayya and Krishnayya, on the way to the farm, witness the damage done by the Sharavathi, forced to overflow its banks by the Linganamakki dam...carcasses floating about: rabbits, wildfowl, and deer. They could hardly make them out; they were that bloated. They might have drowned in the water or might have died in the wind and rain. (D'Souza 73)

Krishnayya was an orphan whom Nagaveni's father had raised with love and care. He was ten years older than Nagaveni. The two had been very close before Nagaveni got married. Even now whenever Krishnayya was around, Nagaveni forgot that she was a married woman. Her fondness for and proximity with Krishnayya made Ganapayya awkward and Krishnayya was aware of it. Krishnayya had given different excuses to avoid coming over to Ganapayya's house, but ultimately Nagaveni's father convinced him to go. Neither Krishnayya nor Nagaveni could keep themselves within check, increasing the feeling of insecurity in Ganapayya. Ganapayya's irritation increases rapidly and he beats up Nagaveni. When Krishnayya comes to know of it, he threatens to leave immediately if Ganapayya does not promise to mend his ways. Ganapayya is embarrassed and apologises. (D'Souza 73)

However, as Aridhraa makes way for Aslesha, the rains show no sign of stopping. The three human beings-isolated from the rest of the world by the inundation and hemmed in by the fear of wild animals lurking nearby are driven out of their sanity. Nagaveni cannot bear distancing herself from Krishnayya any longer; Krishnayya is torn between his fantasy for Nagaveni and his sense of gratitude towards her father for saving and raising him; Ganapayya cannot accept Nagaveni's proximity with Krishnayya.

The breaking point is reached when Krishnayya, unable to pardon himself any longer, decides to leave without informing anyone-even if that means swimming across the predator-infested waters. As soon as she realises this, Nagaveni too jumps into the water and joins Krishnayya. Ganapayya, distraught upon witnessing his wife's ultimate betrayal, is eaten alive by the lurking tiger on his way back to their house.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's book *The Greater Common Good* (1999) studies the effects of dam-construction in detail. The first adverse effect she discusses is the forced eviction of marginalised people from their lands, livelihoods, cultures and traditions. On many occasions they are deprived of compensation on one or the other pretext. Thus they are left without land, deprived of their livelihoods and alienated from their culture and tradition. They bear the brunt of development, whose benefits are enjoyed by others. Being removed from the centre and agencies of power, they have no avenues for voicing their disenfranchisement. A similar fate awaits wild animals who reside in those forests that get inundated when the course of the river gets altered due to dam construction. These animals are forced to migrate and adapt in new habitats. Often it leads to their death and in worse cases, extinction of species.

Besides rampant displacement, dam construction is often accompanied by soil erosion, salinisation of the soil, deforestation and submersion. Agriculture, fishing and allied professions get seriously affected. The work patterns of labour get affected as well; the alterations in the course of the Sharavathi would flood Hosamanehalli and surrounding villages not only for one year but every year thenceforth. Thus, labourers from the Hasalaru and the Deevru communities would have to find employment elsewhere.

The only antidote that can avoid such multifarious problems from cropping up is to adopt the sustainable development approach, whereby benefits accruing from development may be distributed in a more equitable fashion. Madan Mohan opines that in order to strike the right balance between industrial proliferation and ecological health, extensive planning must be undertaken beforehand. A judicious mix of environmental management, assessment of impacts on the environment and promotion of eco-development must be ensured, so that the adverse effects do not outweigh the benefits in case of gigantic projects such as dams and hydel projects.

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