



**THE SUNDARBANS-A DEATH TRAP: THE TIDE COUNTRY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE***

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**Abstract:**

*Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* elaborates the hardships of the refugees in the Sundarbans, the tide country. The Sundarbans, the deltaic region has the area of 10,000 square kilometres of land and water in the Ganges delta between the borders of India and Bangladesh. The place is known for uncertain climatic conditions, floods, tides, cyclones, man-eaters, crocodiles and poisonous snakes. Refugees from West Bengal settle illegally in the Sundarbans who fall easy prey to the natural calamities and animal attacks. The paper attempts to throw light upon the ugliness of the Sundarbans that takes away the lives of thousands of people. The islands and the water streams change their shapes every now and then. The forests of mangroves and the tides take away the lives of the settlers. The tide country is known for the hungry tides that devour lives of people, animals and plants, making the Sundarbans, ugly.*

**Keywords:** *Natural Calamities, Animal-Attacks, Deaths, Fear, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most celebrated novelists in Indian English today, was born in Calcutta in 1956, whose writings brought him several prestigious awards, including, Prix Médicis Étranger Award and Arthur C Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction. His writings were shortlisted for the 2008 Man Booker Prize for Fiction Prize and for the 2011 Man Asia Literary Prize. Taking into consideration his contributions to Indian English fiction, Government of India conferred upon him the much coveted Padma Shri Award in 2007. In 2016, Ghosh received Lifetime Achievement Award at Tata Literature Live in the Mumbai LitFest. Subsequently, in 2018, Ghosh became the first English-language writer to receive Jnanpith Award. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* explicates the struggles of the settlers in the Sundarbans at almost all levels for survival. The geographical space plays pivotal role in the lives of thousands of settlers in the narrative. The Sundarbans become a death trap for the poor refugees, animals and plants as the islands are subjected to huge tides,



cyclones, storms, tiger attacks, crocodiles, and poisonous snakes. Though the islands are known as the Sundarbans for their rich biodiversity, it proves ugly for thousands of refugees and their families. Amin and Shammin in their scholarly research paper explicate the importance of the Sundarbans:

The Sundarbans, a World Heritage Site, is the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world spanning across the border between Bangladesh and India and home of the majestic Bengal tiger-a globally endangered species as per the Red List ... on the banks of the Matla River but washed away by consecutive cyclones within a few years. (Ghosh, 2016). The power the natural world has over land and people in this part of the world is simply overwhelming (Amin R. & Shammin, 2021).

Amitav Ghosh selects the deltaic region of the Sundarbans near the Bay of Bengal for his ecological novel, *The Hungry Tide* that covers the area of 10,000 square kilometres of land and water in the Ganges delta between the borders of India and Bangladesh which is declared as the UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. The entire deltaic region was once under the Bay of Bengal, and the Ganga and the Brahmaputra Rivers meet the Bay at the apex near Gour in Malda district. The Sundarbans has numerous channels, distributaries and re-distributaries consisting bottom-set, fore-set and top-set beds, forming the deltaic region. These islands attract settlements of illegal intruders and migrants. The term the “Sundarbans” means beautiful forests that attracts the refugees, but it fails to protect them. It does not remain beautiful as the nature in the islands is capricious and coercive.

The novel documents triggering role of nature, climate and environment in the deltaic region of the islands, mangrove forests and the refugees in the Sundarbans. It exhibits the crises between humans and the ecology at the Sundarbans and Morichjhapi islands in the delta of the Ganges where immigrants struggle with the cyclones, floods, man-eaters crocodiles and venomous snakes. The novel chronicles the struggle of the settlers in small islands in the tide country for survival, the intervention of humans and nature, the trio connection among the plants, animals and humans. It is divided into two parts, Part One is entitled, *The Ebb: Bhata* and Part Two is *The Flood: Jowar*; highlighting the cyclical nature of the ebb and the flood that affect the ecology and human lives on the banks of the rivers and their tributaries in the Sundarbans. The writer is keen in bringing out the vast spread area of waters in the jungles during the tides. Climate changes every now and then. “There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.” (Ghosh, 7) The islands change their shapes with every tide exhibiting the power of water. The tides in the Bay of Bengal push the waters back into the currents of the river that the connectivity between the islands of Sundarbans, Lusibari, Morichjhapi and others are lost. Similarly, the density of the trees and leaves is so thick that the preying animals like tigers and crocodiles attack the helpless human beings. Therefore, the writer alarms the readers about the grotesque nature. Ghosh illustrates new ecological creation with beauty and its beasts:

Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense, visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's





hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (Ghosh, 7-8)

Gradually, Ghosh introduces how the inhabitants of these islands call the tide country as *bhatirdesh* where the ebb-tide gives birth to the forest. These forests are formed in the night as a result it is known as the tide country. The settlers travel by boats and wade through muddy banks pulling up their saris and lungis as well as their trousers till their waists, “each passenger sank slowly into the mud, like a spoon disappearing into a bowl of very thick *daal*; only when they were in up to their hips did their descent end and their forward movement begins. With their legs hidden from sight, all that was visible of their struggles was the twisting of their upper bodies.” (Ghosh, 24-25) It seems that travelling through boats and muddy waters is the routine for the dwellers in these islands. They travel from one island to the other using boats, through the dark, and storms confronting crocodiles and tigers. During the rainy season the rivers flow fully flooded causing greater damages to the lives on the banks. Also, the rains invite diseases like pneumonia wherein the poor refugees succumb to death. Ecology and ecological changes bring agonies, sufferings and death to the settlers on the banks of these rivers. The instability in the climate reduces the amount of life on the islands. The volatility in climate triggers life threats. Neogi and others in their research paper rightly points out the role of climate change in the tide country:

Sundarbans’ large human population is exposed to a new set of challenges posed by global climate change. Studies indicate that changes in river discharge, tides, temperature, rainfall and evaporation will affect the wetland nutrient variations, influencing the physiological and ecological processes and hence biodiversity and productivity of Sundarban mangroves. Hydrological changes in wetland ecosystems through increased salinity and cyclones will lower food security and increase human vulnerability to waterborne diseases (Neogi, et al. 2017).

The lives of the people are governed by the tides of the rivers as the shores are formed and distorted by the tides. Tides change every biotic and abiotic element on the banks of these rivers. Kanai explicates the triggering role of rain, water, and tide in the lives of the people, “But Kanai knew that once the tide turned everything would disappear: the rising waters of the mohona would swallow up the jungle as well as the rivers and their openings. If it were not for the tips of a few *kewra* trees you would think you were gazing at a body of water that reached beyond the horizon. Depending on the level of the tide, he remembered, the view was either exhilarating or terrifying.” (Ghosh, 36-37)

During rainy days it becomes more difficult to travel by boat as it may lead to casualties due to high tides. Ecology is so strong that it does not allow the settlers to construct permanent ports or structures for the boats to harbor safe. Water streams, in other words, keeps on making the soils porous and mobile. The very character of the islands rests on the water streams, “There were no docks or jetties on Lusibari, for the currents and tides that flowed around it were too powerful to permit the construction of permanent structures” (Ghosh, 37). The tides dominate the



transportation, routes and lives of the settlers. The plants, animals and settlements shift as the islands shift.

Piyali Roy is a cetologist who is on her mission to study the dolphins, their behaviour, and their routes in the rivers and water streams in the Sundarbans. But she comes across huge crocodiles, “There were four of them, and they were huge: from tip to tail, the largest of them was probably about the same length as the launch. She had wondered what it would be like to encounter one of these monsters up close and the thought had prompted an involuntary shudder” (Ghosh, 42). Huge crocodiles and the royal Bengal tigers threat the visitors. Eventually, Ghosh throws light upon the children of ecology-the fishermen and the boatmen who resemble the lean and thin but strong plants in the islands. Piyali observes keenly the physical features of the boatmen comparing them to the ecology of the islands, “His frame was skeletal, almost wasted, in the way of a man who’d grown old on the water, slowly yielding his flesh to the wind and the sun. She had come across many such fishermen on other rivers” (Ghosh, 42-43).

Consequently, Ghosh excavates the history of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scottish young businessman who had come to Calcutta to make his fortune. He had the doubts in mind regarding why the island was forsaken by people. “Why does no one live here? Why are these islands empty of people? Why is this valuable soil allowed to lie fallow?” A crewman sees him peering into the forest and points out the ruins of an old temple and a mosque. See, he says, people lived here once, but they were driven away by tempests and tides, tigers and crocodiles. “*Tai naki?*” says S’ Daniel. Is that so? “But if people lived here once, why shouldn’t they again?” (Ghosh, 50) He learns that in past people lived on the island but the ecology is so fearsome that the tides, tempests and the crocodiles and tigers forced the people to evacuate the island. These islands were occupied by the people-refugees and migrants but soon they were forced to vacate due to the ecological forces. The tigers, crocodiles and snakes killed hundreds of poor people in the islands of the Sundarbans. Soon, S’ Daniel declared a war against the creatures of ecology as he rewards people who kills a tiger or a crocodile. Actually, settlements of the refugees in the islands are the encroachments in nature by the people acquiring illegally the natural habitation of the animals that results in attacks on them. “Think of what it was like: think of the tigers, crocodiles and snakes that lived in the creeks and *nalas* that covered the islands. This was a feast for them. They killed hundreds of people. So many were killed that S’ Daniel began to give out rewards to anyone who killed a tiger or crocodile” (Ghosh, 52) .

A happenstance where Kusum, the mother of Fokir experiences a venomous snake that glides down from the poles of bamboo net when she is talking with Kanai. Sudden confrontations with snakes, crocodiles, tigers and tempests are the pivotal concerns of the narrative. The description of an unexpected confrontation with a venomous snake shudders Kanai. Ghosh paints the instance so well that the readers can easily visualize:

Suddenly one of the strings had come alive; to the accompaniment of a sharp hiss, it had snapped a whip-like tail across the palm of her hand. She had snatched her arm back just in time to see a long, thin shape dropping from the pole. She had caught a glimpse of it before it wriggled under the door. It was an extremely venomous arboreal snake that inhabited the upper branches of some of the more slender mangroves: in the poles of the mosquito net it had evidently found a perch much to its liking (Ghosh, 89).





This instance of a sudden snake confrontation makes Kanai restless. He is so much disturbed by it, that he feels, the entire roof of his room has come alive like snakes. The snake affects his psyche so much that he feels that everything around him is taking the shape of snake with rustles, shapes, hisses and squeals.

*The Hungry Tide* also deals with the hunger of the royal Bengal tigers, the big cats that prey human beings easily, especially, the refugees. “This was in itself an astonishing sight, almost without precedent, for the great cats of the tide country were like ghosts, never revealing their presence except through marks, sounds and smells. They were so rarely seen that to behold one, it was said, was to be as good as dead – and indeed the sight caused several of the women on the embankment to lose consciousness” (Ghosh, 108).

The expanse of the dense mangrove forests with fifty six tributaries of the Ganga, the Brahmaputra and the Sutlej make the entire huge landscape a widespread labyrinth. The writer narrates the story of Bernier and his people who had visited the islands for expedition lost their way. The reference to the story amplifies the complex structure of the islands, ““On the third day Bernier and his party discovered that they were lost. They wandered through creeks and rivers and became more and more distracted, thinking that they were trapped forever in this labyrinth of waterways” (Ghosh, 146). Consequently, Nirmal brings to light the unbelievable and mysterious facts about the forests. It seems that ecology itself takes the shape of a ghost. The wild fire and the great swarm of the glow-worms turn the entire landscape into a haunted place. Nirmal narrates:

First, the wind died down so that not a leaf stirred in the forest. Next the air around the boat began to heat up and it soon became so hot that the priest and his party could scarcely breathe. Then, all of a sudden, the mangroves around the boat seemed to burst into flame as the greenery was invaded by great swarms of glow-worms. These insects hovered in such a way as to give the impression that fires were dancing in the mangroves’ roots and branches. This caused panic among the sailors who, the Jesuit says, “did not doubt that they were so many devils (Ghosh, 146-147).

Gradually, Nirmal narrates how ecology exhibits the terror in the Sundarbans through storm, fierce wind, rain, thunder and lightning. The scenario becomes so brutal that it becomes difficult to survive in the situation where everything is vague. “But the storm raged with such ferocity that their cables could not long withstand the wind. Soon the ropes snapped and it seemed certain the boat would be blown out of its shelter, into a storm-tossed mohona where the waves were sure to rip apart the hull. All the while “the rain fell as if poured into the boat from buckets” and the “lightning and thunder were so vivid and loud, and so near our heads, that we despaired of surviving this horrible night” (Ghosh, 147).

During the Civil War of 1971, the Hindus from Bangladesh lost their homes and belongings, and, they were forced to take refuge in the delta of the Sundarbans. The tide country showcases how islands disappear in the floods. During the floods, the tides nibble the islands slowly. Piyali observes how the island disappears in flood, “Keeping watch in the bow, Piya saw that, with the tide in flood, the surrounding islands were sliding gradually beneath the water.” (Ghosh, 166) Subsequently, the tide country unearths the possible dangers to the visitors beneath veneer of the scenic beauty through the huge crocodiles. Crocodiles in the Sundarbans are huge in



shape to attack and tear a human being into pieces. The fear is evident when Piya observes three crocodiles through her binoculars, “They were lying exposed to view but their mud-caked bodies blended so well into the surroundings that it was hard to judge their size. One had its jaws open and it seemed to Piya that the gap was wide enough to take the measure of a human being – certainly one of her own size” (Ghosh, 166-167).

The Sundarbans is popularly known for the huge crocodiles and their attacks on the human beings. They camouflage in the water, mud and the mangroves so well that they are never spotted easily by their prey. They attack so suddenly from their hiding places that the escape of the preys is hardly possible. Piya experiences a very close encounter with death through the crocodile attack which she escapes narrowly. Ghosh elaborates:

Suddenly the water boiled over and a pair of huge jaws came shooting out of the river, breaking the surface exactly where Piya's wrist had been a moment before. From the corner of one eye, Piya saw two sets of interlocking teeth make a snatching, twisting movement as they lunged at her still extended arm: they passed so close that the hard tip of the snout grazed her elbow and the spray from the nostrils wetted her forearm. A second later the boat shook under the impact of a massive underwater blow. The shock was powerful enough to send the bilge water shooting up, out of the innards of the craft: there was a creaking sound and the boat tipped to such an angle that it seemed almost inevitable it would roll over (Ghosh, 174-175).

The diary of Nirmal contains several instances of calamities taken place in the Sundarbans. The tides toss entire islands and hundreds of lives that appear and submerge within a fraction of moment. “*That one began simply enough, with an exceptionally high tide, a kotalgon that came spilling over the top.*” (Ghosh202) Tides become the prime force behind the existence and decline of anything in the islands. Especially, during storms the entire settlements are gnawed by the high tides. Slowly as the water level increases the huts and the constructions dissolve into the waters. The striking of the storm and the tides are more horrifying and irreparable than a tiger attack. Nirmal chronicles how ecology in the Sundarbans decides the destiny of the settlers:

And imagine that fateful night, when the storm struck, at exactly the time that a kotalgon was setting in: imagine how they cowered in their roofless huts and watched the waters, rising, rising, gnawing at the mud and the sand they had laid down to hold the river off. Imagine what went through their heads as they watched this devouring tide eating its way through the earthworks, stalking them wherever they were. There was not one among them, I will guarantee you, my young friend, who would not rather have stood before a tiger than have looked into the maws of that tide (Ghosh, 203).

Subsequently, in one of the pages of his diary, Nirmal Bose enunciates how human lives are spoilt by ecology. The crocodiles kill three men. This tragic happenstance showcases how precious human lives are wasted unguarded in the islands of the Sundarbans. “When the flame was kindled they saw that the hold was filled with water, and swimming in this tank was an enormous





crocodile it had killed those three men” (Ghosh, 205). Further Nirmal Bose unearths the history of ecophobic instances how in the great storm of 1737 more than twenty-four ships were lost in these waters. Further, in 1885 the India Steam Navigation Company lost two proud steamers in these islands. Gradually, the ecology of the Sundarbans creates abundant unbelievable stories. The floods bring lots of things in the city. The huge tides from the delta, “The wave travelled deep into the hinterland, flooding the swamps and wetlands that surrounded Calcutta. When the tide turned and the waters began to recede, a rumour swept the streets of the city: a school of giant sea-creatures had been stranded in one of the salt lakes on the city's western outskirts” (Ghosh, 228). The refugees in the Sundarbans settle in such an unorganized way that they settle wherever they get shelter and fall easy preys to the tigers, venomous snakes and crocodiles. The number of tigers in the Sundarbans is so high that they kill the refugees as they are easily available. Nilima expresses her fear that a human being is killed every other day in the deltaic region of the Sundarbans. The interaction between Nilima and Kanai throws light upon the fear of death by tiger attacks in the tide country. And the figures of the deaths caused by the tiger attacks are not factual:

My belief is that over a hundred people are killed by tigers here each year...If you include the Bangladesh side; the figure is probably twice that. If you put the figures together, it means that a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans—at the very least.

Kanai raised his eyebrows. I knew there were killings, he said, 'but I never thought there were as many as that.'

'That's the trouble,' said Nilima. 'Nobody knows exactly how many killings there are. None of the figures are reliable. But of this I'm sure: there are many more deaths than the authorities admit' (Ghosh, 240).

Further, the writer amplifies the easy availability of human beings in the Sundarbans for the tigers to pounce upon. It is believed that only the old, injured or ill tigers attack human beings as humans are easy prey. But the healthy tigers in the Sundarbans attack human beings because of the non-availability of food. The tide gulps down the islands, and the food for the predators is not accessible. The tigers develop the habit of attacking human beings. Ghosh writes, “...even young and healthy animals were known to attack humanbeings. Some said that this propensity came from the peculiar conditions of the tidal ecology, in which large parts of the forest were subjected to daily submersions. The theory went that this raised the animals' threshold of aggression by washing away their scent markings and confusing their territorial instincts” (Ghosh, 241).

As the settlers in the delta are illegally settled refugees, there are no records of the tiger attacks on human beings either reported in the newspapers or in the government chronicles. The forests of the Sundarbans are so dense and obscure that they provide a greater shelter for the tigers to camouflage with the surroundings, and, easily attack the human beings. Majority of the victims are not found. “Official records show 579 people killed by tigers in the Sundarbans since 1973. Of those, 373 were fishermen, 107 honey-gatherers and the rest woodcutters. Villagers say many more, as many as 2,500, have been killed. Bodies of most of the victims have never been found.” (Daily News, June 10, 1987) Here, the poor refugees are attacked by the man-eaters. The discussions between Piyali and Kanai throws light upon the instances of people being killed by the tigers, ““That tiger had killed two people, Piya,’ Kanai said. ‘And that was just in one village. It



happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers” (Ghosh, 300-301).

The writer explicates the might of the storm through the incident where Piyali and Fokir are pushed nearly fifty kilometers from their place. They struggle in the storm to protect themselves and their boat, but in vain. The trees provide them the shelter to protect themselves from the storm and the tide. They realise in the morning that the flood waters are too high. People in the Sundarbans take shelters on the trees. Ghosh narrates, “Looking around them, they saw that they were not the only people to take shelter in a tree: many others had saved their lives in a similar fashion. Whole greetings were shouted from one tree to another, they learnt that they had been blown nearly fifty kilometres from where they had been when the storm hit” (Ghosh, 349). In this storm and the huge tide wherein Fokir, the true child of ecology, loses his life. The storm exploits the nature, and the children of nature. Fokir dies in an attempt to protect Piyali. He bears the blows of the storm and sacrifices his life. The water showcases all the leaves and branches plucked away by the winds. All the markers of the land disappear. The writer narrates, “The water’s surface was covered in an undulating carpet of green, while the forest—or what little could be seen of it—was completely denuded of leaves, stripped down to trunks and stalks. With the drowning of the landscape the channels’ shores had disappeared, making navigation doubly difficult” (Ghosh, 391).

The calamity is so terrifying that the leading newspapers in the western countries also consider the news to be published on the front page. For instance, *The Free Lance-Star*, the daily newspaper comments harshly on the calamities happened in Bangladesh. It comments how human lives are wasted in the obscure parts of the islands in Bangladesh. The caption of the news is more vocal, “Tragedy is not new in Bangladesh”. Nature, cyclones and storms hit the poor refugees from time and again killing several settlers:

More than half a million people have died in 18 major hurricanes that have struck Bangladesh since 1960, according to official records, but the Guinness Book of World Records puts the toll in one storm alone at 1 million. The latest storm whipped mammoth waves across the islands and coast of southern Bangladesh on Saturday. The death toll has reached into the thousands and as many as 40,000 people are reported missing...In one of mankind's biggest disasters, the worst hurricane to hit Bangladesh occurred Nov. 12-13, 1970, when the nation was East Pakistan—a province of Pakistan. On those two days, a hurricane with wind speeds as high as 138 mph struck across the Ganges delta, battering the coastal districts of Chittagong and Khulna and off-shore islands in the south. Dhaka officials put the death toll at half a million, but the Guinness Book of World Records said at least 1 million people were killed in that two storms in 1974 and 1975 (*The Free Lance-Star*).

Amitav Ghosh vocalizes the unfortunate accident of the hungry tide that devours thousands of lives of humans and animals, tossing trees and dissolving islands. There is no political aid to the victims extended by the government. It is treated as mere historical happening. The writer projects





the massive hunger of the hungry tide in the narrative that cause millions of human beings, animals, plants and islands to suffers and submerge in the tide. The novel records the incessant struggle of the refugees in the Sundarbans where the land is unstable, and the nature is capricious. The novel comments upon the wastage of human resource in the deltaic regions of the Sundarbans. Being a Bengali native, Amitav Ghosh keenly portrays the landscapes of the Sundarbans wherein he pens down the struggle of human beings right from past. The instances from the past till present amplify the in vain efforts of the human beings in the islands of the Sundarbans where the Sundarbans no longer remain beautiful, but ugly.

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