



Myth, Ecology, and the Politics of Development: Reading Resistance in Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*

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ABSTRACT

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* ideally sits on the forum of resistance discourse. Loosely based on the Narmada Bachao Andolan, in which the novelist was an active participant, this graphic work has questioned the liberty of political governance in the nonchalant sacrificing of nature and people in the pretext of modern development. In an interview with O'HeraldO Goa, Orijit Sen said, "I was drawn into because of being involved in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, in the 1990s, I think they were among the first mass movements in India that raised these questions of development for who, and at who's cost."- O'HeraldO Goa (YouTube) The novel also makes use of mysticism to depict the philosophy of life, both of nature and people, affected by the modern demands of urbanisation and abetted by the wings of politics. The paper focuses on the use of myth and ecology as a form of resistance against the so-called development by scarring nature and to the resultant displaced identities that form the problem.

"If a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand." (Mark 3:24) This Biblical belief is ecologically inclined as the unnatural division of an area always leads to bitter consequences. River, a powerful element of nature, has similar reservations. But, unlike modern science, defying the sanctity of nature does not fall in the books of indigenous culture and its people and their firm belief in nature as the supreme God does not

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disqualify their ecological consciousness. Orijit Sens's *River of Stories* serves as an ecological stance to commemorate the lost mysticism that further abets the loss of identity, cultural and ethnic. Considered to be the first graphic Indian novel, it deals with how ecology and mysticism is interwoven at a time when environmental crisis started spreading its roots. The novel is an echo of Narmada Bachao Andolan; and the story revolves around Rewa river, a fictional name, but has its origin as the largest and longest river in the Fiji islands. The author's close association with and active participation in Narmada Bachao Andolan set the background of the novel and created layers of meaning, cultural, ecological and mystical. Like the construction of Narmada Dam, the Rewa river is also being obstructed by a dam that displaced many indigenous communities in the pretext of development. Therefore, the novel takes both the ecocentric and anthropocentric stance as a form of resistance against the narrative of modern development through the application of a mystical consciousness.

Ecology and mysticism, though different in their parallel worlds, have a strong affiliation in the matters of cultural identity. Mysticism is often associated with religion and spirituality; whereas, ecology is the scientific study of the natural world, an area that was mystical until the recent centuries. But ecology and mysticism put together “posit an underlying unity that binds every extant thing into one whole.” (Tagnani 1) This can be linked to the notion of ‘the supreme conscious’ or the ‘universal Self’ in Indian Philosophy. In the Guru Gita of Skandapurana, Maharshi Ved Vyas writes, “Om Akhanda Manadalakaram Vyaptam yena Charaacharam/Tadpadam Darshitam yena Tasmai Shri Guruve Namaha” (*Ahym sin - Akhanda-mandalākāram Mantra*, n.d.) This means that there is a divine energy which pervades in the entire universe in all forms of life and even the world of the non-living. This divine energy is the ‘supreme conscious’ which is present in both the static as well as the dynamic. Considering the omnipresence of energy in all forms, it can be said that the energy that flows through an individual is the same energy that flows through the universe; thus, creating a bridge of interconnectedness between the both. Therefore, it becomes the duty of the individual self to look after the larger, universal Self.

Eco-mysticism is a part of spiritual ecology that does not adhere to any specific religion but concentrates on a domain of natural energy of which the human world is a part and parcel of its existence. It is not the material world but an underlying peace that resonates itself in the primitive perspective of human beings about the natural world. Having said that, the treatment of nature by the indigenous communities in India represents a scientific way but the explanation to their scientific outlook and belief system often is devoid of ratiocination; being quite mystical and unreasonable for the modern science to grasp. But, nevertheless, it acts like an invocation of a revolution in the human consciousness to be more ecocentric. The paper will deal with how in *River of Stories* the confluence of ecological and mystical insights of the indigenous



people acts as a form of resistance against the modern narratives of development aided by the brutal displacement of these marginalized communities.

The people by the Rewa river, a river which is addressed as a “mother” and “the holy one and provider of life...” (Sen 36) are a developed truth that constitutes the mass realisation of underlying relationship between humans and nature with all her diversification. They represent all the denied possibilities of scientific research that could have helped debugging the underlying causes of the ongoing environmental crisis. The creation of dams that obstructs the natural flow of a river is a specimen of the ecological oblivion on the part of the government and also the modern science that has its facts drawn from natural, rational and scientific perspectives. But this perspective excludes the innumerable boundless alternatives that are present in the materialist world. Vandana Shiva has rightly commented, “This materialist criterion allows one to view belief systems as weak when the unanticipated and unpredicted change in the material environment is far more extensive and intensive than the predicted transformation.” (Shiva, 2). Therefore, Paul Shepard, the deep ecologist, has rightly observed, “Ecological thinking...requires a kind of vision across boundaries.” (Shepard, 2)

Now, development is a term that usually rests upon a definition approved by modern science. And, as has been mentioned before, the narrative of development is a framed idea that fools its believers and materially benefits its exercisers, the ones in power. This is closely associated with colonialism that used hegemony as a tool to fool the colonised in the pretext of modern development. It is, therefore, conclusive of the fact that hegemony has its grip on the ecology of the world as well. The policy makers, politicians, business stalwarts, and champions of modern science are all a part of the hegemony. Together, they “...absolutely believe that imposing the artifice of human constraint on an unruly environment is the future—a project widely known as sustainable development (and, alternatively, as managing planet earth).” (Oelschlaeger, 97) It is evident in *River of Stories* that the construction of a dam in the Rewa river in the political language shall provide employment to the masses apart from providing electricity. One of the characters in the text also questions the indigenous way of living commenting that, “The very existence of people living in such a primitive way is an obstacle for modernizing the country.” (Sen, 8) But, this narrative of employment and development foreshadows the collateral damage on ecology and identity of the indigenous settlement resulting in a displaced identity. One of the characters in the text says, “Sahib, this land is our Mata. She gives us food and shelter. She takes care of our needs. We worship the trees, the rivers, the hills...” (Sen, 9) The process of development involves a number of unaccounted sacrifice and troubles faced by these indigenous groups when their lands and ways of living are forcefully snatched by the government for the development projects. Sen highlights this issue by showcasing the immoral and



scheming ways to uproot not only a community but also an entire ecosystem and bring it to nothingness. The family of Antriyo, in the text, falls victim to such immorality of thekedars and policemen. Raising voice against this corruption leads to Antriyo's house being burnt down to the ashes and his land being taken over by the government, and also his brother, Maaru losing his life to the scandal. Relku, Antriyo's daughter described the incident that acted as the initial phase of the indigenous people losing their lands and forced to move away to cities. In the words of Relku they were "forced to give away all our (their) land for payment in uncle's debts" (Sen 28) and further said, "One day, we were happy cultivating our own land...living in a house my father and uncles had built with their own hands and the next day we were on our way to Ballanpur to work as landless labourers with no money or possession" (Sen 28). The displacement caused in the pretext of development does no good to these indigenous communities and to the world of nature. Their identity that is closely linked to the elements of nature is at stake and this abets loss of culture and tradition innate to the community concerned.

Displacement plays an important role in the formation of identity as it is closely associated with feelings of estrangement and longing. A sense of unfulfillment and nostalgia deeply lurks in the psyche of the displaced identities. Displacement has its causes rooted in different aspects like political, economic and sometimes natural calamities. Displacement abetted by politics has mostly to do with development that deals with projects of construction that require deforestation. These "development projects appropriated or destroyed the natural resource base for the production of sustenance and survival." (Shiva, 2) Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* brings forth together the narratives of personal struggle and collective struggle resulting from the psychological and physical displacement. The text deals with these two forms of displacement by showcasing the connectivity of the indigenous people of Rewa with their lands and nature in toto. The so-called development projects of the government deeply affected these indigenous and marginalised people whose daily livelihood rested on the Rewa river. As a replica of Narmada Bachao Andolan, the text questions the government's so-called remedy that would displace these communities to different cities and assist them with a sum of money for their survival. This is vehemently criticised by Sen when these communities, during their protests, disregarded the government's assistance saying that this displacement would cost their identity that is deeply rooted in the Rewa river. Further opposing the construction of dam that would have hazardous ecological repercussions, these communities by the Rewa river showcased an ecocentric approach to nature. Sen's narrative of displacement also questions the ecological alienation that rises from the land alienation. Apart from this, these monetary compensations of the government did not promise these communities alternative forms of livelihood. A character in the text, Relku who is a migrant worker, not only stands as a specimen of displaced identity but also as a mouthpiece to the ecological



culture deeply rooted in their identities as an indigenous group. Conforming to the discourse of displacement, Relku, with her family members, lives in a city as “poor people” and her children “can’t go to school” as they “must work”.

To break the structures of these authoritarian and hegemonic regimes, resistance comes in as a contrapuntal attack. Resistance, a term which usually has physical connotations, also deals with abstract notions like values and ethics. The discourse of resistance forms a narrative in the preservation of many aspects of society like, cultural identity, ecology, and addresses the monopoly of power. It has been difficult to define the term. But, in *Theorising Resistance: Narratives in History and Politics*, Jasbir Jain is of the opinion that “it has several shades such as non-conformism, protest, propaganda, commitment, criticism... adopts variety of means and mediums...” and has its response based on different locations in “history, class, religion and ideology.” (Jain 1) In literature, this discourse, as Jain further opines, “...assumes an intellectual and ethical input, and when viewed in retrospect, it apparently forms a counter-discourse.” (Jain xiv) *River of Stories* not only showcases the rebellion that was a part of Rewa Andolan but also a rebellion against the resultant displacement and loss of indigenous identities rooted in the river. Vandana Shiva has rightly put, “their resistance is against the destruction of entire civilizations and ways of life in the very process of dam building which involves the large scale dislocation of peoples and river systems.” (Shiva, *Staying Alive*). Sen, using the insights of ecology and mysticism, brings in the character of Malgu Gayan. It is through the character of Malgu Gayan, who “sleeps for twelve years and snores for thirteen” (Sen 30) that Sen brings in the mystic element in *River of Stories*. In order to arouse that revolutionary consciousness among the agents of modern science, Malgu Gayan sings “to preserve... (the) ecosystem from destruction by the flawed development policies.” (Sen 34) It is him who says, “...time has come again to pick up the rangai so that the river of stories which rises from the soul can flow out to the far corners of the world, and people everywhere awaken to its sweet music...” (Sen 31)

In a recent case in Chhattisgarh that occurred in the second week of October, 2025, an elderly woman was seen weeping at the felling of a large Peepal Tree which she had planted twenty years ago and had nurtured it since then. The tree was illegally felled in order to “level government land in front of a plot recently purchased” by one of the two accused. (NDTV) This incident showcases the deep understanding of the relationship between the human and natural world. This relationship is again deeply rooted in spiritual values that consider humans to be an integral part of the natural world; an ecosystem that holds humans and nature together. The tree, for the elderly lady was a family member; hence, the reaction. This relationship also gives rise to a contemporary and less researched discourse called Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) that facilitates a better understanding of the mystery of nature. In the select text, one of the characters



who represents the indigenous community residing by the Rewa river, acts as a mouthpiece of the rarely understood connection between human and nature when he says that they could not let anybody deforest their land as in these forests their “deities and spirits lived” (Sen 11). It is in this philosophy that one can ensure the sustainability of nature and an ecosystem that is devoid of loss of identity and of natural calamities aided by the modern definition of development. This indigenous philosophy acts as a universal resonance of all the traditions and belief systems of the indigenous groups from every corner of the world.

Ecology and mysticism are primary agents in the River of Stories that act as a form of resistance against the narrative of development that is politically defined and also question the political lethargy in failing to cater to the cultural and economic necessity of the displaced indigenous groups. This resistance literature not only provides a voice to the oppressed but also seeks to create an awareness among its readers of the indigenous culture deeply rooted in nature and its mysticism that defies all the nomenclatures of development. It also exposes the political failure and acts as an attempt to recover the lost significance of spirituality that has its formation in the inner enthusiasm and energy generated through a confluence of mystical and ecological recognition of life and nature. All the elements of nature, rocks, trees, mountains, river, air, etc. along with other forms of living beings and organisms form a deep connection that can be traced back to the inception of existence. And through this connectivity, which seems to be hanging on a loose thread, Leonardo Boff rightly comments, “...we can grasp the grandeur, solemnity, might, and majesty that they (everything in the ecosystem) continually impart to alert spirits, who are so well represented by the indigenous peoples, poets, and mystics who understand the language of things and decipher the vast discourse of the universe.” (Boff, 38)

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