Glocal Colloquies
An International Journal of World Literatures and Cultures

ISSN: 2454-2423
Vol. 9, October 2023

Environmental Precarity in Postcolonial West Bengal: A Reading of Parimal Bhattacharya's *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land: Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok*

Tathagat Banerjee*[1]
Dr Durbadal Bhattacharya**

ABSTRACT

In "The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene", Dipesh Chakraborty argues that while the question of caste was sublimated into the categories of peasant and class in the Marxist discourse of Bengal, the Dalit question also remained invisible in the subaltern discourse. Though consciousness of caste and its terrible inequities existed, caste remained absent in most of the dominant intellectual discourses. Even in environmental dialogues, attempts at erasure of Dalit experience are evident, and tend to overlook how ecological degradation has continued to affect the living conditions of the marginalised communities, particularly the Dalits in postcolonial West Bengal. These marginalised, resourceless groups are the principal victims of environmental hazards, degradation and injustices. Here, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's idea of "postcolonial environment" is used to describe the current situation of ostensibly decolonised countries with deteriorating landscapes, troubled colonial histories and postcolonial economic dependence on global ruling class, such as that of the postcolonial West Bengal. Globalised ruling classes continue to control and exploit such postcolonial sites through local intermediaries. The case of post-independent West Bengal can be read as an example of one such postcolonial environment, which is marked by an ecological and human disposability. In this context, we intend to examine Parimal Bhattacharya's representation of West Bengal as one such postcolonial environment in his creative nonfiction *Field Notes from a Water Borne Land: Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok* (2021). Divided into seven chapters, all rooted in specific geographical areas of Bengal, ranging from rivers to forests and hills, the book records the precarious lives of the marginalised communities and their degrading environment as resultant effects of the unfolding capital.

KEYWORDS

precarity, Dalit, bhadralok, postcolonial, environment, global capital, unevenness.

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Langat Singh College, Muzaffarpur, Email: tathagatbnrj21@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Department of English, Laxmi Narain Dubey College, Motihari, Email: madhubadal2008@gmail.com

1 | INTRODUCTION

Parimal Bhattacharya's *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land: Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok (*2021) begins with an epigraph consisting of the following quotes by Tagore and Coetzee respectively:

"If we look into our hearts, we will have to admit that the India we know is actually the India of the bhadralok" — Rabindranath Tagore (qtd. in Bhattacharya v).

"There is no lie that does not have at its core some truth. One must only know how to listen." — J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (qtd. in Bhattacharya v).

While Tagore clearly points out the schism in India, a schism between the enclaved few and the outcastes, the dominant sections of the population and the marginalized ones, the visible and the invisibilized, the indispensables and the disposables, Coetzee's statement foreshadows the destabilising effect the text will have on the neoliberal discourses of sustainable development in postcolonial India. The book was the result of an unfinished UGC research project on the primary school dropouts. During his travels and interaction with people the realisation dawned upon the author that "…universal primary education is a prism: it refracts a spectrum of economic, social, cultural and even ecological issues, which remain muddled" (P. Bhattacharya ix).

The book traces the trajectories of both "slow" and "spectacular" (Nixon 2) violence resulting in sustained ecological degradation and ecological disasters in contemporary India and finds such precarious environments in the postcolonial states to have their roots in its history of colonialism and in the uneven unfolding of the global capital in postcolonial era of neoliberalism. The book cuts through recorded history often treated as anointed truth and challenges dominant discourses to reveal a polyphony of voices exposing how the "postcolonial environment" (Mukherjee 12), a term used by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee to identify the problematic condition of nations with colonial past, both carries the trauma of colonial violence and at the same time is subject to new forms of exploitations perpetrated by evolved forms of colonialism, namely neocolonialism, that is represented by both the postcolonial state's masters and transnational companies. Therefore, Bhattacharya's book becomes a site of engagement for both postcolonial and eco-critical perspectives.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM

The last few decades have witnessed an increasing attempt on the part of various disciplines to engage productively with environmental studies. Literary studies too have taken a "green" turn. Environmental studies primarily originated in the U.S.A in the 1960s -70s in the works of authors like Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, and Rachel Carson. Later on, "Third world" (Nixon 47) environmentalists like Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, Joan Martinez Alier and, Ken Saro Wiwa intervened. Eco criticism or ecological literary study, however, was shaped as a proper subfield of literary studies by scholars like Cheryl Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Scott Slovic, Laurence Buell and, Greg Garrard. The formation of the ASLE and the journal ISLE established ecocriticism as a critical school by 1993.

In this context, we would like to focus on the dialogue between postcolonial studies and ecocritical studies in literature. In the second edition of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (2006) edited by Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths, an entire section was devoted to "environment" (qtd. in Mukherjee 53). On the other hand, while Pablo Mukherjee and Rob Nixon trace the schisms persisting between these two fields of literary

studies, they still advocate a careful coupling of these two extremely important modes of reading. Graham Huggan linked the environmental crisis to modern capitalism and imperialism and thereby justified the "green" turn of post-colonialism. Significant studies such as *Post-Colonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010) by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin also indicate the continuous exchange between postcolonial and eco critical literary studies.

Here, we propose to attempt a close reading of Parimal Bhattacharya's *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land: Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok* using the theoretical framework of "postcolonial ecocriticism" (Cilano and DeLoughrey 74). This leads me to the important term that can be used as a conceptual tool to aid my study- "postcolonial environments" (Mukherjee 1). The term, taken from Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's book *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (2010) is used to refer to the contemporary state of supposedly decolonized nations or "new post colonies" (7). Here, the 'post' in post-colonialism is not used as a historical marker of the end of colonialism, but as an extension of colonialism in new forms. The term is used in a loaded way to imply the phenomenon of neo-colonialism. Moreover, the word "environment" is used to refer to the well-knit system composed of the relationship between human and non-human and material and immaterial transactions between them. Using the term "postcolonial environments" (1), Pablo Mukherjee insinuates at the gradual exploitation of the environments of nations burdened with colonial pasts and consequent economic dependence on developed nations in the post-independence period. To make things clearer, the act of embracing development ideology leads third world nations to fall prey to neocolonial masters, comprising of an evil nexus between transnational companies, national or the state governments, and the bureaucrats; to use Mukherjee's phrase, neocolonialism is "a cartel composed of their own and 'core' metropolitan European/north American elites" (5). And this turns the nation into a site of constant exploitation, causing substantial damage to its ecological system. The predatory socio-economic system of global capitalism spreads uneven development in such postcolonial environments, leading to socio-economic, political, ecological, and cultural crises.

Scholars like Pablo Mukherjee and Ramachandra Guha believe that, other than the historical, political and economic dimensions, majority of the conflicts and injustices in contemporary India are intricately connected to the environment of the nation. "The material strata, one that is composed of soil, water, plants, crops, animals" (Mukherjee 5) and in which the postcolonial nation is rooted in, therefore, cannot be neglected. Therefore, the conceptual tool best suited to understand the condition of contemporary India is an intertwining of the concepts of the postcolonial and the environment.

Any neocolonial system uncouples power from responsibility, and thereby relinquishes the citizens at the margins and renders the environment disposable. Contemporary India, Mukherjee thinks, is postcolonial in the sense that it is a site or zone of exploitation by a globalised ruling class, composed of both state and global actors. For Mukherjee, colonialism and the following post-colonial conditions are stages in the uneven global unfolding of capital. In Marxist thought, the material unevenness of the world is an important concept. This unevenness is affected by the opposed tendencies of capitalism, that is, capitalism as a system over accumulates capital in one zone and empties another of it, thereby adding a spatial dimension to it. Neil Smith explains this in the following manner, "The pattern which results in the landscape is well known: development at one pole and

underdevelopment at the other. This takes place at a number of spatial scales" (qtd. in Mukherjee 77).

Capitalism thrives on colonial oppression. Mukherjee here reiterates Lenin's theory of imperialism to trace how the intertwined growth of capitalism and colonialism led to neoliberal imperialism, that is, the monopoly stage of capitalism. All these threads are joined together by the one feature, that of "uneven development" (Mukherjee 7). Thus, the terms postcolonial and environment bound together by the phenomenon of uneven capitalist development explain how pockets of affluence and pockets of bareness coexist at the same time in a postcolonial space. Mukherjee explores the relationship between such radical unevenness and literary and nonliterary cultures in postcolonial spaces. He cites Trotsky's view on this and states:

> As historical capital globalizes itself, its unevenness also takes cultural forms. A zone or a country that is 'backward' in terms of its capital accumulation assimilates the cultural wealth of those that are more 'advanced', but not in a blind, imitative fashion (Trotsky 1977, pp. 26–7). Rather, it amalgamates or combines these 'advanced' cultural forms with those 'archaic' forms that exist around it, producing extreme stylistic unevenness. (qtd. in Mukherjee 15)

The uneven development thus wrought by capitalism is fiercely evident in countries with a colonial history and in neocolonial grip. This unevenness has a cultural consequence. It gives rise to literature with extreme stylistic unevenness, with a fusion of disparate forms. In short, a financially backward country assimilates the advanced cultural forms available from an advanced country, combines these advanced forms with available regional forms thereby creating uneven literary pieces. The presence of advanced civilisation in a backward country juxtaposes advanced literary forms with old archaic ones. Therefore, the writers are influenced to make an "evolutionary jump" (79) which results in singular artistic modes and forms.

Mukherjee understands the problems of using Indian English novels to examine this cultural aspect of postcolonial environment. First, Indian English literature represents only a fraction of total literary production in the country. Second, it tends to become what Graham Huggan calls the "postcolonial exotic" (qtd. in Mukherjee 8). Third, the writers occupying a privileged position help in the extension and regulation of the neocolonial regime. However, Mukherjee notes that postcolonial writers often "find a way of registering an artistic critique of their own sociological positions in their works" (Mukherjee 8). And in addition to that, Indian English literature offers a critique of postcolonial regime through its literary specificity and singularity. The literary singularity is moulded by the extreme unevenness of capitalist development in the post colony which renders the environment too uneven.

3 | READING BHATTACHARYA – ECOLOGY, CULTURE, AND MARGINALITY

Parimal Bhattacharya's *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land* is unique or singular in its own sense. In his review in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Debraj Bhattacharya calls it a "creative nonfiction" (38), a text that straddles the space of fiction as well as non-fiction. The concept of postcolonial environment has some representational challenges. But Bhattacharya negotiates with his representational challenges by a curious fusion of various modes/forms. This combination of the forms of memoir, travelogue, testimonies, interviews, journalistic

reporting, baul[1] sangeet, orality and memorialisation and technique of intertextuality allows him to negotiate with representational difficulties.

Parimal Bhattacharya divides his book into seven chapters, all named after important ecological resources ranging from rivers to mountains in West Bengal. A nonfiction which reads like a fiction, the book avoids easy categorisation. A memoir, a travelogue, a collection of interviews and testimonies of real people whose names have been changed, an act of registering oral histories the book is a veritable fusion of disparate modes. With myriad voices scattered throughout the narrative the book skillfully handles the spatial and temporal dimensions. While the writer skillfully compresses vast stretches of time to represent the attritional violence perpetrated on the human and the non-humans, it is rooted in some of the most ecologically sensitive terrains of West Bengal.

While Pablo Mukherjee's concept of post-colonial environment focuses more on the space or zone of exploitation and oppression, Rob Nixon wants us to consider the temporal dimension of environmental degradation with the concept of "slow violence". A combination of the two concepts can create an effective framework to study the nuances of environmental degradation and injustices. By "slow violence" Rob Nixon means, "… a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Nixon's concept of slow or attritional violence refers to environmental harm that compounds over vast stretches of time invisibly before manifesting into a catastrophe. Such environmental degradation which affects the marginalized population particularly in the countries of the Global South is closely connected to neoliberal practices like resource extractions, industry and infrastructure development thereby linking the term to the uneven unfolding of capital in postcolonial nations, a phenomenon that creates sites of sustained oppression of the human and the nonhuman called postcolonial environments. Therefore, Rob Nixon's slow violence is a quintessential tool of colonial and the neocolonial oppression. Rob Nixon states, "an era of resurgent imperialism, an era in which—sometimes through outright, unregulated plunder, sometimes under camouflage of developmental agendas—a neoliberal order has widened, with ruinous environmental repercussions" (37). Thus, the concepts of "postcolonial environment" and "slow violence" are invariably intertwined and an application of these concepts in our reading of Parimal Bhattacharya's book can lead us to an understanding of the environment centered conflicts in contemporary Bengal, in particular, and India, in general.

The first chapter of Parimal Bhattacharya's book takes its title from three rivers of Bengal, namely, Ganga, Icchamati, and Damodar. In this chapter, Bhattacharya relates the history of the caste subalterns inhabiting the land built by the above-mentioned silt depositing rivers. Despite having a prosperous past due to its fertility and accessibility, the Deltaic Bengal is in ruins today. The land is marked by unspeakable poverty, precarity and displacement. The frequent environmental catastrophes, ranging from cyclones to floods, in addition to the political catastrophe of partition, sordid colonial past of famines and the continuing neocolonial interventions in the form of infrastructural practices has turned the space into a postcolonial environment, a space of intensified exploitation of the human and the non-humans. Thus, the Deltaic Bengal with its history of colonial extraction and neoliberal globalisation witnesses an environmental degradation that is not accidental but a structural consequence of uneven global power relations where the ecological is closely

1 The mystic singing minstrels of rural Bengal and Bangladesh

intertwined with economic and political forces. The chapter is interspersed with interviews of the people of the Deltaic region. These interviews allow us to peek into the psyche of the people hitherto invisibilized in dominant discourses as disposables. The galaxy of characters like Bharati, Kazi, the widows of Nabadwip, Anil Kaka, Nakul Sardar, Rafiqul, Utpal all show great resilience in the face of sustained precarity and impending catastrophe.

The chapter, in fact the whole book, makes intertextual references to the character of Apu in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's novels *Pather Panchali* (1929) and *Aparajito* (1932). The character later on received wider recognition with Satyajit Ray's adaptations of the classics. The writer uses such intertextual references for two reasons. One, to draw parallels between Apu and the people he interviews in contemporary Bengal. Two, to challenge, destabilise, and intervene the Bhadralok's representation and appropriation of the character of Apu. Apu is a cultural icon of the Bengali Bhadralok society. Apu, unlike Tagore's Gora, is the "boy next door" (20). The trajectory of Apu's journey from his village to Calcutta, from being a priest's son to being educated in modern education reflects the longing of a typical middle class, upper caste Bengali bhadralok. The author states:

> Apu, in contrast, is essentially a boy next door, and he best symbolizes the aspirations of the educated Bengali middle class. Generations of men have seen their dreams reflected in Apu's youthful ambitions. In his attachment to the beauty of rural Bengal, generations of migrants uprooted by Partition have found a home for their nostalgia. In his wide-eyed fascination for Calcutta, too, the cosmopolitan longings of middle-class Bengalis have found a mirror. Apu's move from the village to the city, his devotion to learning, his ambition to rise above his situation through education, even the muddle of his later life, sum up the story of the bhadralok – educated urban middle-class and mostly upper-caste Hindus that emerged in Bengal during the nineteenth century. (18)

However, the cherished cultural icon of the Bengali bhadralok fails to reflect the lives of the people portrayed in the book. In fact, the journey of these marginalized, invisibilized people occupying zones beyond the closed enclaves of the bhadralok stand in stark contrast to that of Apu. The episode of Rafiqul, for instance, exposes how inappropriate is the bhadralok cultural icon to represent the miseries of a kid in contemporary India who drops out of school due to precarious socio- economic and environmental conditions. P. Bhattacharya states:

> Apu is poor, but a Brahmin scholar's son. His family has a standing in the village society despite their economic condition. Apu's wrenching question to Sarbajaya – 'Ma, don't you have the money?' – is addressed. But what about the question Rafiqul's teacher asked his father? 'Is this the end of his studies,' Ananda had asked on that grey winter afternoon in Sheikhpara, like the rest of the boys in the village Rafiqul never appeared for the Madhyamik examination. I learnt this from a letter Ananda wrote me. (57)

Rafiqul's halted education due to environmental and economic precarity reinforces Nixon's central idea of how the population most vulnerable to slow violence is least visible to state and global powers.

Ironically, the author travels to Bibhutibhushan's native village Chalki-Barrackpur by the river Ichhamati only to find a completely changed environment, one that is completely opposed to the description in his classics. Here the drawing of the intertextual reference

serves the purpose of compressing the temporal dimension, thereby representing sustained slow violence affecting the space.

The author travels to the flood devastated towns and villages to interview the people battling for existence and to witness the unfolding disaster. He probes the colonial policies, and neoliberal interventions to understand their devastating consequences and uses memorialisation and orality to compress time and capture the slow violence. Anil Kaka (uncle) emerges as a significant character whose reminiscences expose the sustained exploitation the human and the non-human have been subjected to:

> There was a time when village women would pick these things in the marshes and bring them to the bazaar. They'd collect wild figs, a variety of greens, tortoise eggs and small fish. The types of fish we used to get in East Bengal, those you won't find here anymore. Do you see those women now? You don't. Why not? That's because the marshes have vanished. The shrub jungles too, that once bordered this town. All gone. There was a time when these wetlands connected the rivers. (21)

He mourns the gradual disappearance of intricate ecosystems of the marshlands, and points out how the marshes were a source of sustenance for the caste subalterns during the famines in colonial era:

> During a famine – and there had been a series of famines in Bengal since the eighteenth century, since British rule began – the edible roots and clams that thrived in the marshes had saved entire communities, particularly the landless lower-caste people. (23)

This erasure of marshlands and the recurring floods registered in these testimonies serve as a reminder of slow violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but unfolds gradually over time. This incomprehensible violence spread over generations and slow suffering, resistance and survival registered through orality and memorialisation often eludes representation by fast media and policy reports. The chapter deals in details with the history of partition, the refugee crises and the settlement policies of the government. It portrays how infrastructural and settlement practices in the deltaic region have destabilised the intricate ecosystem leading to displacement, migration and erosion of environment, thereby reinforcing Pablo Mukherjee's point of the conversion of commons into commodities and the relegation of the subalterns to zones of precarity leading to an environment of uneven development. However, the chapter also delineates the indigenous acts of resilience, and hope for a sustainable future through characters like Kazi, the member of activist group, and Nakul Sardar, a philosopher from the margins. The chapter "A Water Sutra" offers an alternative epistemology of the oppressed that cuts across the environmentalism and development ideology of the global and state powers.

The second chapter is skillfully divided into two sections — "Going Bengal" and "Dumurdi Vidyashram". The first section portrays the author's visit to the Purulia Ayodhya hills in the 1990s and the second one records his revisit to the same place after a gap of 30 years. This portrayal of two slices of time periods keeping the space constant helps the writer solve a lot of representational challenges that come with the portrayal of slow violence and unfolding of global capital. One of the basic tenets of capitalism is to create radical unevenness by impoverishing one space and enriching another. This impoverishment has an environmental dimension to it. The chapter is a polemical tract on the ambitious infrastructural project of building two dams in Ayodhya hills. The chapter succinctly portrays how the Ayodhya hills project has turned its inhabitants into developmental refugees.

Marred by forced displacement and sustained violence of the infrastructural enterprises of the state and global powers, Ayodhya in Purulia is now an impoverished wasteland.

Next, the author takes us to the banks of the Ajay in Birbhum district. His first destination was the Vista-Bharati University or Santiniketan. There, he attends the Bengali New Year programme. Tagore's abode is described as a veritable heaven, "…a constellation of pretty buildings set amid well-tended greens" (163). This heaven is full of "the cream of Bengali society" (164). However, Tagore's Visva-Bharati sits in one of the most underdeveloped districts of West Bengal. "This out-of-placeness", says Bhattacharya "has always haunted this world-famous address" (167). However, with economic liberalisation the rural setting has turned into an attractive weekend gateway thereby resulting in a spike of tourists and resorts. The place also saw a proliferation of NGOs, some serious and some just to massage the conscience of the Bengali bhadralok. This spatial disjuncture, an existence of elite leisure and environmental aesthetics as opposed to adjacent zones of degeneration and neglect, substantiates Mukherjee's argument of spaces of uneven development.

The chapter juxtaposes the suave atmosphere of Santiniketan with the scene of a village called Jaydev Kenduli, a village by the river Ajay famed to be the birthplace of the 12th century poet Jaydev. There the author meets Gouranga Bauri, a baul singer. Bauls were rustic singers belonging to the lowest rank in the caste system. Gouranga takes the author and his companion to their village Ichhaipur, a village on the sandbar of Ajay. In his interaction with Gauranga, the author learns how regular floods had become a part of the lives of people in Ichhaipur. The village on the sandbar mainly inhabited by refugees from East Pakistan is strictly controlled by local representatives of the "Red Party", that is the CPI(M). This control slacks with a regime change and leads to conflict. Gauranga loses his hand in the conflict but is more grieved at the loss of his land and land deed. Ichhaipur was not Gauranga's native land. He had long been evicted from his roots in Bangladesh. The land on sandbar was the result of two decades of hard labour and persistence and he derived his identity from it. Now he had lost it. Gouranga's dispossession exemplifies how displaced communities, already marginalised by caste, are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards and remain invisible in the developmental discourse. This chapter, thus, juxtaposes the two completely different sides of Bengal — one occupied by the Bhadraloks of Shantiniketan and the other by the caste subaltern who live in unspeakable poverty and precarity. This neat separation of environmental privilege and environmental precarity across lines of caste, class and geography enforces a sort of "eco-apartheid".

The next chapter titled 'Raimangal, Kalindi' takes the author to the world's largest wetlands, the Sunderbans. The chapter is chiefly focused on three characters — Dulal Kumar Mondal, Jaggannath Mondal and Dibash Kotal — all from the Dalit community. The chapter not only corroborates the paper's main argument that the worst affected community of environmental degradation and injustices are the people at the bottom of caste hierarchy but also presents a mysterious world with space for the coexistence of the human and the non-human.

The puzzling data of West Bengal Human Development Report 2004 of girls outnumbering boys in school takes the author to Dulal Kumar Mondal's village nestled in the Sunderbans called Seshergram. The author witnesses people surviving in a paradoxical state of existence. In the face of sustained environmental degradation and environmental injustice the people not only exhibit an inimitable resilience but also an inexplicable

reverence towards their environment. For example, the author is stuck by the respectful tone in which they referred to the tiger, fondly called Boro Miyaan or big brother. The following conversation of the author with Dulal's mother is a case in point: "What about the tigers? Weren't you scared?' I asked.' Do we have a choice? We live in his home after all.' She smiled. They had come to this land of tigers after they were uprooted from their homes across the border. It was during the Khulna riots of 1950" (204). The idea of living in the land of tigers exemplifies an indigenous ecological ethic where survival does not necessitate dominion over nature but coexistence with it. Dulal's mother's indigenous ecocritical ideology poses a critical challenge to anthropocentric discourses which see nature and the nonhuman as separate and subordinate entities to humanity.

The author, however, laments the loss of green cover in the archipelago of Sunderbans, traces the sustained erosion of the Sunderbans from colonial times. He cites from the *Bengal District Gazeteers:24-Parganas* (1914) that the vicinity of Calcutta was largely a wild land, especially to the east, where the forest was just seven miles away from the city. He adds that with postcolonial urbanisation, half of a hundred odd islands on the Indian part of the Sunderbans have lost their green cover. Located in one of the remotest parts of the world, the villages mostly have two main sources of income, prawn fishing and brickfields, both exported to urban areas for consumption, and both these occupations are controlled by local mafias with strong allegiance to the State. This control does not go unchallenged, thereby giving rise to frequent conflicts. The author states: "Prawn and brick: products for urban consumption, dragging in their wake hot money stained with blood" (198). Here, the Sunderbans represents a contested space where global capital, state politics, and caste identity converge to perpetrate environmental injustice. However, in the face of climate change, catastrophes and constant fear of displacement, the inhabitants have found a way of surviving as a single undivided community, as is evident from the use of Muslim names for Hindus and vice versa. The author states:

> So far away from the vigilant eyes of the pundits and maulvis, in the teeth of a fierce nature, faith and rituals seemed to have undergone a fabulous blending here. The story of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai – the guardian spirit of the jungle and her arch-enemy, who disguises himself as a tiger – lived on in the hearts of the people. Shifting faith, shifting identity, shifting land. The Sundarbans was a metaphor for such fluidities. (234)

The next section of the book, 'Hooghly', portrays the journey of Bengal's SEZs from being Special Economic Zones to Special Extinct Zones. It depicts people at peril due to the slow deindustrialisation process on the banks of Hooghly. Bhattacharya registers testimonies that counter the belief that holds trade unionism and communist ideology responsible for deindustrialisation, and exposes an evil nexus of businessmen, media houses, politicians, and even intellectuals. Such a nexus remains proof to the vagaries of deindustrialisation and consequent environmental and economic precarity, while the workers, marginal and vulnerable, are pushed into zones of further precarity. While most intellectual circles accuse radical trade unionism of being the cause of Bengal's deindustrialisation, the two main characters in this chapter contradict the dominant discourse with their own versions of the narrative. Their experience unravels the workings of neocolonial practices:

> There's a perception popular among the middle classes that militant trade unionism has driven out the industries from West Bengal,' (259) says Subhasis and adds "Bengal has always been a haven for crony businessmen…During the last twenty to

> twenty-five years, how many crores of workers' PF money was stolen? Have you heard of a fraud of this magnitude? And the interesting fact is, most of the crooks are still around. They've only changed their line of business, that's all. They have their men in media houses: they sponsor most cultural events in Bengal, from poetry recitals to art exhibitions. And I know of one jute-mill owner who has set up an art gallery in a posh south Kolkata neighbourhood. Whoever is in power, you'll always find these thugs by their side. From political leaders to intellectuals, painters to theatre personalities, everyone eats out of their hands. (260)

Moreover, the trade union leaders used to belong to upper castes and used to bring supply of low caste labourers from villages in UP and Bihar, thus curating a formation quite similar to the village feudal system. Thus, "a feudal caste system crept into the trade unions" (260) in jute mills. A landscape of environmental and economic abandonment emerges where the human and the nonhuman are rendered disposable. The case of the jute mill owner opening an art shop in a posh area of Kolkata and the labourers surviving in dilapidated quarters of a shut factory is a typical example of the gulf that neocolonialism produces.

4 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can observe how Bhattacharya's work challenges both colonial and postcolonial environmental practices and concomitant attritional violence. In addition to highlighting the environmental precarity brought about by past exploitation and current global disparities, Bhattacharya's work also demonstrates the agency and resilience of Bengal's marginalised groups in the face of these difficulties. This analysis demonstrates that a reevaluation of developmental approaches that prioritise sustainability and justice, as well as a close engagement with subaltern epistemology, are necessary for the future of Bengal's environment as well as for the environment of other postcolonial regions.

WORKS CITED

Bhattacharya, Debraj. "Short Stories on Precarity." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 Oct. 2022, www.epw.in/journal/2022/42/book-reviews/short-stories-precarity.html.

Bhattacharya, Parimal. *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land: Bengal Beyond the Bhadralok.* HarperCollins India, 2021.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Dalit Body". *The Empire of Disgust*, 2018, pp. 1-20, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199487837.003.0001.

Cilano, Cara, and Elizabeth DeLoughrey. "Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 71–87. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44086558. Accessed 14 Apr. 2025.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, Jill Didur and Anthony Carrigan. *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches.* Routledge, 2015.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.

Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2009.

Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave, 2010.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.