

**THE UNDECLARED CHEMICAL DISASTER IN GOD'S OWN COUNTRY:
SWARGA- A POST HUMAN TALE**

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Abstract

Ambikasutan Mangad is a Malayalam novelist and short story writer from Kerala who has fictionalised the Endosulphan tragedy that affected the people of Enmakaje in Kasaragod district of Kerala through his novel Enmakaje (2009) translated into English as Swarga: A Post Human Tale (2017). This paper seeks to show how the agenda of rights, both human and non-human emerges in the novel. It will do this by taking up concerns of Human Rights and Environmental Rights. The paper would address questions like rights of the child, right to water, right to clean environment, intergenerational justice, advocacy for acting, the use of threat and also highlight the contrast between monoculture agriculture and cultural diversity of Enmakaje. It would thus show how a creative work becomes a “cultural apparatus” in understanding the narrative of Rights.

Keywords: Swarga, Enmakaje, Rights, justice

Would the acknowledging of a disaster mean anything to those affected by it? When changes are irreparable for them, what difference would it make? Yet, if it is an anthropogenic catastrophe, making the culprits visible enables what Rob Nixon observes as “transnational visibility and audibility” (Nixon 37). Ambikasutan Mangad’s *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale* (2017), translated by J Devika, attempts to achieve this. The original Malayalam version of the novel was titled *Enmakaje* which was published in 2009. *Swarga* addresses the human rights implications of an ecological catastrophe that has not been officially declared as one induced by the State. This work is a fictional engagement that highlights the incidental damage to the ecology, attendant upon the indiscriminate use of the organochloride pesticide endosulphan on the cashew plantations at Enmakaje in Kasaragod district of Kerala, “God’s Own Country.” It offers an inclusive picture, including the damage wrought not just on human beings but also on the other biotic and abiotic components. There have been a number of studies looking at the disaster from the point of view of health, economy, government, policies and revenue. So what does a work of fiction achieve by highlighting the issue? This paper seeks to study how through the mode of fiction, an

ecological disaster is documented. It would highlight the human rights issues and also the wider ecological concerns explored by the author.

Linda Hajjar Leib in her book *Human Rights and the Environment: Philosophical, Theoretical and Legal Perspectives* (2011) has demonstrated how the concept of human rights needs to be expanded to include the environment. On the one hand, she observes the need to expand the procedural rights in the human rights framework and on the other hand, she stresses the rise of a “right to environment in international law” (71). A work of fiction is a “cultural apparatus” (Mc Clennan & Slaughter 2009 1) that can supplant the human rights discourse. It adopts the affective garb and the human angle is always more effective than statistics or clinically precise reports. Using Leib and Slaughter, the paper would treat *Swarga* as a vehicle that documents human rights concerns that surface from an environmental catastrophe.

The novel delineates how a small panchayat in Kasaragod district, Enmakaje, finds itself caught in an ecological maelstrom with the use of the organochloride endosulphan starting from the 1970s. The panchayat, with its poisoned waters and land, diseased humans and animals, disappearing insect and reptile world is a veritable ecological hell-hole which is shunned by many. It centres on fictional characters like Man *aka* Neelakantan and Woman *aka* Devayani who are “outsiders/settlers” who become a part of the fight against the Plantation Corporation of Kerala which was responsible for the aerial spraying of the pesticide; and also on characters who have real life correspondence with some of the activists on the forefront. The State owned Plantation Corporation and the State machinery are portrayed as the key aggressors in the novel. When people are uncertain, filled with anger and do not know how to proceed, they can turn into a corrosive community. Mangad effectively captures this impotent anger in *Swarga*. On the human level, the novel documents the transgenic mutations that have taken place on the human body and the minds of people living there and their children. On the non-human level, it shows how the toxicity in air, water and soil adversely affected the flora and fauna making it an uninhabitable land.

The child or infant is, similar to any other natural creature, a developing being that needs an appropriate habitat to develop into a proportionately formed entity. But in Enmakaje most of the children are de-formed beings or face mental retardation and are dependent on support from all. The use of pesticide and the resultant environmental degradation becomes detrimental to their health and subsequently they are denied their right to health. In the context of the child’s right to a clean environment it has been perceived that:

children are much more susceptible to environmental causes, especially during periods in early development – called “windows of vulnerability”- when their vital organs are forming and rapidly developing and when even minimal exposure to toxic chemicals can lead to permanent damage to their brain, immune system”(Radina 15)

Furthermore,

...children have proportionately greater exposures to toxic chemicals on a body-weight basis because of their disproportionately large intakes of air, food, water; children's metabolic pathways are immature and their ability to metabolise toxic chemicals is different from that of adults; their extremely rapid and exquisitely delicate development is easily disrupted; children have more time than adults to develop chronic diseases that may be triggered by environmental exposures in early life stages. (Radina 15)

Children who were exposed to the pesticide in Kasaragod either in the foetal stage or as young children have severe disabilities and health issues. Nearly every home in the village of Swarga has a sick child with genetic mutation. There are children with tongues jutting out of the mouth well below the chin (69), children with enormous heads (71), mentally ill children (71), children covered with sores (74), children with fingers like octopus arms (74), children with eyes that have no pupils (74), children who look and act like monkeys (83) and children in whom menstrual cycle begins as early as seven. Though the novel might be a work of fiction, the children in them correspond to real life characters. It is these children who shock the readers out of their complacency and expose the severity of Enmakaje's tragedy. By providing factual details of the illnesses of the children, the novelist points out to the reader how the right to a healthy life has been thwarted to the hapless children. This in turn is connected to the denial of right to education. In short, the "normalcy" of life which is often taken for granted becomes a luxury in the case of these children.

The first sign that something is amiss in the land occurs to Man in the initial pages when he wonders why butterflies were so rare in the forest and Jadadhari hill in spite of brimming with a variety of flowers (10). In fact the central characters Neelakantan (Man) and Devayani (Woman) are able to spot only one large butterfly. The local population is deprived of their access to natural resources which is in turn connected to their subsistence. One of the first protests in the novel against the Plantation Corporation is triggered by the group of people who depended on bee keeping as their source of livelihood. Even the conversion of natural flora into large cashew plantations must be treated as a systemic violation of the people's rights to natural resources. This does not limit itself to livelihood alone. Instead it extends to sustenance also. When a few characters sit together to eat the juicy jackfruit from the famed and legendary jackfruit tree, the activist Jayarajan asks much to the disbelief of others, "Do you know how many ppm endosulphan can be found in this aril" (Mangad 135)? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its article on the right to food stresses on the quality of food available for consumption and specifies that it should be free from adverse substances. Mangad emphasizes in the novel that the use of endosulphan beyond the permissible limits proves detrimental to life and jeopardises the quality of food accessible to human beings in the immediate surroundings. Infants are dependent on breast milk for sustenance. But the pesticide is found in dangerous limits even in the breast milk of the residents amounting up to even approximately 200 times the permissible level.

That water is the elixir of life is a clichéd expression. However clichéd it may seem, it is undeniably the precondition for life. "... [T]he provision of safe, potable water and adequate sanitation cannot be successfully achieved without the protection of ecosystems where water resources are located" (Leib 143). It is the right to life, in its fullest sense that is shown to be compromised in Swarga and the neighbouring places due to the poisoned water. In Enmakaje there are no wells, only tunnels, which are called *surangas* in local parlance, dug from the hills to each house (Mangad 90). Srirama, a resident and freelance journalist of Enmakaje notes in *Swarga*,

In Swarga- in Pedre village- alone ther' are mor' tha' a thousan' surangas!.... Thi' abundance of water which' made this place heaven is wha's makin' it hell now.... Twenty-five yea's, the poison's been sprayed on those waterbodies! If it wer' a well, you coul/ cover it. Bu' the poison tha' falls on the hill, it gets int' the surangas an' reaches you' home. Isn' tha' why this place is full of sick peopl' (Mangad 126-127).

Surangas or tunnels from the hills in the Western Ghats are found in the Southern parts of Karnataka and certain areas adjacent to the Ghats in the Northern district of Kerala, Kasaragod. This is a traditional means of water harvesting in the region. They are rich water bodies that provide niche habitats for "insects, spiders, frogs, crabs and turtles" (Crook, Tripathi and Jones 7) in addition to aquatic beings. Through the indiscriminate use of endosulphan, the water in Swarga proved deadly not only for human beings but also for all the other biotic components. In the fight against chemicals, insects and reptiles give up early on. Mangad captures their eerie conspicuous absence through several instances in the novel:

He looked closely at the water for some time to see if he could spot a fish. Not even a tiny one? And none of the other creatures of the water either" (Mangad 87).

Now there's no fish or frog or snake i'thi' water. Use' to be plent' b'fore. (Mangad 94)

In this vast expanse, he could not sense the presence of a single living creature. Not even a lizard or a chameleon or a frog or snake or mongoose....but the thought that not even a cockroach was to be seen was truly scary" (Mangad 22)

The waters of Enmakaje which once had curative powers, as testified by the tribal chief Panji Moopar turns into water "in which no fish, no frog, gro" (Mangad 70). The mutations that are seen in the children are also seen in the form of three legged or two headed calf. Due to the aerial spraying the chemical is deposited in the open water bodies that run down the hill into the tunnels. The malaise of the humans and animals of Enmakaje lie in the contaminated water that reaches their ponds through the tunnels and flows through the Kodankiri canal. In 2010, the right to clean, safe, accessible and affordable water was declared as a Human Right.

One of the basic rights of any living being is shown to be violated through a human intervention- all in the name of narrow anthropocentric development.

Monoculture agriculture has been sharply contrasted with the diversity in culture of the land in the novel. The imposition of homogeneity is the death knell for any culture. Hence the novelist in a creative fashion offers his attempt at righting wrongs. Monoculture agriculture had been encouraged in several states in India and also in Kerala starting from around the 1960s. Despite all favourable arguments that would spring from several corners, monoculture should be treated as the destruction of diversity and hence an ecological violation, if such a term may be used. In *Swarga*, not only is the biodiversity lost but due to the vitriolic assault on nature with pesticides, every single existence becomes precarious. Monoculture agriculture is fiercely resisted by the activist Jayarajan in one of his passionate outpourings in the novel:

...it's about this terrible violence that the government's inflicted- the terror that it has perpetrated. They set up these monoculture plantations, destroying pricelessly biodiverse forests. And not in a negligible area. Six hundred hectares in Enmakaje alone!....This culture of monoculture is what a politics of diversity should end...(Mangad 154-155)

The degradation of the natural environment due to monoculture is supplanted in the novel with a rich cultural environment that has existed in Enmakaje over centuries. Cultural heritage must be conserved for future generations. In his essay on intergenerational justice Agius notes that "cultural heritage includes the intellectual, artistic, social and historical records of the human species. [Cultural heritage] embrace both physical objects which we create or produce as well as the non-physical such as knowledge and social practices" (Agius 320). Through the form of the novel, Mangad records the cultural heritage of Enmakaje. The knowledge and practice that the healer Panji has learnt from his grandfather Kogu and father Kukku; the legend behind the curse of the Jadadhari hill; serpent worship; the various Bhoota groves; the remnants of the Jainas, Mayilars and Mogeys and the *sakijaal* or Truth Steps are instances of the rich culture enmeshed in the otherwise depressing tale of a group of wronged people.

There are two specific instances through which the author integrates the current plight of the people and the beliefs of the people. The first example is that of the Truth Steps. It was believed that one's days are numbered if one spoke untruth while climbing the Truth Steps. Immediately after Neelakantan learns about the plight of the people of Enmakaje, he also discovers that the Truth Steps of Enmakaje are broken. The novelist observes here: "Enmakaje's Seat of Truth had been ravaged. No one could climb up the truth steps and bow down to the Truth any more" (94). The chemical disaster that befalls Enmakaje is intertwined with the disruption of an important cultural practice of the land.

The second instance is with regard to the composite nature of the story of Bali. One of the notable elements in the narration of the novel is the contrast between the attendant effects

of endosulphan (which is the result of monoculture) and the use of diverse folklores connected to Mahabali or Onam. These two might appear disconnected, bearing no relation to each other. However, both the thematic concerns must be treated as interlinked and as the author's affirmative demand for diversity. By showing that in Enmakaje, Onam is celebrated in the Malayalam month of *Tulam* on the New Moon day, that his mother comes first in the month of *Karkitakam*, that Bali's wife and children also arrive in the previous month of *Chingam* to visit Kerala, that two people-instead of one- had condemned Bali to the underworld (Mangad 139-140) all highlight this diversity in culture. This is in contrast to the popular depiction of a single strand of narrative in connection with Bali found in the rest of Kerala. It is such a land with diverse culture that is destroyed by a monoculture plantation. Not surprisingly, the author befittingly ends the novel with Bali, who is considered as the primordial ancestor, welcoming Man and Woman to his Cave and addressing Life in general. By juxtaposing these two strands, Mangad achieves what Pramod K Nayar has termed as the "folklorisation of Human Rights," (Nayar 24) and the rights of all biotic components. The novel thus functions as a "cultural apparatus."

This novel is also an instantiation of how natural resources of the future generations are compromised, thereby taking up the cause of intergenerational justice. Scholarship on climate change and environmental degradation has focussed on the need for intergenerational justice- justice for the current generation and the future unborn generations. This was also stressed in the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted during the World Conference on Human Rights (Agius 318). Mangad inscribes the idea of the need for environmental justice in the novel. He juxtaposes the moving tale of those affected with the empirical information about the adverse effects of the pesticide. People like Anvar and Fatima have to grapple with restricted mobility, stunted growth, octopus arms and fading eye sight (Mangad 74, 75). Sivappa Naik's daughter Bhagyalakshmi cannot eat any solid food as she cannot close her mouth (Mangad 70). Tumanna Shetty's mentally ill children have to be kept in fetters and is watched over by their dog (Mangad 71). While on the one hand the novel abounds in such instances drawing the readers' ire at the state of affairs, on the other the narrative is filled with discussion of reports from various Committees like the Achutan Committee, Dube Commission, Shanbaug report, reports of NIOH and CSE. While the former two are favourable to the Plantation Corporation, the remaining reports strengthen the need for a ban on endosulphan. These reports point out that genetic change would be repeated over generations and the current level of endosulphan in the soil of Enmakaje was enough to contaminate it for over the next five decades. When the contents of the reports are discussed by the characters in the novel, it becomes distilled palpable information. That genetic mutations would take place even in unborn future generations, is an indication of how human life has been imperilled. Such discussions are important as often policy makers are forced to redesign their policies.

Though intergenerational justice sounds anthropocentric, Mangad posits the idea of justice for all living beings. In the early part of the novel, Neelakantan encounters a crab in the Kodangiri canal: The crab, “Hey, Human Being, tell me,” it seemed to be saying, “ What have you done with all my comrades who fought the war of life in the Dharmakshetra, Kurukshetra” (88)? Here Neelakantan, the homo sapien feels accountable for what a few members of his species have perpetrated for petty economic concerns.

The advocacy for acting is an important agenda of the Human Rights discourse. In the novel, the committee ESPAC is at the forefront in bringing justice to the people of Enmakaje. They remove the belief circulated among the people that it is the curse of Jadadhari that is responsible for their malady. They are able to garner the support of the visual media and effectively use the print sphere to expose the pesticide lobby and draw attention to themselves. Through meticulous research members discover that Enmakaje is not a single isolated occurrence of endosulphan disaster. Similar ecological catastrophes have been wrought by the overuse of pesticides in places like Sudan, Philippines and Alabama. Through such responses to Enmakaje’s crisis, the novelist elevates environmental issues to a transnational level.

Mangad captures how airing grievances in front of authorities is a difficult task even if supporting evidence in the form of scientific research is given. In order to shake the State machinery from its complacency, the activists in a chilling fashion gather the children who are the victims of endosulphan and present them in front of the agriculture minister as the “*kani*”- the first auspicious sight in the morning. Though no seismic shift in the attitude is expected, the reaction of the minister is equally shocking,” Who gave you the authority to surround and obstruct a minister? Endosulfan is no poison, it is medicine! If you are ill, go to the doctor...take them all away...all of these corpses” (Mangad 158). One of the sentences that is often repeated by the representatives of the State machinery be it members of the Plantation Corporation or the elected representatives is that “endosulphan is no poison, it is medicine” (105, 158, 171). Perhaps it is with the futile plea of the State to assure the people of its innocence, that such a misconception is repeatedly circulated. The Plantation Corporation pretended to be “innocent until proven guilty” and blocked their negative image of being ecological plunderers. The expenditure statement of the Plantation Corporation “from 1985 to 2009 shows that cashew cultivation has not been profitable to it, and that cashew production came down considerably during this period” (Irshad and Joseph 62). After studying the purchase pattern of the Plantation Corporation Irshad and Joseph conclude that “the PCK has been actively aiding the endosulfan industry rather than the pesticide aiding cashew production” (62). It is this statistical detail that the novel converts into concrete detail in the form of the unnamed leader. The novel highlights how the State machinery fails in carrying out its obligations and maintains a dangerous complacency over the issue thus exposing the dysfunction of the State. With intensified resistance it is frugal material

assistance that is doled out to the affected populace. Reparations for this atrocity are not addressed.

Seeking environmental justice or fighting violations are daunting tasks for activists. Often false charges are foisted upon them. There is also the danger of branding them as extremists or Eco terrorists and are even intimidated or silenced. In addition, their activities are closely monitored. Will Potter, the author of *Green is the New Red*, mentions in an interview of “the power of fear” that can be created (Potter 2014). These issues resonate in *Swarga* also. The past of Neelakantan and Devayani are unearthed which is used as a weapon of intimidation, their houses are razed down, false charges are foisted, Dr Arunkumar is silenced and Jayarajan is murdered for his obstinate determination. The activists in the novel are radicals but not eco-terrorists. The murder of Jayarajan and police aggression is indicative of the danger of radicals resorting to violence to settle grievances in the future if their pleas and non-violent means go unheard.

One of the important absences in *Swarga* is the voice of the sick. Numerous sufferers in the novel are children who might find it difficult to articulate their woes. The only (foster) parents who articulate on behalf of their child Pareekshit (Vijayakrishnan) are Neelakantan and Devayani, the protagonists. The other fathers like Damodara Shetty or Tumanna Naik are either resigned to their fate or can only mouth their impotent rage. Mothers and elderly women of the house are the people on whom the domestic drudgery of looking after, cleaning, putting up with tantrums of their sick or mentally deranged children fall upon. Yet the voices of these mothers are never heard. The only strong voice of a woman is that of Leela Kumari Amma, a former employee at the agriculture department who was one of the earliest persons to secure a ban on aerial spraying of endosulphan and to file a case with the National Human Rights Commission (Mangad 190). What might be the perspective of an affected child, adult or parent? In the novel they are a part of the group that protest against the Corporation but are never shown as individuals with distinct voices. Perhaps it is time to hear their voices.

The most popular snack of Kerala is the crispy banana chips. One of the important cultivators of the plantain is the northern district of Kerala, Wayanad which some refer to in jest as Vazha-nad (the land of bananas). In spite of the popularity of the snack, today health conscious Keralites are apprehensive of eating the Furadan dipped bananas, pineapples or vegetables. We exist in a world where there are intimations of sickness in one’s surroundings and body. Most bodies bear the burden of toxic contaminants which build up slowly. Are we destined for inevitably sick futures? There are enough portents like *Swarga* that we need to pay attention to.

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