

Modern Indian Poetry: Reflections on Environmental Hazards

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Abstract

Modern Indian Poetry translated into English, produced over the last five or six decades, is polemical in voicing the environmental concerns. Ecocriticism and Environmentalism are the critical and literary approaches to evaluate the translated poems from ecofriendly and ecoharmful perspectives. The present paper has taken translated poems from various Indian languages and analysed them from ecoperspective.

Key Words: Modern Indian Poetry, Ecocriticism, Environmentalism etc

The rapid pace of environmental degradation is slowly catching the atypical attention on the list of forthcoming world issues. To make the world put on 'green glasses', to look at and reinterpret the hidden meaning of natural surroundings and the interrelation between man and nature, multiples of new theoretical approaches have come into academic and non-academic circles. Eco-criticism, Environmentalism, Green-revolution, Go-green, like phrases reflect the concern for re-establishing man-nature harmony. This concern is slowly becoming the primary vision of contemporary political, social, educational and economic macro and micro organisational policies, programmes and setups.

Modern Indian environmental movement was foregrounded by the Chipko movement which raised many debated environmental conflicts and issues. Ramchandra Guha in an article The Past and Present of Indian Environmentalism in The Hindu (March 27, 2013) wrote:

On the 27th of March 1973... a group of peasants in a remote Himalayan village stopped a group of loggers from felling a patch of trees. Thus was born the Chipko movement, and through it the modern Indian environmental movement itself. The first thing to remember about Chipko is that it was not unique. It was representative of a wide spectrum of natural resource conflicts in the 1970s and

1980s — conflicts over forests, fish, and pasture; conflicts about the silting of large dams; conflicts about the social and environmental impacts of unregulated mining.

Ramchandra Guha has further noted that the devastating effect of modern development on the ecosphere and the people:

In all these cases, the pressures of urban and industrial development had deprived local communities of access to the resources necessary to their own livelihood. Peasants saw their forests being diverted by the state for commercial exploitation; pastoralists saw their grazing grounds taken over by factories and engineering colleges; artisanal fisherfolk saw themselves being squeezed out by large trawlers.

Can we live without ‘nature and environment’? Are we not an inseparable part of nature or rather are we not nature? To read and analyse the interrelationship between nature and living organisms two new approaches ecocriticism and environmentalism have emerged. Ecocriticism and Environmentalism are the literary and critical responses to the growing destruction of ecological scenario. They analyse a piece of text from environmental perspective, connecting the philosophical, literary and the scientific wisdom to evaluate the aesthetic, imaginative, realistic and pragmatic subtle nuances towards nature and ecology. Defining Ecocriticism Richard Kerridge writes “Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects” (Waugh: 2006:530). Ecocritics dive deep into the matter and search for the “history of concepts such as Nature” to understand the “cultural development” which has engendered the “present global ecological crisis”.

The field of ecocriticism is much wide and it views nature as a” cultural and ideological construct, or rather a multiplicity of constructs made by different groups...” (Waugh: 2006:531). Environmentalism is also a movement in “response to perceptions of how dangerous environmental damage has become”(Waugh:2006:532). Environmentalism criticises possible consequences of flooding, famine eco-wars over diminishing resources and millions of environmental refugees. It tries to create an environmental vision by mixing science discoveries and data with humanistic ideals of the world. Speaking on the relation between science and literature, Christopher Norris says “ the best way forward is through an application of “possible worlds’ logic , or by ranging texts on a comparative scale of proximity to or remoteness from our particular, historically , actualised , presently existing world.” (Waugh: 2006:461)

Environmental reading of Indian English poetry is one such new form. This “ green reading” of Indian poetry explores poems written in various languages depicting views of nature and

are evaluated in terms of harmful and beneficial effects on it. This depiction of exploration of environmental implication in literary texts is of late regarded as Ecopoetics also. The environmental debate has definitely become the central concern of modern Indian poetry also. The singular term 'Indian Poetry' is plural in concept as it does not mean poem in one language but connotes poetry composed in various languages - Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Malyalam, urdu etc. Being an Indian and seeing the Indian socio-cultural and ethno-religious fabric of the country it may be surmised that environment and Nature occupy a central role in its Literature wither of linguistic variations. Vedas mark the beginning of Indian Literature 1500 B.C. to 500 B.C.. RigVeda, Samveda Yajurveda, Atharvaveda have the hymns of Nature worship thereby implying that to get the blessings of Nature to sustain you and your posterity, Human beings should revere its power. Ecospiritualism was predominant in early ancient human civilization of Indian and even the world. Looking at the mythology of the world from one geographic location to another geographic location across the world, nature worship is the common characteristic. All the natural forces have their ruling deities. From Greek and Roman culture to African culture to Hindu culture there are anthropomorphic gods, water god, sun god, mother earth, vegetation deity, almost all entity of natural phenomenon has presiding deities. We find Ancient literature and pre-independence literature e.g. Kaalidas's Shakuntala, Meghdoot, Tagore's poems and plays, Aurobindo's poetry and plays reflect the cordial nature – man relationship. Nature worship is prevalent since time immemorial but unfortunately this cordial benevolent nature herself is in danger in modern time.

From reverence to exploitation to protection, Nature has come into danger zone bringing all species into danger. Nature has come to the periphery resulting in hazardous conditions for humans and all forms of life as well. Literature shows concern towards this phenomenon and sensitive souls of poets, irrespective of diversity of languages and cultures, have left glorifying Indianness, Indian culture and heritage like earlier generation poets. Contemporary poets are worried about the degrading environment and think of the treeless future and birdless world. The present paper has taken up a few poetic outpourings from diverse Indian languages and discovered the growing concerns of poetic community towards the loss of natural phenomena. The harmonious man-nature interdependence, interconnectedness has turned lopsided. The poems posing problems of degrading environment – trees, garden, mountain, river, fish, frog, birds, deer and the impact of growing urbanisation – buildings, skyscrapers have been analysed from environmental perspective.

Today the Scenario is changed, therefore the tenor of literature also. In one such Malyalam poem 'Between The Necter And the Poison'(Translated from Malayalam : E. V

Ramakrishnan.) the futuristic poet is tensed about the roost of the bird when it returns from her Utopian flight. Growing non-vegetarianism has gulped all species of flying feathery friends mapping the geography. The voracious taste-buds of dehumanised human love birds not for beauty but for taste:

Where will the bird return
today?
To whose dining table
as a favourite dish?
To the hymn of which non-God?
To the cage of which pavement-astrologer ?
On which branch will
the bird returning from
Utopia roost?
.....
I could not transplant my
humanity into the bird
Nor could I sleep like child. (Satchidanandan:2007:353-355)

Birds will be used by astrologer to predict future of people on pavement but their own future ironically is bleak. The poet could not give safe place to the bird on this devouring earth but he could neither sleep calmly without thinking about the abode of nature's another creature on the verge of danger. There is no roosting place where the birds can have a 'customary consultation/ with the green leaf /as always before each journey.'

There are no stretched vistas of trees to lure the birds as people are endlessly cutting trees and making apartments. Creating human abode by dislocating another creature's abode. The deeply touching , interrogating abovementioned Malayalam poem finds the appropriate answer in a Marathi poem "Change" which reflects the consequences of modern industrial growth and development of the hitherto salubrious world, now a brick-built carcass:

They have removed
All traces of trees from the avenue
The road goes terribly straight.
Not a single green outbreak is visible
In the blank stretch of the earth.
This is barren
Metaphysical avenue;

The venue of death

And a new beginning. (2007:301)

Yes, the poet surmises the beginning of a new concrete world devoid of trees, flora, fauna and all greenery or it may mark the beginning of destruction. The land is barren as trees have been cut and it no more seems to be abode of humans, it looks like the 'venue of death'. The poet sees the lifelessness in life and feels the absence of the greenery by the side of roads and calls it a metaphysical avenue i.e. a treeless place beyond this world might be another planet devoid of all natural greenery, needed to sustain all forms of life.

How the poetry turned towards environmental phenomenon, which once resonated with saga of romantic lovers who felt in nature and natural elements an image, a symbol of their lovelorn physical and mental, emotional states. A rose was the medium to express the desire of the heart of a lover, raindrops were the tears of beloved sighing in memory of the departed lover. First poem was composed by the great poet Valmiki when he saw two uniting birds and one was killed. The genesis of poetry was the loving birds' separation i.e. death at the hands of a hunter. But today the poem itself is wayward and wants to sing the song of the pain of the Earth. In the poem "Gandhi and Poetry", 'One day a lean poem/ reached Gandhi's ashram/ ... ashamed of not being a bhajan' asks him, "I was born in the woods,/In a hunter's mouth..../First I sang in the courts : /then I was plump and handsome /but am on the streets now, /half starved ." The personified poem is in a fix what to do:

"That's better," Gandhi' said
with a sly smile, "But you must give up this habit
of speaking in Sanskrit at times.
Go to the fields. Listen to
the peasant's speech."

The poem turned in to a grain
and lay waiting in the fields
for the tiller to come
and upturn the virgin soil
moist with new rain. (2007:342-343)

This is how the art of poetic creation emerging in the myth of hunter's mouth (Sage Valmiki) flourished in kings' patron-ship, is in pathetic condition now. Gandhiji suggests her to sing the songs of peasants, fields, nature and again she will flourish with new generation of poets who will sing not only joys of nature but woes of nature. So the poetry with new poets of

Nature marks the beginning of eco-sensitive literature as the poet expresses in the Asamiya poem 'The Earth, My Poem':

I am a poet of the vast continent
Studded with rivers and mountains,
The earth is my poem . (2007:217)

Writing of nature definitely does not protect nature but it certainly forces the writer and the reader to think about nature. In the market driven world nature is certainly marginalised entity. Through ecologically sensitive literature the poets and the writers counter the contemporary economic worldview and try to sensitise people towards the existence and necessity of nature, Nature doesn't require human beings for its existence but human beings require nature for their existence.

The eco-sensitive poetry has started singing the song of famine. Famine is scarcity of production of food, distribution of food, water etc. Poetry which eulogises beauty in nature, now represents the repeated scarcity created in nature in the Rajasthani poem "Again". 'Again, the famine this year /Again, the stalks stand stiff without ears, /Oh damn it. /The caterpillar has nibbled this Diwali, too.' The festival of Diwali is marred by hunger, the son is hunger-ridden and mother offers whatever little is left to eat: 'the mother implored,/words half-stuck in her throat:/have a bite, dear'. Nobody should be hungry as this is festival and ritual is must. A tussle between the ritual oriented mother to feed and nature wrought drastic famine is contrasted here, a moment engendering tears:

To beat the famine
Mother took a handful of rice
And sprayed pounded gur
over it.
The ritual is a must.

"None should go hungry,
my darling son,
on the eve of a festival.
Holi is not far off,
I will make you
Sumptuous

Seero then". (2007: 335)

Despite the recurrent famine in the village , Mother is hopeful that on next festival Holi, She will prepare a delicious eatable item 'With tears in her eyes she said , in one breath , all this,/ And soon drew a long, arm- long veil/over her face. The title of the poem is 'Again' and not Famine so as to highlight the fact that famine is a usual feature but what is unusual and crucial is its recurrence, killing the innocent desires of innocent children, unaware of the aftermath of drought and famine, eating delicious food at least on festivals.

Famine is also marked by scarcity of water in well, in river, in ponds and in other water bodies of vicinity. The search for under water has been very deeply portrayed in the Gujarati poem 'Under Stones'. What is lying under stones , is it diamond or water? Finally with doubts the poet convinces himself that it is water and very logically he describes how it reaches under earth:

What could be under stones? Diamonds. What else
could be under stones ? Water . Water? Perhaps.

Where? Under stones, perhaps.

Really ?

.....

The customary taut lingam was installed and
over it a continuous trickle of water.

Now what will happen ? It will lie beneath
stones. Will it? Perhaps. (2007:330)

Water goes beneath the stone/earth as there is a pot on shivalinga which continuously drops water on it and this water gets collected . Water has been compared with diamond- one of the costliest stones. The poet imagines for water not for diamond as it will quench the thirst of all and marks that in future, due to scarcity of water, it will be more precious than the precious diamond. Diamond cant quench the thirst of water, existence of which the poet is still in doubt.

One Marathi poem 'Private Poem in Public Garden' talks about the tears of plants but these tears are not in the form of water like human tears. The poet imagines that dry leaves making circle on the ground reflect the sadness of tree as it is devoid of its leafy dress and has become a log of wood:

Again the dry

Leaves circle back to the ground.

Plants do not shed
Any other tears like animal tears
That are shed beyond seasons;
They have no eyes to weep out of.
This is the only
Distinction a Man in the garden
Can make between a rose and a dog.
(2007:300-301)

The poet emphasizes that human beings cannot see the eyes of trees and flowers, how they can understand whether trees are shedding tears. Animals have eyes so we can differentiate. The poet expresses that human beings should have extra sensory perception to perceive the invisible tears of trees.

The sense of increasing air pollution and its drastic effect on natural phenomenon is heightened in the poem 'The Deer is Swift' where the poet sees the change in bird's flying. 'Birds don't fly as far/As they might.' The height of Himalaya has decreased as the snow is melting, the effect of global warming caused by pollution is making the towering snowclad structure of Himalayan a smaller one:

The Himalayas are not so tall
As they might be

The ocean is smaller, not so deep.
.....
There might be more stars,
But there aren't .
It's the air that's everywhere,
But everywhere it is caged. (2007:296)

The poet imagines ocean to be smaller and shallow, sky might have more galaxies of stars. He finds that the presence of air is everywhere but it is locked inside the cage because it is not fragrant, free-flowing, independent, breathable, salubrious air but all its natural, curative essence and effect is lost, it is the captive air.

Growing urbanisation, one of the moves of humans to build modernised cities by destructing jungles is increasing multifarious problems on this overburdened earth. In Telugu poem 'Boulevards of Paris' the poet sees that cities have been built but they remain lifeless, and growing trees in it is like stabbing with rapiers:

They built this city
Brick by careful brick,
But it didn't live.

Then they stabbed
The heart of the corpse
With rapier of chestnut rows:

The city then woke up and sang magnificently. (2007:182)

Planting trees is like piercing with sword and still the lifeless city starts singing with joy. City has life when trees come into its life.

Cities are overcrowded and overpopulated not only for living beings but the dead are also finding the scarcity of place. The Urdu poem 'Epitaph' is an ironical comment on the increasing population of people on this earth that the graves are also overcrowded with dead bodies overlapping: 'As soon as I reached the grave /I stretched my limbs to rest/And thought/ And no one will disturb me now, /These two yards of land /Are mine , mine alone,

And so I kept mixing with the soil
and even lost the count of time.

I thought at last I was at rest
but soon enough

.....

that i had not yet become soil

some other person

entered my grave

and now someone else's epitaph

is engraved on my grave. (2007:158)

The dead body could not become the part of the soil, the soul could not become the part of almighty, before the full absorption, there comes another body for burial. Even the two yards of land are not for the dead soul. So epitaph after epitaph engraved.

Another Urdu poem 'Tall buildings' insinuates at the drastic effect of urbanisation, modernisation which developed the tall cemented structures, skyscrapers, humans appeared before it like ants , self made huge buildings made the existence of human beings so tiny like ants. Left no space for nature in the cities, nothing left behind except the lifeless tall buildings:

All our lives
we crawled in the shadow

of tall buildings,
clinging to the walls.
The buildings were tall mountains
And we were ants,
Always in search of food.

.....
These buildings grew and grew
Even as we shrank .
At last ,one day , we disappeared ,
Leaving behind
Nothing but tall buildings. (2007:123)

‘Behold these sheep on the road’ a Malayalam poem highlights another dimension that reveals how humans have grown so insensitive to animals , animal killing is so common. The sheep in the poem have the ‘The butcher’s seal on their haunch/ Like the legacy of a coat of arms (150)

They have ceased to feel
They do not feel us
Nor do we feel them.
Do we feel ourselves anymore?(2007:150-151)

Humans have become cruel to animals and so the animals towards human beings. Both the creatures have become insensitive to each other.

In the Kannada poem ‘The Two Peasants’, farmers recognise the house of Mahakavi Kaalidas seeing the lush greenery ‘ This could be the house, Kumbha Ram./ Look, Spring seems to have encamped /here, Leaves and buds have burst/all over.../ Scented cool winds/Are blowing drops of dew /Off the cheeks of flowers.

‘Aren’t you Kalidasa, the poet laureate?’

.....
Haven’t you sung of the Cycle of Seasons,
Lovely Maiden, mountains and clouds?

We have come
About that with just a simple request.

‘Our crops were stood thirsty without
a drop of water. Please add
this in your message to the cloud:
Shower rains on the way
And quench their thirst.’ (2007:13)

Kaalidas, the creator of *Meghdootam*- a classic, is requested by the peasants to give the message to the clouds to shower the drops of rain on the crops of farmers. The poet’s imaginative approach to a realistic natural phenomenon is the response of literature to environment.

The Bangla poem ‘This Earth’ finally portrays the dilapidated state of earth where everything is crumbling , shattering – houses, villages , cities , all the after effects of overburdened overexploited nature. Seeing the destruction of all structures on this earth the poet presupposes that very soon this earth will be a wasteland:

Far and near,
Repeatedly,
Houses, cities
Crumble;

After millennia
on this earth,
the shadows we cast
are of fear
and death, of loss
and bewilderment.

.....
cradling the sheer,
wasteland of remorse,
of blunders,
projects and plans, (2007:6)

Isn’t it a late rising, a delayed awareness towards the overexploited natural system? It sounds a bit negative but this is the fact. We humans were rollicking in the imaginary cradle of idea that Nature has umpteen resources to depend upon for all viable and unviable human and nonhuman requirements. Mahatma Gandhi has written that nature nature has everything for our need but not for our greed. Alas today’s environmental

hazards like global warming, Ozone layer depletion, receding clean and pure water resources, extinction of various animal species, etc. show that we have harnessed the potential of natural resources beyond limit, heedlessly to the extent that the balanced harmonious inter-relationship has become so lopsided and overexploited that overused and misused nature, a benevolent well wisher, mother nature (a cultural concept) has started showing its wrath and anger as visible in the form of natural disasters everywhere in the world. These some examples of Indian poetry translated into English Language successfully reflect the after-effects of environmental hazards. The poetic community deeply senses and voices the agonising pain of natural phenomena and tries to develop a coherent united vision of man-nature growing together salubriously.

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