



Ecology, Literature and the Sense of Place: Floods in Colonial Odisha, 1907–1937

Dr. Siddharth Satpathy*

Abstract

Ecology was one of the most discussed public issues in Odisha in the early decades of the twentieth-century. The rivers in the region flooded time and again, and brought starvation and epidemics in their wake. Appropriate response to these unprecedented devastations became the subject of public discussions. This paper adopts an eco-critical conceptual lens and studies how some of these literary as well as non-literary discourses about the floods, in English as well as Odia, helped construct a sense of place.

Keywords: Floods, Odisha, Ecology, Imperial-Global, Anti-colonial Nationalism, Colonial Journalism, Popular Tracts.

Introduction

Contemporary discussions in eco-criticism underline an understanding of place as relational.ⁱ A place is relational in the sense that it is embedded in networks of “power and relations” that go beyond its “immediate geographical boundaries.”ⁱⁱ Having said that, the relational understanding of place also makes some room for its material and geographical aspects without regressing into the problems of territorialism.ⁱⁱⁱ It makes room for a sense of “belonging to the local as familiar and tangible,” and pays attention to “the ecological materiality of place as a geographical and biological region.”^{iv}

Drawing upon some of these insights, the paper argues that floods in Odisha came to be embedded in three interrelated networks of relations—imperial-global, nationalist and local, and gathered

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Central University of Hyderabad, India

around them diverse imaginaries of the place. The first mobilised what can be described as a political-aesthetic of human and material trace to create imperial-global awareness about the ecological devastations in the colony. The nationalist politicisation of ecology, among other accomplishments, marked the region as irredeemably poor so as to imagine a pan Indian public that is generous and philanthropic towards Odisha. Finally, local literary engagements, in high as well as popular genres, worked to envision a social body that is suitable to inhabit the ecologically sensitive bio-region.

Ecology and Imperial-Global Journalism

Next day I returned to Jenapur, and mounted a large elephant, which, sad to say, could heartily enjoy a daily meal that would keep any Hindu in prime condition for six weeks. As upon a watch-tower, for the next few days I passed up and down the long line of flat country that had been flooded beside the Brahmani, sometimes crossing over into the basin of the Kharsua, another of the uncertain rivers that alternately save and devastate the land. Where it was not devastated, the country was thickly cultivated in little fields of rice, pulse and a kind of millet, and the numbers of planted mango-trees gave it much the same look as an elm-row part of Essex or the Midlands.^v

Ecocriticism, scholars argue, aims to formulate a judgment on the extent and manner in which a literary text works to create awareness about and intervention in ecological concerns.^{vi} Henry W. Nevinson's "Floods of Orissa" espoused precisely this aesthetic-political task at the turn of the nineteenth-century in the midst of an imperial-global world system. A late Victorian journalist, Nevinson toured through the imperial-global space and wrote about it in leading British newspapers of the day. He travelled through India, South Africa, Greece, Angola, Russia, the Balkans, Gallipoli and Ireland. His pieces featured in the *Daily Chronicle*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Daily News* and the *Nation*. His biographer has argued, "A lifetime of international reportage accorded Henry Nevinson a privileged position in observing the uneven shifts towards democratic rights across the globe. In turn his perspectives illuminate the gradual

dismantling of the old and the shaping of the modern world order.”^{vii} Thus, Nevinson landed in India in October 1907 on behalf of the British press with the brief to “discover the causes of the present discontent and to report, without prejudice, the opinions of leading Indians as well as officials.”^{viii} The “present discontent” included the economic condition of the peasantry and the growth of a national consciousness. In course of his tours through India, Nevinson met G. K. Gokhale, B. G. Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose, and others. He wrote about the *ryotwari* system in Madras and Bombay presidencies, and joined the crowds at Marina beach celebrating the release of Lala Lajpat Rai and heard them sing the Vande Mataram.^{ix} He visited Odisha, and delivered a speech to about four thousand people in an open-air congregation at Cuttack. He spoke of the recent floods that devastated the region.^x

He also wrote about it. Published in 1908, *The New Spirit in India* is a travelogue of his journeys through India. It includes a long chapter on the floods in Odisha. The extract, which serves as the epigram to the section, briefly delineates the political-aesthetic Nevinson mobilised to create imperial-global awareness about the ecological devastations. The pairing of the elephant and the Hindu, the comparison between the coastal plains of Odisha and the plains of the Midlands, and the traveller’s persona articulated in the investigating “I” are all markers of this political-aesthetic of the environment.

Two features of this political-aesthetic deserve particular attention. First, it mobilises both human and material “traces” to construct realist portraits of suffering. The floods invariably brought starvation and displacement in their wake. Nevinson pays particular attention to displaced and emaciated human bodies. These bodies serve as mere traces of the ordinary lives they led before the floods. “When I reached Orissa,” he writes, “the first sign I saw of the calamity was a band of thirty or forty brown skeletons crawling towards me as I stood in a garden at Cuttack.”^{xi} They had left their “ruined homes” on the banks of the Brahmani river, and were “looking for work or food” (137). Several hundreds of them were “wandering over the country...even as far as Calcutta” (137). “There is no need to describe a brown skeleton,” the narrator says (137). And

then goes on to describe it in detail – “the projecting ribs and spiny backbone, the legs and arms like withered sticks, the deep pits at the collar-bones, the loose and crinkly skin” (137). He also includes photographs to supplement the realism of his narrative (Fig. 1). As the unknown man stands in a pose with the arms raised, camera has an opportunity to catch and highlight his emaciated rib cage. Beneath him is his little bundle of belongings. A little further off in the background stands a woman with her little bundle on her hips. They were walking along their path before they were called in for a photograph. The man, the woman and their little bundles of belongings are but traces of the lives they led before the devastations.

The portraits also include material traces. Nevinson soon moves out from the urban space of Cuttack and goes into the banks of the Brahmani to carry out his investigations. Mounted atop the elephant, he finds material traces of the devastations long after they occurred. “In November,” he writes, “I could still trace the tidemark of the flood by tufts of dried grass and drift-wood sticking in the trees high above my head, as you may do in early summer on the banks of the Severn” (136). And again, “But in many of the villages that I visited neither flood nor drought will matter for many years. Sand like the seashore had covered crops, and fields, and boundaries, and homes in one indistinguishable desert.” (142). The tufts of dried grass and drift-wood stuck high in the trees, and fertile land and homestead turned into barren sand deserts are but traces of the bio-material life of the region before the floods.

Second, Nevinson’s political-aesthetic situates these portraits of suffering in relationship with three specific figures embedded in the realist narrative—the official mind, the native benevolent public-man, and the imperial-global reporter. The official mind, in the upper echelons, interpreted the ecological disaster in terms of statistics. Surrounded by “his barricades of reports, abstracts and regulations,” the British commissioner of the province furnished Nevinson “the official figures of distress, as far as was ascertained at the end of the third month after the disaster” (139). The statistics showed “an estimated area of 460 square miles affected by the flood, with a peasant population of over 300,000” (139). It also delineated the number of houses swept away, the volume of loss in cattle and horses,

the number of deaths from cholera in the wake of the flood, and the amount of rupees distributed in relief measures (139). In the lower corridors of power, the official mind was not favourably inclined to enquiries. A Bengali deputy magistrate he met along with a native public man was “evidently determined not to fall below the standard of European dignity,” and “Consequently...received...[them] with his legs on the long arms of his deck-chair . . .” (148-149). This “attitude,” “. . . he had observed as customary among English officials when they receive natives . . .” (149). In any case, whether in the upper or in the lower corridors, the official mind was doggedly determined to deny death by starvation. The “. . . official cause of death,” Nevinson writes, “is always some innocent and unavoidable sickness like cholera or ‘bowel complaint,’” and concludes that “the official mind has a rooted objection to starvation” (140).

If the official mind denied starvation, the benevolent native public man doggedly drew imperial-global attention to the precise reality of starvation. Madhusudan Das, the most prominent public man in Odisha at the turn of the century, drew the attention of the British public to the subject. The *Pall Mall Gazette* in London, for instance, reported a cablegram from him on the floods and the consequent devastations.^{xii} Das invited Nevinson to Odisha and accompanied him on his tours in the flood-affected regions. On the one hand, Nevinson writes, Das was “almost worshipped as the saint of Orissa by the poor among his countrymen” (148). On the other hand, Das “appeared to act on official minds much as a hedgehog would on naked man who found one rolled up in his bed” (148). Nevinson argues that someone like Das could have been of greatest help to the officials in the crisis “for the people trusted him absolutely” and “no one living understood them better” (150). However, Das could not be fitted into the official mind’s project of interpreting the ecological disaster in terms of statistics – “It was only that he was the kind of man who perturbs tabulated columns” (150).

In this Das stood in close affinity with the imperial-global reporter. Nevinson’s narrator also positions himself as someone who does not think in terms of statistics. “For myself, I cannot think in thousands. I trust economists and officials to do that for me” (139). The narrator makes it a point to highlight the humanitarian affinity

he shared with Das – an affinity that moved across the racial divides that marred the imperial global space. Nevinson articulates this affinity in personal gestures. As they tour through the countryside, Das and Nevinson came to rest one night at a dak-bungalow. Of the three rooms available, “a Bengali magistrate and a colleague” occupied two. Nevinson chose to sleep in the open air along with the elephant, and offered that “Mr. Das, who was oldish and invalid, should have the other room . . .” (148). Nevinson also articulates humanitarian affinity as he stands before the starving populace. This articulation touched upon human limitations in face of ecological disasters. As he rode through the flooded areas, people expected help from him – “Surely a man who rode an elephant and wore a helmet, and was white by courtesy, could save them!” (143). But, “What could I do?,” he wonders. “There were 15,000 living skeletons ready to join in that prayer,” he informs, “and I had one pocketful of coppers” (143). He poses questions to his imperial-global readership, “Where is charity when things are like that? And where are economics?” (143).

To this imperial-global readership, he suggests remedy. The narrator does not blame the individual officials of the Raj. Rather, he locates the fundamental problem in colonialism per se. “In Orissa itself and in Calcutta the British officials were being rather angrily criticized for negligence,” he observes. However, he argues, “apart from the necessary failure of a system which tries to administer welfare through foreign rulers who live completely isolated from the people, I do not think the officials were to blame” (145–146). Let us then turn our analysis to the nationalist imagination that was at work in India in the early decades of the century, and analyse its engagement with the problem of floods in Odisha.

Nationalist Politicisation of Ecology

The Harrowing tales of distress that are daily coming in from the flood stricken tracts of Orissa call for prompt and generous action on the part of the public spirited and philanthropic citizens of every community and every province of India . . . When it is remembered that Orissa is one of the poorest provinces and the distress that has been

caused by these unprecedented floods is widespread and acute, the duty of other provinces towards Orissa will, we feel sure, be fully realized and simply discharged . . . The distress in Orissa is so terrible that we feel confident that all those to whom our appeal is addressed will realize that it requires a national effort to alleviate it.^{xiii}

“Appeal for Generous Relief,” Madan Mohan Malaviya,
Pandit Nilakantha Das, 1927.

In a recent essay, Cheryl Lousley argues that “the representational challenge that ecocriticism faces” is “not the *representation of nature*, but the *politicization of environment*.”^{xiv} Politicisation of the ecology of Odisha gathered pace with the intervention of the Indian National Congress in the third decade of the century. Its reformist programs took up the ecological condition of the region, and articulated it as a political concern. Cited above is an appeal for relief signed by a range of political leaders affiliated to the Congress including national eminences such as Madan Mohan Malaviya and local stalwarts such as Nilakantha Das. Issued in the wake of the devastating floods of 1927, the appeal appeared in full in the *Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Of all possible strategies of representation, the nationalism of Congress mobilised a specific rhetoric to politicise the ecology of Odisha.

The national imagination made room for the ecology of Odisha only in a manner that marked the region as irredeemably poor, and thereby came to conceive itself as generous and philanthropic. It presented Odisha as “one of the poorest provinces” and appealed other provinces of India to discharge their duty towards her. The place is then embedded in a network of unequal relations—she comes to occupy the position of a poor relation vis-à-vis other Indian provinces. Thus, the appeal cited devastations in Gujarat and Sind as well, and noted that the “Indian Legislative Assembly has made an appeal to the Government and to the people in respect of Orissa, and in respect of Gujarat and Sind.”^{xv} However, it made a special case for Odisha and argued, “A special appeal has become necessary in respect of Orissa as she cannot help herself and requires outside support as funds must be earmarked for relief in Orissa.”^{xvi} It then

advised “the public spirited and philanthropic citizens of every community and every province of India” to join in the “national effort” of providing relief and to send support directly to Gopabandhu Das, President, Utkal Congress Committee at Cuttack, and alternately to Lala Lajpat Rai, M. L. A. Simla, who consented to serve as the Treasurer of the Funds.^{xvii}

The nationalist rhetoric also involved a sharp censure of the role of the colonial government. It argued that the colonial state regularly downplayed the extent of devastations in its official communiqués, and made political demands on the state to resolve the ecological problem of floods in a manner that was systematic and meaningful. In 1926, C. F. Andrews who was active in relief work in the region, “was deeply concerned to see the Government communiqué concerning the damage done by floods in Orissa,” and had reasons to believe that “the damage was likely to be even more extensive than last year.”^{xviii} He “urged that the time had come for a more thorough and extensive examination regarding what could be done to put an end to these perpetual floods, which were wearing down the peasantry of Orissa to helplessness and a pitiable state.”^{xix} Andrews argued that “[t]he engineering works needed might be very costly, but no cost was too great to save from such miseries many thousands of human lives.”^{xx} In a resolution moved by T. Prakasam and seconded by Subhas Chandra Bose, the All India Congress Committee in session in 1927 at Calcutta condemned “the callously minimising attitude of the Government of Bihar and Orissa with regard to the recent flood disaster in Balasore and Cuttack districts of Orissa.”^{xxi} In the same session, Gopabandhu Das explicitly presented the ecological condition of the region as a political problem. He argued that “Orissa was a problem in Indian politics, not only on account of its dismemberment but on account of its annual floods,” and entreated “the Indian Congress to help the struggling people of Orissa.”^{xxii} Finally, published in 1935, the report of the Orissa Flood Relief Committee, again under the presidency of C. F. Andrews, pointed out that despite a long history of British rule, the ecology of the region had not received the care and attention it deserved, and thereby made a case for the colonial state’s negligence. “Orissa is a land of floods and famines. One hundred and thirty years of British

rule have passed, but this life and death problem has not been tackled with the amount of care and attention that it deserves.”^{xxiii}

Lastly, the nationalist rhetoric on ecology found yet another form of articulation – that of uneven competition and governmental care – once Odisha was formed as a separate province within British India in 1936.^{xxiv} The Congress formed government under Biswanath Das in 1937. In a speech delivered to the provincial legislative assembly in 1939, Das directly alluded to C. F. Andrews and mobilised a language of uneven competition and governmental care.^{xxv} He began where Andrews had left off, and argued that the province had suffered a “century long neglect” (2). Unlike the other “sister provinces established long long before” (2), the Odia speaking regions came to be united under one provincial administration only in 1936. Nevertheless, Odisha is “called upon to keep pace” with the other older provinces in “the tremendous responsibility of developing the nation-building departments” (2). “Necessarily therefore,” he observed, “we are given a start in life with finances limited, areas to be developed and with wants unlimited” (2). This language of uneven competition enables Das to reimagine and resituate Odisha in the league of Indian provinces. She is no longer the irredeemably poor cousin, but rather the newly formed province who bravely enters the uneven competition of nation-building despite a century long neglect.

Having cited the uneven legacy of the colonial administration, Das moved on to the language of care. “Rev. C. F. Andrews, whose love for Orissa is so well known...laid stress on three activities which are essential to put life into Orissa” (2), he observed, and went on to “state all that has been done” to take care of one of these, “The flood problem” (2). The governmental language of care was about investigation and production of “expert knowledge” on ecology. It was also about the exertion of state control over ecology. As regards production of knowledge, Das mentioned how his government created a dedicated “Flood Division” and appointed a designated “Flood Officer” to “collect and collaborate all necessary information and to make an intelligent study of the situation” (5).^{xxvi} On the advice of Sir M. Visvesvaraya, he said, the government also formed an “Expert Flood Committee” under the aegis of C.C. Inglis, Director of Central Irrigation and Hydro-Dynamic Research Station at Poona,

and M. Rangayya, the Chief Engineer of Orissa (5).^{xxvii} Besides, the government hired the services of P. C. Mahalanobis to compile a “report on the statistical analysis of the rainfall in the catchment areas of the rivers in Orissa” (6). As regards the exertion of control over ecology, Das mentioned projects of irrigation. His government set up a “Special Irrigation Division” under the chief Engineer, and set out to “harness our rivulets and river courses to divert the water for purposes of irrigation” (6). The language of care, with its emphasis on production of knowledge and exertion of control over ecology, helped Das to differentiate his government from that of the previous apathetic dispensation.

Ecological Suffering and a Social Body

Floods, again! Day after day pass by, and so do months and years. Fates of many individuals change, circumstances of many races change, the good days of many nations return. However, the days of suffering do not cease for Odisha. Fortune does not return, circumstances do not change, afflictions do not leave, misfortune does not move. People have hardly recovered from the disasters of one year, and again comes flood; famine relief programs have not concluded, and again comes famine. It is not in the destiny of the residents of Odisha to eat a full meal in good health and remain without worry for even a day. ^{xxviii}

“Banya Biplab,”
Gopabandhu Das, 1927

O brothers,
seated atop the thatched roof of a washed away hut,
a woman was [floating down],
ceaselessly crying in fright and grief.
O ! [in the midst of it all],
she gave birth to a boy!
as she floated away into fathomless [water].
She starved for four days long.
People went in boats to her rescue,
and could cut the umbilical cord of the newly born babe

four long days after [his birth]!
See the deception [deceptive consideration] of the Lord! ^{xxix}

Ajay Kumar Ghosh, “Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda,” 1928

Scholars have argued that literature acquires significance in ecocriticism as it helps one to reconstruct particularly the non-material aspects—the memories or sensory experiences—of place.^{xxx} Literary language has the capacity to construct an intense sensory experience of local ecology, an affect, and make it available to those who do not experience it at first hand.^{xxxi} By paying attention to the work of language, one can study the ways in which human beings come to interact with the environment.^{xxxii} Taking a cue from some of these arguments, let us explore how literature in Odisha envisioned a social body that is fit to inhabit an ecologically sensitive bioregion in the period under consideration. We need to turn to Gopabandhu Das.

Das, who represented the ecological condition of Odisha as a political problem for the Indian National Congress to resolve, was not only the President of the Utkal Congress Committee but also a litterateur of the front rank. Das toured flood affected areas and published reports in the local newspapers broadly between 1907 and 1927. These were later collected and published under the title *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha: Gopabandhu Rachanavali*.^{xxxiii} To Das goes the credit of forming an ‘affect’ for ecology in modern Odia discursive traditions. The intensely sensory experience of ecological devastations he constructed and made available to the public at large revolved around the figure of a *padosi*. Literally, a neighbor, the *padosi* is one who inhabits the same ecological region. However, he or she is not immediately endangered by the disasters, and hence can bear witness to the suffering of the others and provide material succour. As he witnesses and intervenes, the *padosi* provides the suitable ethical principle for the formation and preservation of a social body in an ecologically vulnerable region.

Das and other leaders of the time exhorted the public in Odisha to skip a meal one time in a week and donate the money to those who starved in the wake of the floods. “If a *padosi* is dying of starvation,”

he wrote in 1925, “I have no rights to eat a full meal and remain content.” He evoked the idiom of *dharma*, and continued: “I must do something for the *padosi*. I need to give up something, need to accept some small degrees of hardship. May be the present laws do not make this binding on me, but *dharma* does” (152). Not only should the concerned *padosi* skip a meal, he should also go out to meet and lend a sympathetic ear to those who are caught up in the devastations, “...in these terrible times of affliction, we fulfill our duty as *padosi* by reaching out to the people and offering them a word of sympathy; it brings them a little hope and courage” (149).

The ideal of the *padosi* provided the affect around which Das imagined the social body suitable to inhabit an ecologically sensitive bioregion. He acknowledged that floods have become a chronic problem in the region over the first quarter of the century (79), and often mobilised an affective language to make the experience of suffering available to the public at large. We see this language at work in the extract cited above where Das sets up a figurative contrast between the transformations that occur in the lives of individuals, peoples and nations, and the seeming intransigence of the ecological predicament in which the people of Odisha found themselves embedded in the first quarter of the century. Das did implore the colonial state to intervene and find a permanent solution to the floods via science and engineering. He argued that floods are not natural phenomena like earthquakes. Prevention of floods was not beyond the powers of man. Such measures were in place in other countries. Courses of rivers and oceans were restricted, and the powers of science put them into the service of mankind. If the government agreed, he observed, such measures could also be initiated in Odisha.^{xxxiv} Having said that, Das also moved beyond the role of the state. He laid emphasis on the notion of the *padosi*, and social and sentimental responsibilities one owed to another in face of ecological disasters. “Without saying anything further to the *sarkar*,” he wrote, “we deem it more necessary to specifically address our countrymen on the subject” (152). He went on to acknowledge and encourage all segments of the local social body—the urban intelligentsia, professionals, and trading communities, the rural landowners and money-lenders, the monasteries and other landed religious establishments—to come forward and carry out their social

responsibilities towards the distressed (152, 117). Das argued that these social relations—in particular, the most fundamental relation in the local agrarian world, the one between the *zamindar* and *mahajan* and the *praja*—needed to be recast in the model provided by the notion of the *padosi*. For their own self-interest, Das argued, the *zamindars* and *mahajans*, should adhere to the social responsibilities of a *padosi*.

The *zamindars* and *mahajans* have a serious responsibility in the matter. If the *praja* cannot cultivate the land, it is the loss of the *zamindar* and the *mahajan*. The former cannot pay his rent or redeem his debts. The wealth earned by the hard labor of the *praja* makes for the prosperity of the *zamindar* and *mahajan*. If the latter do not perform their duties towards the former, it will only spell more loss for themselves. (152).

Das did not call for an abolition of social hierarchy. Rather, the aim was to render hierarchical social relations more sensitive towards the present ecological crises. His affective engagement with the ecological disasters and the suffering of the region then revolved around the figure of the *padosi*. It helped him not only to reconstruct an intense sensory experience of local ecology but also to provide a model to reimagine the social body that inhabited an ecologically vulnerable region.

If Das initiated the literary trend to engage with ecology and suffering, others followed suit. In more popular genres, it acquired a more sensationalist and democratic tone. Ajay Kumar Ghosh was a small-scale publisher and bookseller in Cuttack. He sold cheap and popular tracts, both of religious and secular variety. On the one hand, he sold tract versions of early modern Odia religious poetry such as “Kapata Pasha,” and “Mruguni Stuti.” On the other hand, he also sold modern farce such as “Mohini Babu Farce” and “Diara Bhauja Rahasya.” In the wake of the devastating floods in the rivers of Brahmani, Kharasuan and Baitarani in the region of Jajpur in 1927, Ghosh published a verse tract titled “Jajpur Nai Badhi Gita O Kanda,” literally, “Jajpur Floods, Song and Lament.”^{xxxv} *Kanda* or lament is a

popular genre in Odia poetry. Usually, it delineates the sorrow of a newly-wed daughter who is about to leave her maternal home for her husband's house. Affective evocation of familial relationships is the primary work of the genre. The daughter turns to each of her relations, starting with the mother, conveys her sorrow, listens to the sorrow of the relative, and then takes leave.^{xxxvi} In "Jajpur Nai Badhi Gita O Kanda," the scope of the genre is expanded to include lamentations for ecological devastations. Taking a cue from Das, as it were, the tract addresses the reading public as "brothers," and thereby seeks to forge an affective relationship within the social body at large. However, unlike Das, Ghosh imagines a more democratic social body. Das acknowledges the hierarchical nature of social relations. His prose addresses diverse constituencies of the social body—the *zamindars*, the *mahajans* the *prajas* in the rural countryside, and the lawyers, traders and the *bhadralok* in the urban towns. In his tract, Ghosh puts the complex network of hierarchical social relations spread across the rural and urban spaces of Odisha under erasure. He brings all the potential readers and listeners of his verse lament into the same ontological space of affective brotherhood. In face of the ecological devastations, social hierarchies were as if suspended for the moment. A sensational treatment of the subject enables him to accomplish this more democratic evocation of the social body that inhabits an ecologically sensitive bioregion. In the extract cited at the beginning of the section, we see his literary style at work. The short literary scene is about a pregnant woman caught up in catastrophic suffering in face of the unprecedented environmental disaster. The details—seated atop a thatched roof, she gives birth to a boy; both mother and baby starve for days together; the umbilical cord that binds them remains uncut till their rescue—help the narrator evoke an intense sensory experience of the ecological disaster for the distant readers. The verse tract includes a series of such vignettes. Dead animals from the forest—tigers, elephants, bears and sambhar—float away in the waters. Railway lines and telegram wires—signs of colonial progress in the region—are blown apart. The most appealing of these, as the work of the genre demands, are evocations of familial sorrow. Ghosh writes:

Some one says, come O mother!
[I] cannot see where to go;

O mother mine, death is near for sure
Water is only knee deep [here]
Hold onto courage, and stand here, O
Mother mine, the Lord will come to our rescue for sure
(32/33).

Some one says, right here, brother spoke,
[And the next moment,] we could not see him [anymore]
O gentle souls, some weep in fright and sorrow
Some one asks, 'Where is father?'
Some one says, 'Could not find my daughter'
O gentle souls, some one says, 'let us run away.' (34-35).

These vignettes of lamentation invite the reader to participate in an intense emotional experience of ecological suffering. The reader is expected to participate in it not as a *zamindar* or *mahajan* or *praja*. Rather, he participates as a brother. Ghosh, then, renders social identity of the reader irrelevant to his affective experience of the ecological devastation. The genre he works with enables him to reimagine the social body that is caught up in the disaster as a family and to invite the reader to see himself as a member of the family.

Conclusion

Floods in early twentieth-century Odisha came to be embedded in three overlapping networks of power and relations—the imperial global, national and local. British visitors to the region mobilised a specific political-aesthetic to create imperial-global awareness about the ecological devastations. This political-aesthetic looked out for and deployed both human and material traces of the devastations to construct realist portraits of suffering, and demand intervention. The nationalist politicisation of the ecological devastations in Odisha followed diverse trajectories. It marked the region as irredeemably poor so as to imagine an Indian public that is generous and philanthropic towards Odisha. It also involved a sharp censure of the inefficient role of the colonial state in redressing the problem of the floods. Local literary engagements worked to envision a social body that is suitable to inhabit the ecologically sensitive bio-region. This social body was built around discursive figures such as the “*padosi*”

or neighbour, and often found articulation in minor literary genres such as the “*kanda*” or lamentation.



[Figure 1: Source, Nevinson, *The New Spirit in India*, 1908]

Endnotes

- i. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*. For a discussion of the formation of social space in colonial Odisha, see Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*.
- ii. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 8.
- iii. Ahuja, *Pathways of Empire*, 25-26. See footnote no. 18.
- iv. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 11. Also see, 26.
- v. Nevinson, “The Floods of Orissa.”
- vi. Kerridge, “Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Forms and Genre.”
- vii. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 2.
- viii. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 105.
- ix. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 108.
- x. John, *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*,” 110-111.
- xi. Nevinson, “The Floods of Orissa,” 136.

- xii. "A Cry from India: Floods Devastate a District." *Pall Mall Gazette*, Special Edition, October 29, 1907. Accessed on 5.10. 2022.
- xiii. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xiv. Lousley, "Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation," 156.
- xv. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xvi. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xvii. "Orissa Floods: Appeal for Generous Relief." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Lahore. Monday, August 29, 1927, p.7. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xviii. "Floods in Orissa: Mr. Andrews advises preventive measures." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Saturday 25 September, 1926, p.18. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xix. "Floods in Orissa: Mr. Andrews advises preventive measures." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Saturday 25 September, 1926, p.18. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xx. "Floods in Orissa: Mr. Andrews advises preventive measures." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Saturday 25 September, 1926, p.18. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxi. "Flood Distress in Orissa." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Monday, October 31, 1927, p.14. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxii. "Flood Distress in Orissa." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Monday, October 31, 1927, p.14. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxiii. "Ill-Fated Orissa: Land of Floods and Famine, Central River Board Suggested." *The Civil and Military Gazette*, Friday, November 15, 1935, p.6. Accessed on 13 April 2024.
- xxiv. The history of the Odia language movement and the formation of Odisha, one of the first states in India to be organized around the principle of linguistic identity, are beyond the scope of the paper. For relevant discussions, see, Mishra, *Language and the Making of Modern India*.

- xxv. Das, "Speech of the Hon'ble Sreejukta Biswanath Das."
- xxvi. In this pursuit of knowledge, Das followed the lead of the government of Bihar-Orissa who in response to public demands had formed a "Orissa Flood Committee" in 1927 under the chairmanship of C. Addams Williams, Chief Engineer to the Government of Bengal, and sought to investigate into the cause of the flood problem and recommend solutions. The committee submitted its report in 1928. Accessed at <https://nvli.in/report-orissa-flood-committee>
- xxvii. The Flood Advisory Committee was formed in 1938. It met each year from 1938 to 1942 and submitted its reports in 1938-39, 1940 and 1942. Accessed at Dhananjayrao Gadgil Library, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. <https://dspace.gipe.ac.in/xmlui/>
- xxviii. Das, *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha*, 234. My translation.
- xxix. Ghosh, *Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda*, 4. My translation.
- xxx. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 15.
- xxxi. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 27-28.
- xxxii. Filipova, *Ecocriticism*, 4.
- xxxiii. Das, *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha*.
- xxxiv. Das, *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha*, 235.
- xxxv. Ghosh, *Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda*.
- xxxvi. Gantayat, *Jemadei Kanda*.

Works Cited

- Ahuja, Ravi. *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, 'Public Works' and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c.1780-1914)*. Orient Black Swan, 2009.
- Das, Biswanath. "Speech of the Hon'ble Sreejukta Biswanath Das, Chief Minister, Orissa, in introducing the Budget Estimates for the year 1939-40." *Odisha Budget*, Finance Department, Government of Odisha. Accessed at: [https://budget.odisha.gov.in/upload Documents/budget-speech-english/1939-40-English.pdf](https://budget.odisha.gov.in/upload/Documents/budget-speech-english/1939-40-English.pdf). PDF download.
- Das, Gopabandhu. *Odishara Banya O Durbhiksha: Gopabandhu Rachanavali, Dvitiya Khanda*. Gopabandhu Janma Shatabarsiki Samiti, 1977.
- Filipova, Lenka. *Ecocriticism and the Sense of Place*. Routledge, 2022.

- Ghosh, Ajay Kumar. *Jajpur Naibadhi Gita O Kanda*. Haranath Press, 1928 / Odia Bibhaba: Treasure Trove of Things Odia / Srujanika, 2017. Accessed at odiabibhaba.com.
- Gantayat, Shyam Sundar. *Jemadei Kanda*, Store Press, 1927 / Odia Bibhaba: Treasure Trove of Things Odia / Srujanika, 2017. Accessed at odiabibhaba.com.
- John, Angela V. *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century: The Life and Times of Henry W. Nevinston*. I. B. Tauris, 2006.
- Kerridge, Richard. "Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Forms and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality." *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 361–76.
- Lousley, Cheryl. "Ecocriticism and the Politics of Representation." *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 155–71.
- Mishra, Pritipuspa. *Language and the Making of Modern India: Nationalism and the Vernacular in Colonial Odisha, 1803-1956*. Cambridge UP, 2020.
- Nevinston, Henry W. "The Floods of Orissa." *The New Spirit in India*, Harper & Brothers, 1908, pp.134–51. Accessed at archive.org.
- Pall Mall Gazette*. The British Newspaper Archive / Findmypast Newspaper Archive Limited / the British Library, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.
- The Civil and Military Gazette*. The British Newspaper Archive / Findmypast Newspaper Archive Limited / the British Library, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.