

Contextualizing Climatic Migration in South Asia in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island

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Abstract

The article embodies three major aspects-the rising issue of climate refugees, the recognition of the rising crisis by the Indian government, and the contextualization of the issue in a critical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), about 50 lakh Indians were displaced in 2021 due to climate change (India Times June 17, 2022). 'Climate Refugee' is an underdeveloped and 'uncared-for' term for the group of people who are compelled to migrate from one place to another for a better environmental situation. Very recently, the Indian Govt. addressed the issue of Climate Refugee in a Lok Sabha Session and traced the root of the great derangement to colonial times: "Western nations have a historical responsibility to address the greenhouse gas emissions they have emitted" (The Hindu March 31, 2022). The issue of environmental degradation and colonial policies of forceful acquisition and exploitation of land are intimately related: "...you think the earth itself is dead ... It's so much simpler that way!

Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror" (Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest* 1.2.124-5). In this context, Paul Driessen's term 'Eco-imperialism' should be borrowed to critique the Western environmentalist discourses that have been imposed on developing countries. Very interestingly, the issue of displacement due to environmental degradation is triggered by a 'push' factor and the migrants have no hope of returning to their old place-the "homing desire" (Brah 180) in such cases remains absent. The national identities dissolve and the episteme of belonging is reformulated. The bioregional concerns of the environmental studies seem to topple down. In this context, a serious reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) seems to be relevant. Ghosh's novel revives the legend of Chand Sadagar, the Gun Merchant. In the legend, Chand, a prosperous merchant from eastern India was struck by drought and floods owing to the sudden climatic change of the Little Ice Age (Ghosh 155). The Gun Merchant crossed the Bay of Bengal. In a way, he may be called a climate refugee. The article addresses the rising crises of climate migration and the evolution of the definition of belonging and nationalist discourse.

Keywords: Climate Refugee, Environmental Discourse, Bioregional, Power, Colonialism

Nilima Bose's garrulous advice to Din, a Brooklyn-based rare book dealer to visit the mysterious Manasa Shrine in the Sundarbans before it is buried under the rising water levels is a prophetic anticipation about the future of the earth. The Osaka earthquake in Japan in 2018, Magkut in the Philippines, rising heatwaves in Germany, the extinction of Lemur and other endemic species in Madagascar, extreme heat, flood and soil erosion in India, climate migration in Sri Lanka, and droughts in Kenya are some the excruciating examples in hand.

Gun Island (2019) is a global novel because in it the geographies dissolve, the towering Brooklyn city collapses and becomes the wild of the Sundarbans, the waters of Venice make a confluence with the tides of the delta, and the global environmental crises of the Anthropocene meet the centuries-old legend of Manasa and Chand Sadagar (the Gun Merchant) in Ghosh. Under the façade of mythology dwells the recognition of the environmental crises and the issue of climate refugees. Ghosh's novelistic discourse incises deep into the hinterland of environmental crises and climate refugees. His concerns for the Sundarbans are evident. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh writes:

I happened then to be writing about the Sundarbans, the great mangrove forest of the Bengal Delta, where the flow of water and silt is such that geological processes that usually unfold in deep time appear to occur at a speed where they can be followed from

week to week and month to month. Overnight, a stretch of riverbank will disappear, sometimes taking houses and people with it; but elsewhere a shallow mudbank will arise and within weeks the shore will have broadened by several feet (10-11).

The article embodies three major aspects-the rising issue of climate refugees, the recognition of the rising crisis by the Indian government, and the contextualization of the issue in a critical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), about 50 lakh Indians were displaced in 2021 due to climate change (India Times June 17, 2022). 'Climate Refugee' is an underdeveloped and uncared-for term for the group of people who are compelled to migrate from one place to another for a better environmental situation. Very recently, the Indian Govt. addressed the issue of Climate Refugee in a Lok Sabha Session and traced the root of the great derangement to colonial times: "Western nations have a historical responsibility to address the greenhouse gas emissions they have emitted" (The Hindu March 31, 2022). The issue of environmental degradation and colonial policies of forceful acquisition and exploitation of land are intimately related: "...you think the earth itself is dead ... It's so much simpler that way!

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Climate Refugee, the Circle of Displacement, and the Sundarbans

Even though the issue of displacement due to climate change has been debated and questioned, it cannot be denied that climate change induces migration and give rise to the increase in the number of climate refugees. The idea of 'ecological refugee' first appeared in 1948 in William Vogt's *Road to Survival*ⁱ but the term was not coined until 1985 to "highlight the potentially devastating need for humans to escape from the impacts of unchecked development and pollution" (UNHCR). Environmental migration, as observed by

Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016) has remained a way of life since prehistoric times. Historical records and archival data testify to the fact that man has migrated from one place to another either compelled by a hostile environment or in search of favourable habitats. Nevertheless, environmental hospitality was part of a natural process. Very recently climate in degradation resulted in forced migration and this is something we need to worry about.

Climatic threats such as global warming, droughts, rising sea levels, glacial melting, erosion or expansion of deserts, excessive rainfall, and changes in the seasonal pattern, to name a few, have already affected millions of people all over the world: “The potential climate change- induced migration of millions of people is currently one of the most disputed impacts of climate change and is increasingly becoming an issue of great concern for governments” (Manou and Mihr et al, 03). Climatic change-based migration has resulted in multiple complicated problems. Primarily human rights are compromised. Those lucky people who live in those places hostile to leave and are forced to migrate from one place to another due to the adverse impact of climate change are deprived of the basic amenities of life. Secondly, cross-border migration especially in the Global South such as Bangladesh, Kenya, Chile, Sudan, and many sub-Saharan countries has resulted in an unprecedented increase of illegal migrants. Thirdly, climate migration has undermined the national,

bureaucratic, and legal integrity of different countries. According to a report on the website of UNCHR, India an estimated 3,000,000 people in central America and southern Mexico were affected by hurricane Eta in 2020. India is exposed to severe atmospheric hazards and climatic hostilities on multiple fronts. More than 20 cyclonic disasters took place in India between 2021-22.

The appellation “climate change refugees” seems to have become an issue of legal polemics. There is no international law that fully addresses the issue. UNCHR “has resisted calls to expand the refugee definition” (Manou et. al,15). The 1951 Refugee Convention or the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 was built upon Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which recognized the right of refugees seeking asylum from persecution in other countries. In the 1951 Convention, there was no provision for climate change refugees since the problem did not exist at its present intensity. Even the term ‘refugee’ seems to be problematic when applied to climate change migrants because in many cases the migration is internal. They should better be called internally displaced persons (IDP). An expansion of the convention may be a plausible solution at hand, but such legal redress may not be relevant for internally displaced migrants.

In the Sundarbans migration is a part of livelihood as hundreds of inhabitants move from hostile to safer places in search of better occupation, livelihood, and geographical safety among other necessities of life. A report by Dipanjan Saha, published in *In Focus*, dated 21 March 2022 notes that Sagar Island has already lost around 50 square kilometres of land to coastal erosion. The sea level in the delta has risen by 3 centimetres (1.2 inches) a year on average. The same report documents multiple ground-level realities as conveyed by some of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. Besides, the regular environmental degradation, some yearly disasters force the inhabitants to migrate to safer places for refuge. In 2020, cyclone Amphan destroyed about a quarter of the delta’s Indian Mangrove Forest.

The history of the Sundarbans can be traced back to as early as 200-300 AD. Chand Sadagar, the Mughals, the Portuguese, and finally the British Raj had historical footprints in the area. In 1757 the proprietary rights of the Sundarbans were obtained by the British East India Company from the Mughal emperor Alamgir II. In 1764 the area was mapped by the Surveyor general. In 1771, the Sundarbans were divided into plots and lands that were leased out to prospective landlords for the extraction of agricultural revenues. The farmers of the neighboring districts were invited to settle in the Mangrove forests of hostile climate. These people did the work of clearing the forests and developing lands. The whole affair of acquiring land was expedited when Tillman Henkel, the magistrate of the Jessore district pointed out an extension of the mangrove forests in a map before the area was cleared. Most settlers in the area were migrant populations from the adjoining districts of Midnapur and Central India (Ghosh and Schmidt 2015).

Migration is part of the policy of sustenance in the Sundarbans. Primary reasons are occupational such as low wage rates, lack of job opportunities, and so on. Nevertheless, the occupational migration pattern in the Sundarbans is circular in nature. The Indian Meteorological Department report has termed the Sundarbans as ‘the cyclone capital of India.’ Most of the migrants of the Sundarbans left the largest mangrove in the last decade fearing the ravages to be made by the Cyclone Aila of 2009. People lost their habitats and were reduced to beggars as the cyclone wrecked most of the agricultural lands.

Climate migration adds to the woes of West Bengal. The migrants’ right to the city is often neglected even when they are displaced within the same country. Often considered “outsiders” they seem to be in exile in home. The public square between the Calcutta university and the Calcutta Medical College teems with the homeless people from the villages of Jayanagar Block 1 in South 24 Parganas. They are denied fundamental human rights and are compelled to pay ₹10 for a bath and ₹2 for the toilet. But these grim

phenomena are by no means unprecedented who stopped between 1966 and 1968 hundreds of people migrated to the city of joy having no joys to call their own. The continual inflow of Sundarbans migrants into the cities of India seems to have no solution. They are homeless, jobless, and joyless people, devoid of the basic amenities of life. The situation is worse for those women in the Sundarbans areas for the rising salinity in water since they have to fetch water from distant places. The issue of climate migration is a neglected issue, and the urgency is not found in the political agenda of any of the political parties of India.

Gun Island and the depiction of the crises

In this context, a serious reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019) seems to be relevant. Ghosh’s novel revives the legend of Chand Sadagar, the Gun Merchant. In the legend, Chand, a prosperous merchant from eastern India was struck by drought and floods owing to the sudden climatic change of the Little Ice Age (Ghosh 155). The Gun Merchant crossed the Bay of Bengal. In a way, he may be called a climate refugee. The article addresses the rising crises of climate migration and the evolution of the definition of belonging in the context of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019). In the chapter Los Angeles, Dinanath shares his experience of listening to a speaker about the Little Ice Age. The speaker went on recalling

and restaging the apocalyptic times:

The seventeenth century, declared the historian, was a period of such severe climatic disruption that it was sometimes described as the ‘Little Ice Age’. During this time temperatures across the globe had dropped sharply, maybe because of fluctuations in solar activity, or a spate of [...]” (Ghosh, 139).

While listening to the lecture he wonders: “Was it possible that the legend was born of the tribulations of the Little Ice Age?” (Ghosh, 136). Dinanath’s silent reflection on natural calamities faced by Chand coincided with an anticipated natural calamity when the director of the museum announced: “We’ve just been told that we need to evacuate this building, as a

precaution. It’s something to do with the wind – the wildfires are moving faster than expected” (Ghosh, 138). The suddenness of the announcement sounds a little bizarre to me sitting comfortably on a chair in my study as if it were some otherworldly thing. The so-called foreignness of a natural disaster not happening to us makes us indifferent to it as a street accident read in a newspaper while taking a warm sip of tea until it happens to us or someone we are attached to emotionally. Interestingly, Ghosh has reduced the foreignness of natural calamities by reviving the myth of Chand that everyone in Bengal or Bangladesh is familiar with and bringing to stand face to face the current times of climate change and environmental hazards. Moyna informs Dinanath:

Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia, on boats (Ghosh, 59)

Ghosh’s novel addresses the grim situation of the Sundarbans- the acidification, pollution of water resources, and the growth of dead zones. Pia, an Indian American of Bengali origin monitoring the Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans expresses her concerns: “Have you heard of oceanic dead zones? No? Well, they’re these vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content – too low for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers” (Ghosh, 107).

Indian Government and the recognition of the Threat

It has already been pointed out that environmental crises and climate migration have not raised enough political agenda of any of the political parties even in the election campaigns of the Legislative Assembly in West Bengal as though the problem never exists. Very recently, the issue was dragged into the Lok Sabha recently when Dravida Munetra Kazhagam MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi and Saugata Roy of the Trinamool Congress asked if the government is prepared to deal with Climate Refugees during the second part of the

Budget Session of Parliament on 31 March 2022. Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change replied that the government is focusing on sustainable development more to reduce environmental degradation. He adds: “We have a national adaptation fund and national disaster resilience infrastructure fund to take care of potential climate refugees...”

(The Hindu 2022).

The UNHRC has recognized India as a “safe haven” (IDR 2022) for refugees India is one of the few countries in the world that is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol. According to the convention the signatory country is expected to provide a minimum standard of hospitality and amenities to the refugees. Since there is no collective dedicated policy for climate refugees and rehabilitation practice, asylum seekers often face discrimination on religion, region, gender, and so on. However, very recently, India has adopted the national action plan for climate change (NAPCC) launched in 2008 to adapt to the adverse impact of climate change. The action plan has 8 sub-missions:

1. National solar mission
2. National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency
3. National Mission on Sustainable Habitat
4. National Water Mission
5. National Mission for Sustainable Himalayan Ecosystem
6. Green India Mission
7. National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture
8. National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change

Though most of these sub-missions are in the development stage, it is a matter of greater relief that the Government of India has recognized the climate refugees as a vulnerable group and is ready to extend meet hospitality to them.

To overcome the geographical, economic, and cultural diversity, the Indian government must develop decentralized planning for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Besides refugee funds may be created by encouraging public and private contributions. At the global level countries must come together to help each other and take initiatives for the growing concern of climate refugees. we hope that India having a liberal constitution will ensure the right to life of climate refugees. According to articles 21 (right to life) and 14 (right to equality) of the Indian Constitution, the right to life and right to equality should be ensured to non-citizens and this prerogative of law may be applied to the climate refugees as well. We also hope that very soon India will come up with better and more effective measures to meet the concern.

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