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Submersion of Soil: An Ecocritical Reading of Land in Na D' Souza's *Dweepa*

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Abstract

The paper explores the enduring struggle in human existence, where survival remains the foremost concern despite facing numerous obstacles. Through an analysis of the first displacement Kannada novella *Dweepa* (2013) written by Lanard D'Souza, the study emphasizes the detrimental consequences of displacement and modernization on underprivileged communities situated at the lower rungs of India's caste-based social hierarchy. The novel vividly depicts the hardships endured by Ganapayya and the generations of families uprooted from their ancestral homes on the Sharavathi river island Hosamanehalli, shedding light on the devastating ramifications brought about by the construction of Linganamakki dam. Furthermore, it underscores the intricate relationship between nature, culture, and human agency in development and modernization. In this paper, we delve into the profound and enduring struggles that encompass human existence, where the pursuit of survival remains paramount despite the many challenges faced. It examines the far-reaching consequences that contemporary technologies and societal systems impose on individuals, often resulting in the marginalization and isolation of specific groups within society. To shed light on these issues, *Dweepa* serves as a powerful lens through which we can discern the detrimental effects of displacement and modernization on underprivileged communities positioned at the lower echelons of India's deeply entrenched caste-based social hierarchy.

Keywords: Dweepa Island, Ecocriticism, Submersion, Struggle, Displacement, Marginalized.

Ecocriticism promotes a path toward sustainable progress, aiming for a better future for humanity. Every living entity has the inherent right to survive in its unique manner. Whether it is plants, animals, women, marginalized communities, or indigenous groups, each has a

crucial role to play in preserving the fundamental life support system of the planet. Utilizing resources in a controlled manner will ensure a secure and stable future for generations yet to come. “The most well-known measure to handle ecological emergencies is sustainable improvement” (Frederick 128). It ultimately implies the necessary utilization of shared resources without jeopardizing the entire condition and the prosperity of everyone (Essays in Ecocriticism 36).

Renowned experts and prominent elected officials of the nation made grand pledges to individuals to relinquish all their possessions to support the greater goal of nation-building. For instance, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s inaugural Prime Minister, laid the cornerstone of the Hirakud dam on the former grounds of Jamada village on April 13, 1948. He committed to offering displaced families a replacement parcel of land for their lost land and a new residence for their previous dwelling. His colleagues assured the residents would only be displaced once suitable resettlement is provided. This proposal encountered strong opposition from the populace for the same reason. Despite the formidable resistance from the locals, the movement against the dam ultimately did not achieve its intended outcome.

The Sharavathi river basin has undergone extensive development for hydroelectric power projects, effectively harnessing its abundant potential. This journey began with the inauguration of the Mahatma Gandhi Hydroelectric Project in 1948. Subsequently, the Sharavathi Generating Station came online in 1964-65, followed by the establishment of the Linganamakki Dam Powerhouse and the Sharavathi Tail Race Project at Gerusoppa in 2002. These combined initiatives collectively account for around 45% of the total installed capacity of hydroelectric power in the region. However, this development has not been without its challenges. The creation of the Linganamakki reservoir resulted in the partial or complete submergence of ninety-nine villages in the Sagar area and seventy-six villages in the Hosanagar Taluk of Shimoga district. It led to the displacement of approximately 12,000 people. Similarly, the Talakalale reservoir caused the submergence of parts of three villages in the Sagar Taluk. Furthermore, the establishment of the Gerusoppa reservoir resulted in the inundation of 5.96 kilometers of tropical

evergreen to semi-evergreen forests, adding to the ecological impact of these hydroelectric power projects.

Na D'Souza i.e. Lanard D'Souza's commitment to public service is exemplified by his 37-year-long career in the Karnataka Public Works Department. His tireless work in this sector demonstrated his dedication to improving the infrastructure and the lives of the people in Karnataka. A boundless odyssey through literature, his career encompasses a captivating sea of genres—novels, stories, plays, and even tales that ignite young imaginations. This remarkable journey has been met with both his own boundless creativity and the resounding applause of the world. With over 94 published books to his name, he has proven his enduring commitment to the world of letters. He received the Sahitya Akademi's Bala Sahitya Puraskar for his novel titled "Mulugadeya Oorige Bandavaru." D'Souza's fiction, *Dweepa*, and *Kadina Benki*, were adapted into motion pictures that received national awards. This adaptation showcased the universal appeal of his storytelling and further cemented his status as a literary giant in the Kannada language. He actively participated in various public interest movements and agitations, aligning his work with the broader social and community issues of his time. This commitment to societal betterment reinforces his image as a writer deeply rooted in the reality of his surroundings: "The problem of submersion of land in the cause of modernisation and the ensuing displacement of the local people is something that has bothered me for a long time."(xi)

One of the few Kannada novels with the main theme of development-induced damage is *Dweepa*. The term "Island" or "Dweepa" inherently implies detachment from the mainland, surrounded by expansive bodies of water. This river island existed at Hosamanehalli, a small village on the banks of the Sharavathi River, where five families have lived for generations. However, the march of progress has introduced new avenues of life, and the government has formulated plans to construct a dam on the Sharavathi River. This impending development necessitates the evacuation of the five families from their ancestral homes in the face of the imminent dam's impact. *Dweepa* is organized into seven chapters, each named after a star associated with different phases of the monsoon, namely Krithika, Rohini, Mrigashira, Aridhraa, Punarvasu, Pushya, and Aslesha. These stars symbolize the diverse influences on the

monsoons, mirroring the narrative's progression. In this poignant tale, the impact of modernization and development on traditional ways of life is vividly portrayed through the lens of the river island and its inhabitants, providing a powerful commentary on the struggles and sacrifices borne by marginalized communities in the face of progress-driven displacement.

The complete responsibility for Ganapayya and his family's tragic downfall lies with the government. The government's failure to provide timely compensation is the leading cause of their ruin. Had the government acted promptly and appropriately, Ganapayya and his family could have been rescued from their unfortunate fate. Duggajja loved the land; "he loved his piece of land with attachment a woman feels for her mother's house" (*Dweepa* 12). This level of attachment he felt for his land was profound. It brought him immense joy to reside on the island and nurture his family there with affection and attentive care. Ganapayya shared a similar perspective. Therefore, he says, "Even if the government compensates me with land and money right now, I'm not the kind who'll get up and go immediately. I'm going to stay here this monsoon and reap a harvest on my land. Let whatever happens happen" (Island 13). Nevertheless, this was different with Herambha, another farmer from Hosamanehalli who highly regarded the city. "He was attracted to the city, and so he decided to loosen the bonds that bound him to Hosamanehalli" (Island 15).

The unchecked development and progress led to a separation between nature and humans, causing people to feel disconnected and estranged from the previously unified entity. The past two decades have seen a flourishing of new ecological thought. These theories bridge the chasm between intellectualizing the environment and experiencing it firsthand. They're pushing a nature-centered perspective to the forefront of diverse fields. These endeavours run parallel to considering other crucial factors such as class, race, and gender.

The consequences of dam construction during the Nehruvian era were multi-faceted and had far-reaching effects on India's development and environment. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, initiated several ambitious dam projects as part of

his vision for rapid industrialization and economic growth. While these projects aimed to provide irrigation, electricity, and water resources for agriculture and industries, they also brought significant social, environmental, and economic changes. They also often lead to various social, economic, and environmental impacts affecting local communities.

Creating reservoirs behind dams often requires the displacement of local communities residing in the affected areas, which leads to the loss of homes, land, and traditional livelihoods. The three families living at Hosamanehalli were worried because the dam's construction may submerge their houses. Ganapayya, Herambha Hedge, and Parameshwarayya rushed to the Submersion Office to check for any truth about the submersion. As they received the information from the government to vacate the land, Parameshwarayya and Herambha decided to move from Hossamanehalli to the place which the government had sanctioned them. "I will have to move from here today or tomorrow, anyway. Why should I stay on and strain myself through the monsoon, craving to reap a profit from harvesting areca nut and paddy? Who knows how high the water will rise this year? The hillock may not drown. But where's the guarantee that our lands won't? That's why I decided to move " (Island 10), said Herambha to Ganapayya.

Haunted by the relentless threat of floods, Ganapayya desperately questioned officials about compensation, his voice raw with the fear of displacement. Their empty reassurances offered no solace. Despite the rising panic, he clung fiercely to his home, a place woven with memories. Even if submerged, a sliver of hope remained - to somehow endure. Nagaveni, his wife, urged him to find temporary refuge with family. Leaving their home was a bitter pill to swallow, but the specter of food shortages after the floods loomed large. Torn between his attachment and the looming crisis, Ganapayya couldn't bring himself to leave. A glimmer of possibility emerged in the form of Herambha's abandoned land. But the solution was tainted. Cultivating it would require hiring cheap labor from marginalized communities, perpetuating the exploitation he witnessed around him. Ganapayya's predicament transcended his personal struggle. It mirrored the plight of the marginalized, their vulnerability preyed upon in times of hardship.

The urgency of the situation hung heavy as Ganapayya set out for Talaguppa the next day. He needed to find workers for their land, but the journey also held another purpose for Nagaveni. With the impending monsoon rains isolating their village, she intended to visit family they wouldn't see for months to come. Progress, in the form of the dam, had become an obstacle. The once-familiar river crossing, a convenient eight-anna ferry ride, was swallowed by rising waters. Now, a longer bus route stretched before them, winding through unfamiliar towns like Hosamanehalli, Aralagodu, and Kargal, for a steeper fare of one rupee and eight annas. Disappointment awaited them in Talaguppa. Their search for workers yielded nothing. Ever resourceful, Nagaveni offered a solution. Krishnayya, practically a son to them, possessed a strong work ethic and could be their saving grace. The day itself mirrored Ganapayya's mood. The clear blue sky had surrendered to a canvas of churning grey clouds. The downpour that began wasn't a gentle sprinkle, but a relentless assault, echoing the turmoil within him. The wind howled a mournful tune, punctuated by the booming pronouncements of thunder and the sharp crackle of lightning. These were all grim omens of the relentless deluge foretold by local wisdom — four long months of unceasing rain that would grip the land. This harsh reality struck Ganapayya with the force of a physical blow. Stockpiling supplies and firewood weren't a chore anymore; it was a matter of survival for the siege that loomed ahead. "Heavy wind, thunder, and lightning were harbingers of the mirage phase of the monsoon. Once this intermittent rain became incessant, it would stop only after four months" (Na D'Souza 35). The impending monsoon spurred him into action - gathering firewood and supplies became his top priority.

For eight relentless days after their return, the rain poured down like a relentless waterfall, mirroring the one the dam now choked. The Mirugi festival, a time for celebration, was marred by the downpour, keeping the farmhands away from their work. As if adding insult to injury, Ganapayya discovered their poorly built farmhouse had suffered water damage. The very river that once flowed freely towards the falls, a familiar landmark, was now a captive, its path ruthlessly blocked by the dam. "The Sharavathi lay like a pregnant woman, full and ready for birthing" (D'Souza 37). Alarming news reached Ganapayya through whispers among the

workers. The river, they claimed, had risen to the level of the hill, effectively cutting off the village from outside help. Disheartened, Ganapayya realized his search for external labor was futile. Fortunately, Krishnayya stepped forward, offering his assistance. However, his offer came with a sobering warning: the relentless river had risen dramatically, reaching the very hill overlooking the village. Krishnayya cautioned that isolation was imminent, with the only escape route being the road towards Aralagodu. The rising water threatened to turn their village into a marooned island if it continued its relentless climb.

“But now that her flow was blocked further down, she had begun to spread out, encroaching the neighboring forest and valley. Trees, shrubs, and bamboo were already knee-deep in rainwater, in red muddy water, still and silent... Who ever thought the government would bring us to this state, Ayya?”. (D’Souza 45)

The relentless rain continued unabated, lasting for an additional eight days. The proverb “Survive the Aridhraa, you are sure of a harvest” (Na D’Souza 45) remained a constant reminder to Krishnayya as he desperately sought farmhands from Aralagodu. However, the pouring Aridhraa rain made it impossible to find any available labor. Ganapayya had no choice but to sow Herambha’s field alongside his own. While Krishnayya assisted, additional laborers were still needed. The road to Aralagodu from Hosamane remained in fair condition, with only six more feet of water needed to flood it. Ganapayya, with unwavering determination and the promise of a higher daily wage of eight annas, finally managed to secure some laborers for his land. During the third phase of Aridhraa rain, Duggajja sadly succumbed to illness, but Ganapayya refrained from notifying anyone outside the village as he witnessed the water swallowing up the hillock.

The relentless wind howled, a counterpoint to the drumming rain. Despite the onslaught, the young saplings in the fields, slender but defiant, clung to life. The areca farm, banana trees, and palms strained against the downpour. Water, like a relentless tide, surged from the overflowing pond towards the already brimming river. Parameshwarayya’s land had succumbed, swallowed whole by the flood. Herambha’s farm teetered on the brink, mirroring the river’s dangerous fullness. Hosamanehalli, once a vibrant village, was now a

solitary island, marooned by the floodwaters. All contact with the outside world had been severed, leaving behind an eerie silence broken only by the storm's fury. Ganapayya, Nagaveni, and Krishnayya were the only inhabitants left, the weight of their isolation pressing down on them.

Eleven days of reprieve were shattered as the relentless rain roared back to life. Krishnayya, gazing at the overflowing river, made a grim realization: the dam, intended for progress, had become their prison. It choked the natural flow, isolating Hosamanehalli from any hope of outside help. A suffocating sense of isolation pressed down on the two men. Their precarious situation offered no easy solutions and no way to reach the outside world. The rising water wasn't just a threat to their village. It was a siren call to the wild. Stagnant water attracted unexpected visitors — foxes, deer, and wild goats, all seeking refuge on higher ground. The Malenadu forests, usually home to tigers, cheetahs, bison, and wild boars, might be experiencing similar disruptions. The displaced wildlife, like refugees themselves, could potentially venture closer to the village, adding another layer of danger to their predicament. All these factors weighed heavily on the minds of the three villagers, especially as their restless cattle moored throughout the night, prompting concerns about a nearby tiger. The Aridhraa rain continued, heavy and unrelenting, as if competing with the earlier Mrigashira rain.

Krishnayya ascended Sita Parvatha, his heart sinking with each step. Reaching the summit, he was met with a sight that stole his breath. The land, once a tapestry of fields and forests, had transformed into a boundless sea of water. It stretched as far as the eye could see, a chilling mirror of the colossal waterfall the dam had silenced. Only the faint silhouette of Aralagodu hill remained in the distance, a ghostly reminder of what was lost. The water's surface, once teeming with life, now held a grim reminder of the storm's fury. Krishnayya waded into the water, the chill a stark contrast to the internal heat of worry. As he took each hesitant step, a grim spectacle unfolded — bloated carcasses of rabbits, wildfowl, and deer bobbed in the current, victims of the relentless downpour and the wind's cruel assault.

Ganapayya called for Krishnayya's help, but the young man was caught in a bind. His employer, respectfully addressed as 'Yajamanaru,' had insisted on Krishnayya staying with them for the next four months. Krishnayya tried to weasel out of the situation with excuses, but ultimately, he had no power to disobey his master's orders. While Krishnayya and Nagaveni had grown up close, their current social positions were a barrier. Nagaveni was, after all, his master's daughter, and her mother had always scrutinized their interactions. Krishnayya was aware of Nagaveni's change in behaviour around him and worried about how her husband might interpret it.

Ganapayya, despite his reservations, couldn't deny the practicality of keeping Krishnayya. He wrestled with an unsettling feeling, a gnawing awareness of the bond between his wife and their helper. However, the urgency of the situation left him with no other viable option. When Krishnayya suggested that he would return if that was what they wanted and even offered to leave if he ever beat Nagaveni again, Ganapayya had no choice but to accept these terms. Nagaveni, on the other hand, wished to be with Krishnayya but feared the opinions of others and could not bear to deceive her husband.

The relocation process can be disruptive, causing social upheaval and emotional distress among the affected population. Dams can inundate areas that hold cultural and historical significance for indigenous and local communities. This loss of cultural heritage can sever ties to traditional practices, sacred sites, and community identity. The displacement caused by dam construction can disrupt traditional livelihoods such as farming, fishing, and forest-based activities. Natives who relied on these activities for sustenance may struggle to adapt to new economic opportunities, potentially leading to poverty and unemployment. Dams alter the natural flow of rivers and can impact local ecosystems. The change in water levels and flow patterns can affect aquatic life, disrupting fish populations and biodiversity.

Reduced downstream water flow can also affect agriculture and water availability for nearby communities. Dams sometimes lead to conflicts over water sharing and resource allocation, particularly

between upstream and downstream communities. These conflicts can escalate and strain inter-community relations. While dams can bring economic benefits through irrigation and power generation, they can also create economic disparities. The benefits may only sometimes reach the local communities, leading to unequal distribution of resources and wealth. Dam construction can attract migrant labour and transient populations, which can alter the social fabric of local communities. The influx of outsiders can lead to cultural clashes and disrupt community dynamics.

Monsoon rain has brought great havoc to the family, filling the surrounding areas with water. Water stood in the neighbouring forests and valleys during monsoon. Nature comprises everything under the sun and on earth: "Nature came to be generally equated with wild and wilderness, and culture with tamed, refined and domesticated" (*Ecological Criticism* 5). With the destruction of forests and animals' habitats, wild animals lurk for prey and rest. Wild animals would come towards Sita Parvatha, seeking refuge. Furthermore, foxes, deer, and wild goats scurried fearlessly behind the house, looking for shelter. A python crept into the wood shack beside the kitchen. Rabbits scurried about the veranda. The cattle had mooed restlessly a few nights earlier. Nagaveni said she had heard the low oomphs and coughs of a tiger near the cattle shed before dawn. (Island 50-51)

Ganapayya's situation was distinct; he was prepared to relinquish his land, yet the government failed to compensate him, ultimately leading the impoverished farmer to a tragic demise. Furthermore, his life partner Nagaveni abandoned him and fled with Krishnayya. Another aspect of displacement involves the ratio of those uprooted and adversely impacted by such projects, particularly from marginalized groups like tribal communities and Dalits. Historically, this proportion has been considerable, and it continues to increase today.

In recent times, the rapid pace of development has favoured a privileged minority, leaving the rest of the population to bear the negative consequences. Effective project planning ensures that the benefits are distributed fairly among all stakeholders. Madan Mohan, in his work titled "Ecology and Development," discusses the concept

of sustainable development. He emphasizes the need to balance industrial progress and ecological well-being by formulating plans harmonizing with nature. This environmental strategy encompasses three key aspects: environment management, assessment of environmental impacts, and the promotion of eco-development. In this novella, a dam is a metaphor for the Anthropocene epoch that threatens to consume interpersonal relationships. This malevolence takes various forms, such as a tiger invading human habitats. Nature, although not always benign, can also display its fury when disrupted by dam construction and other environmentally detrimental projects.

Submersion and displacement in Sunderbans are also dealt with by Amitav Ghosh in his narrative, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), which is separated into two plots: the first explores the predicament of displaced people, a group of refugees from Bangladesh; the second side of the story addresses the subject of how humans and animals coexist in a hazardous and complex ecosystem.

Pankaj Sekhsaria is another prominent Indian environmental activist who has dedicated several decades to environmental research and the anthropocentric impact on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as well as their indigenous populations. His debut novel, *The Last Wave: An Island Novel* (2014), is a poignant portrayal of the excesses of modern industrial society. Sekhsaria skillfully weaves real-life environmental and social concerns into a work of fiction. The central themes of the novel revolve around pressing issues such as deforestation, animal poaching, encroachment on forested areas, and the displacement of the Jarawa tribe. Through his storytelling, Sekhsaria sheds light on the very real and urgent challenges faced by the islands and their indigenous communities due to modernization and development.

In *The Last Wave*, another significant issue addressed by the author is the construction of roads, particularly the Andaman Trunk Road. While roads are typically viewed as a critical component of development, facilitating transportation, improving access to raw materials, and reducing rural poverty, the Andaman Trunk Road takes on a more complex role. The Andaman Trunk Road is portrayed as a gateway to resource extraction, which has dire consequences for the Andaman Islands. The road is seen as

facilitating the depletion of the islands' forests and negatively impacting the native population. Timber logging and poaching have become more accessible due to the highways that connect the islands' forests. The road network enables settlers in the islands to exploit the natural resources, much like termites drilling into a wooden frame, rapidly depleting everything in their path.

With the construction of roads, there comes a significant threat to the island's biodiversity and the indigenous Jarawas. The once dark and impenetrable evergreen forests of the Andaman Islands are transformed into a brown and fragile landscape, indicating the ecological damage caused by these development activities. In this context, the novel underscores the dual-edged nature of development. While roads can bring benefits, they can also lead to environmental degradation, resource exploitation, and harm to indigenous communities. Pankaj Sekhsaria's work serves as a stark reminder of the need for responsible and sustainable development practices that consider the long-term well-being of both the environment and the indigenous populations.

In conclusion, the effect of road construction in the Andaman Islands and the effect of dam construction on the natives of Karnataka are a mix of both positive and negative outcomes. While dams can contribute to economic development and improved infrastructure, they can also disrupt lives, traditions, and ecosystems, disproportionately affecting local communities. It is crucial for policymakers to consider the needs and concerns of these communities when planning and executing dam projects and to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to mitigate negative impacts and promote sustainable development.

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