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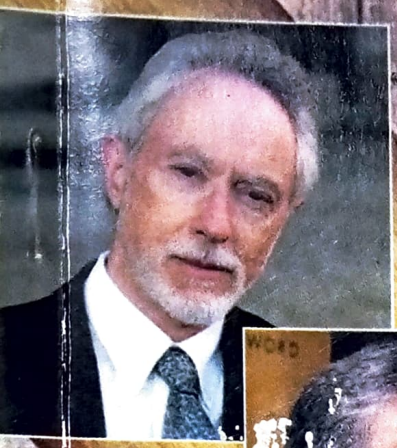

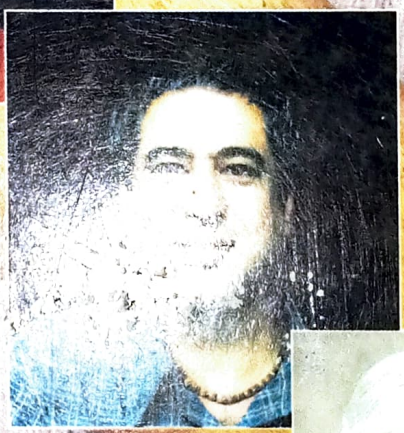

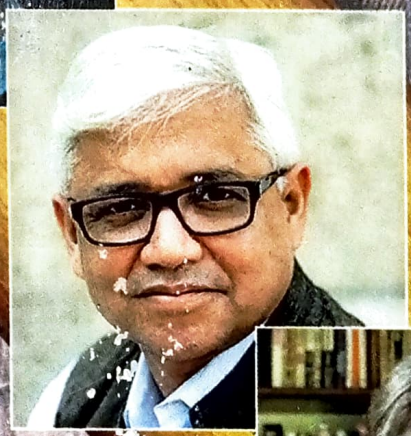

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Editors
Subhrajyoti Chanda
Gitartha Goswami

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Unravelling the Deltaic Maze: A Study of Myth, Reality and Metaphor in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Samaresh Basu's *Ganga*

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A. L. Basham in his foreword to Steven G. Darian's *The Ganges in Myth and History* writes "...there is not a river anywhere in the world which has not something of beauty and mystery, something of poetry about it. And no river is endowed with these qualities in such full measure as the Ganga". Amitav Ghosh, in *The Hungry Tide*, adds a twist to the legend of Shiva receiving

the first brunt of the Ganga's torrents in her descent from the heavens on earth when he depicts the Sundarbans as the point where the Ganga – 'the heavenly braid' comes undone: "...where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle (6)".[1] The other view of the Sundarbans as "the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *achol* that follows her, half-wetted by the sea" re-produces the persistent image of the country as the mother (6). However, in the Mughal records, Ghosh writes, the delta was known as *bhatir desh* for only during the ebb tide or '*bhati*' many islands come into existence which disappear during the '*jowar*' or high tide. The ephemeral nature of the islands parallels the lives of the fishermen who are always at the mercy of the tiger, the cyclone, the *mahajan* 'money lender', the pirate and the river. Samaresh Basu in *Ganga* portrays the river as the point of convergence, the blurry but sweet waters of the Ganga attracts the hunter and the hunted – the fishermen and the fish. Defying human predictions in almanacs, the fish eludes; they move about whimsically in the many rivers – the Matla, the Thakurun, the Ichchamoti and the Ganga – of the delta. And the fishermen are no different from the rivers or the fish; they arrive at the Ganga rebelling against many odds, even the political divide between east and west Bengal cannot dissuade them from taking their ancestors' trail.

The Sundarbans is not just the confluence of rivers; it is also the meeting point of many religions and languages of the world. Nirmal, the retired schoolmaster, in *The Hungry Tide* opines:

> ...the mud banks of the tide country are shaped not only by the rivers of silt, but also by the rivers of languages: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi,

> Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into each other they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. (247)

The erratic interpenetration of the saline water of the sea and the sweet water of the rivers create 'hundreds of ecological niches'. Piya, the cetologist, finds that the 'micro environments' resulting from the intermixture were like "balloons suspended in the water" and "each balloon was a floating biodome, filled with endemic fauna and flora". Nirmal's observations on the intermingling of Hinduism and Islam and of the many languages in the delta are oddly similar to what Piya finds about the physical environment:

> Flowing into each other they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow…the tide country's faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions. (247)

Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar observes that gods and goddesses in the folk religion of the Sundarbans: Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai, Khokathakur are the deities of fishermen, woodcutters, honey gatherers, beeswax gatherers, boat builders and they stand below the established Bengali pantheon. The outsider – Piya, while witnessing the little ceremony performed by Fokir at the shrine of Bon Bibi in Garjontola, is confused by the apparent contradiction in the ritualistic performance:

> Piya recognized a refrain that occurred over and over again – it contained a word that sounded like 'Allah'. She had not thought about speculating Fokir's religion, but it occurred to her now that he might be a Muslim. But no sooner had she thought this, then it struck her a Muslim was hardly likely to pray to an image like this one. (152)

Another contradiction of which Nirmal writes about in his note book is that the narrative of Bon Bibi, 'Bon Bibir Karamoti orthat Bon Bibi Johuranama', is a booklet that opens to the right as in Arabic yet the "prosody was that much of Bangla Folklore". The booklet, written by a Muslim named Abdur Rahim, had lines that rhymed in doggerel fashion – "they looked like prose and read like verse, a strange hybrid". Even the Bengali word for mangrove, 'badabon', is an amalgamation of Arabic and Sanskrit; commenting on this fact Kanai, the polyglot, says "It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of languages – just as the tide country is begotten of the Ganga's union with the Brahmaputra (82)".

While explaining the Ganga's greatness in an imaginary conversation with children of Morichjhapi, Nirmal weaves a story that joins geology and classical myths – both Indian and Greek. The Indian side of the story has Lord Vishnu in his incarnation as a divine dwarf making a tiny scratch with his toe nail which "became the source of the immortal and eternal Ganga that flows through heavens, washing away the sins of the universe... (180)". For his scientific explanation, Nirmal refers to the map of the sea floor to spell out "that Ganga does not come to an end after it flows into the Bay of Bengal. It joins the Brahmaputra in scouring

a long, clearly marked channel along the floor of the Bay (181)". And that the "course of the underwater river exceeds by far the length of the river's overland channel".

Again it is the Greek goddess Tethys, the wife of Oceanus, who is Ganga's mother, for Ganga's (and also Indus's) birth was the result of the shrinking of the Tethys sea because of the tectonic shift of the Indian landmass from the Antarctica towards the north a hundred and forty million years ago.

The lives of the fisher folk in the Sundarban delta revolve around the river and the myths associated with it. The river is addressed as mother by all the fishing folks and at the end of the fishing season there is even a ceremonial worshipping of the benevolent goddess Ganga with much fanfare; but that is only a happy ending to the story of toil and drudgery. The fishing folk also know about a different facet of the goddess's character, that of fierce lady – ruthless, uncaring, desiring to be placated. The Ganga in low tide is likened to a young girl who is unpredictable, full of raw energy and movement. Old Pachu in *Ganga* reflects poetically on the journey of life from youth to old age; the river changes cyclically, all 'her' activities stop during the high tide which is akin to the state of an old person who relaxes having been through the ups and downs of life. Like the river in high tide, Pachu can only reflect on life's vicissitudes; but Bilas and Himi are as lively and enthusiastic as the river in low tide. Basu further draws on animal image to render the complexity of the river's character: the rising waters of the high tide seem to claw the boat's plank which is suggestive of the amphibious presence of the Sundarban tiger.

In his introduction to the second volume of *Samaresh Basu Rachanabali*, Saroj Bandyopadhyay writes that *Ganga* progresses like the river to the sea, there are no divisions in the narrative; at the end of the novel, Bilas – the new 'saidar' – is seen captaining people to the sea in spite of several odds. Bilas's life is marked by a defiance of norms: he challenges the '*mahajan*' and the local fishermen, falls in love with someone higher up in the social ladder, and finally leads his folk to the sea as reincarnation of the dead 'Saidar Nibaran'. The life in the Sundarbans is lived in transformations; the 'young' river attains maturity and that is mirrored in the waters of the Ganga turning red with the soil from the hills. The 'menstruating' river matures into womanhood, giving birth to life forms and the fishermen pray to 'Ma Ganga' and also 'mother earth' during 'ambubachi' for grains from the field and fish from the rivers.[2] The river's ebb and flow gets reflected in the many ups and downs in the fortunes of the common people. The flood in the Koshi, the Mahananda causes deluge in Hugli, Murshidabad, Nadia turning people into refugees; erosion deprives the people of their land and boats. The Ganga becomes a veritable messenger of death – the carrier of deadly cholera germs. The hapless fishermen can only dream of an escape from the unforgiving river on the one hand and the merciless '*mahajan*' on the other. Thandaram, another fisherman, while fleeing in the veil of darkness dies by running his boat into the jetty. The constant exposure to the rain and the sun and the lack of adequate food takes a heavy toll on Pachu; and as he lies dying in his nephew Bilas's lap, he changes his standpoint – he gives his nod to Bilas's wish to go to the sea and his desire to marry Himi. Transformation is the rule of life in the Sundarban delta, the river – the Ganga – most often personified as a female goes through several meta-

morphosis: from the frolicking girl with boundless enthusiasm to an elderly woman who is too self absorbed to take note of the happenings around; she is at once the giver and taker of life, she is the benign mother who provides her children with fish and fertility and is also the heartless destroyer of the boats and houses of poor and the carrier of the bacterium Vibrio cholerae.

The 'jowar' and the 'bhata' are never of equal duration; the ebb tide or 'bhata' is always longer. Pachu philosophically draws parallel between duration of suffering and the ebb tide; period of happiness is always shorter. Pachu dies of cholera and his death, ironically, marks the arrival the season's first shoal of Hilsa fish from the sea. Khokathakur – the lord of the fish – tantalizes, and can be caught only when it so wishes. The temperamental fish may be read as an extension of the river's self. The novel 'flows' with the thoughts of Pachu, who draws a parallel between Himi's love for Bilas and Damini's attraction for 'saidar Nibaran'. The cycle continues, but always with an element of failure. King Shantanu's fatal attraction for Ganga even at the cost of sacrifice of the children could never make Ganga stay with the king.[3] Himi's affair with Bilas too remains an unfulfilled task. Both Bilas and Himi had their own reasons to go to the sea; the sea is symbolic of the idea of arrival/completion. Himi have been through the dirty underbelly of the society; her desire to escape into the sea with Bilas reflects her wish to move into a world free from pretensions. While Nibaran dies in the sea, the fate of Bilas is left to the imagination of the reader.

The idea of arrival is always elusive; the Hilsa swims upstream from the warm sea to the cold waters of the Ganga facing many odds only to lay eggs, for the sweet and blurry water

of the river suits the babies. But it gets caught in the net of the fisherman and the latter himself becomes a victim of the many dangers in wait – Dokkhin Rai, cyclones, disease, dacoits. Even as the river is loved, worshipped, and feared so is the relation between the fishermen and the fish marked by paradoxes. It is the fish (especially, the Hilsa) that is worshipped as Khokathakur and also killed; it is a contradiction that on the death of the 'god' the fisherman lives. Basu puns on the Bengali word *moron* 'death' and *maaron* 'to kill' to build the paradox in the fishermen's lives. Pachu, the helm's man, finds a strange smell in the wind blowing from the south in his last fishing trip and the lightning that strikes in the horizon appear to him like the silent laugh of the ubiquitous *meenchokkhu*, 'fish eye' – a reminder to the fisherman of the arrival of death.[4] With the husband at sea, the sleepless wife at home changes into the guardian angel to her man; she prays to Khokathakur – the lord of the fish, Dokkhin Rai – the tiger demon, to Bon Bibi – the goddess of the forest for his safe return.

Samaresh Basu's well researched novel brings up the fact that even the illiterate folks are capable of fusing the literal and the metaphorical. Pachu remembers the comment of a fellow fisherman Dulal who reflects on the literal shallowness of the river that makes sailing difficult with the 'shallowness' in the heart of miserly goddess who is unwilling to part with her treasures – fish. The reluctant goddess plays a catalytic role in transforming a brave man like Nibaran into a thief who goes for clandestine fishing in the *haors* of Sarapul to provide for his family.[5] And the starving wife enters into a shamanic state where she reveals in a strange, nasalized tone the real cause of her plight: starvation, the *mahajan's* apathy, husband's unemployment.

Himi and Damini can be read as an extension of the benign self of 'Goddess Ganga', they stand by Nibaran, Pachu and Bilas in their hours of trials. Using the analogy of the river, Basu writes that just as even an expert fisherman fails to avoid the whirlpool that the drying river creates in the autumn months; Damini like the Ganga in *Ashwin* fascinated even a solemn man like Nibaran.[6] Himi assumes several aspects of the river, the sea, the fish and the goddess. The saree that she wears to the river to get fish from Bilas is deep blue like the sea with white polka dots, which appear like fish. Even the aesthetic of love making is expressed using the imagery of fish and the sea by Basu – the high tide overflows the bank and Himi gets lost in the dark sea of Bilas's chest. Pachu cannot help wondering at Himi who turns a rich prospective bridegroom to fall in love with a poor fisherman like Bilas; both the grandmother and the granddaughter with all their moodiness are epitomes of the river's multiple selves.

The people in the Sundarbans may be characterized in terms of their adherence or non adherence to the local myths and legends. Bilas in *Ganga* and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* are both fishermen but the former is a defiant figure and the latter is a man of faith. That there is one mysterious force which takes on different guises – that of tiger, cyclone, disease, pirates – is what most of the locals tend to believe. Basu in *Ganga* represents it as the all seeing, all pervasive 'fish eye' that coordinates the lives of fishermen. The extent to which the legend of Bon Bibi is ingrained in the minds of the locals is evident in Horen's ready explanation of the cause of the sudden storm that hit the Christian priest Francois Bernier and his team about three hundred years ago in *The Hungry Tide*; brushing aside Nirmal's scientific explanation,

he says "They crossed the line by mistake and ended up on one of Dokkhin Rai's islands. Whenever you have a storm like that – one that appears so suddenly, out of nowhere – you know it is the doing of Dokkhin Rai and his demons (147)". From the tiger – demon personified: Dokkhin Rai – to the tiny lizard that lives on the low roof of *bachhari* boat of Pachu, many animals of omen have the culture given authority to rein in human movements; but Bilas's killing of the lizard in anger is another act of defiance of traditions.

The Irrawaddy dolphin – *Orcaella brevirostris* – that frequents the waters near Garjontola, the island having a shrine to Bon Bibi, is named Bon Bibi's messengers – 'her eyes and ears' – by Kusum. This seemingly ridiculous notion is in act of mythologizing a reality – the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals. Piya had witnessed in the Irrawaddy in Mandalay how dolphins help the fishermen by herding shoal of fish to the fishing boat. And rationally explained, it was again the Irrawaddy dolphins that saved Kusum's father long back when he was caught in a storm; but to the believers that was an act of divine intervention. Myth and reality appear to merge when a thinking man like Nirmal recognizes Kusum's belief when he sees Irrawaddy dolphins for the first time:

> "Then there came a moment when one of [the dolphins] broke the surface with its head and looked right at me. Now I saw why Kusum found it so easy to believe that these animals were something other than they are". (235)

Myths and legends associated with tiger, fish, rivers, and

dolphins have to a great extent rendered immunity to the environment – protecting the flora and the fauna from direct exploitation by humans. But the killing of the helpless tiger by the angry villagers and the baby dolphin probably by the propeller of the fast moving patrol boat in *The Hungry Tide* are radical anthropocentric moves that destroy the real as well as the mythic world.

The storm in *The Hungry Tide* makes the lovers – Piya and Fokir part, the latter dies sheltering Piya from the wind; the storm in *Ganga* does not, however, end in the immediate parting of Himi and Bilas. In an anticlimactic move, she abandons her plan of leaving with Bilas abruptly after travelling together for some distance and it parallels *The Mahabharata* legend of the desertion of King Shantanu by Ganga. Being afraid of losing her husband to Piya, Moyna requests Kanai to mediate with his expertise in language. To Moyna, Fokir is "the real river', that lies beneath, 'unseen and unheard" which only the wind (Kanai, the outsider) blowing from without can disturb. Fokir's sense of oneness with the river comes up in the observation of Piya: "...I've never met anyone with such an incredible instinct: it's as if he can see right into the river's heart (267)". While Himi, with her moods and tantrums, embodies the many facets of the Ganga in *Ganga*; it is Fokir who, with his sense of oneness with the river, personifies the benign self of the Ganga in *The Hungry Tide*.

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(Footnotes)

[1] Ganga descended from the heavens answering the prayers of prince Bhagiratha to resurrect the thousand dead sons of King Sagara of Ayodhya, who were reduced to ashes by the wrath of Sage Kapila. I followed the description given by Manoj Das in *Myths, Legends, Concepts and Literary Antiquities of India.*

[2] Ambubachi is a time in the month of *Ashada* (June-July) when the earth is said to attain puberty. Farmers abstain from tilling and fishermen shun fishing in the apprehension of hurting 'mother earth'.

[3] It is an episode from *The Mahabharata.*

[4] South is where the sea is and south is also the territory of Yama, the Hindu god of death. Therefore, 'journey south' may also mean the 'final journey'.

[5] '*Haors*' are huge water bodies.

[6] *Ashwin* – an autumn month.