

SO NEAR YET SO FAR: NATURE AS INTIMATE AND NATURE AS THE OTHER

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Some Introductory Thoughts

I try to engage here with the ideas of distance and proximity; with the creation of the illusion of distance, as well as the illusion of proximity, in the contemporary discourse of 'development', or 'modernity' (within which the idea of 'development' and 'progress' as a 'revenue model' is constructed) and within the modern political-economic discourses. My engagement is with what Nature (inclusive of, but not excluding, physiography, landscapes, wildlife, the elements; the general ideas of nature of in the 'Nature' of things) means and comes to mean or is forced to mean, essentially inspired from the everyday, real-life situations, the everyday metaphors of our existence, across geographical and socio-economic spaces. How is nature, or some aspects of nature, or the natural, perceived by people / communities? Is it perceived similarly by all? Do marginalised communities perceive Nature differently? Or, is it constructed *for* them? How close are we to Nature or how distant is Nature from us? Is this decided by communities, or by a larger idiom, constructed by those who rule the 'developmental' logic? Is intimacy with nature a mere romantic (within a 'universalised' category of 'romantic') whim? Or was intimacy the 'real', sidelined by the whim of an anthropocentric, corporate, political ideology? Can there be intimacy and unbelonging at the same time? Or, is belonging the quintessence of intimacy?

Most natural spaces are contested today; there is an almost virile male (idea of) nation (in most parts of the globe) in a rush to establish paternity by injecting the seed of authority and dominion over natural resources towards an illusory idea of 'growth', in spite of *peak oil* and other crises of *climate change* (the two terms used for international agreements and conferences) without changing the ideology of a paternal, exploitative and extractive approach to nature and natural resources.

A telephonic conversation in late September, 2016, gave me that sense of how a construct has become not just *main-stream* but also the only stream that there is, if one has to live in this world—which seems to be the only singular world—today. This was a Koya (ST) farmer who said to me (over phone), he was planning to buy some land in Hyderabad from the compensation he was about to receive for his own land (nearly 10 acres in the pristine environs of a village not far from the Godavari river) which he had sold for the Polavaram dam, even as he spoke of the kind of corruption that was going on in the compensation process for their land for the Polavaram dam¹; he was only shown ‘house site’ and not the promised land for his land lost, which, incidentally is guaranteed by the new Land acquisition Act of 2013². But it did not seem to matter to him—not being compensated for his golden fields / land of corn, maize, paddy, all of these rain-fed. Farming has been rendered an activity that is fairly distant from the globally oriented ‘skill-development’, ‘IT’ dreams, where Hyderabad and its suburbs are the place to live in. At another level, money is the new intimate; every land can be acquired for money, and in this equation, one has to re-configure the intimacy that farmers once had with their fields, or tribal communities / adivasis once had with their forests, for which they fought some of the most protracted battles with even the colonial rulers. Of course, some, like the Dongria Kondh from Odisha, still fighting for their Niyamgiri mountain, become a kind of wonder for many.

The state is almost like a design of the new ‘intimate’—which is forcing itself into every idea that was / is reflective of the intimacy and belonging (where both intimacy *and* belonging go together) of people to Nature. It has come to a point where slow pace is a luxury for indulgence by the rich, as a break from their routine while the very ‘natural’ idea of slowness—time taken in agricultural operations, or fishing, for instance—that most poor farmers naturally dealt with, is the new anathema to the constant push by the state to ‘diversify or perish’ kind of advice given to them, time and again. It is interesting to observe this kind of ‘hurry’ to ‘get ahead’ or be left behind kind of advice given to most of the marginalised sections of the country.

‘Recent times have witnessed a considerable industry trying to alleviate the pressures of compressed time and accelerated mobility...Personal fitness ventures offer a wide range of meditation classes to relax the mind and unwind the body. Urban planners reroute entire roads, block off inner circles, and install speed bumps to decelerate traffic and encourage us to rediscover the joys of urban walking. Travel agencies design detailed packages for all those eager to move beyond the beaten

track and avoid the latest hypes of global tourism...[However] the slowing down of the global economy in the wake of the financial crises of 2008 has done very little to correct our perception of too much speed and temporal compression. On the contrary, Slowness, as it were, has very different connotations in the realm of economic affairs that it has in the sphere of lifestyle choices. To praise slow markets and slow retail sales would border on the perverse and self-destructive. Many may fault the way in which global capitalism distributes its wealth and produces large arenas of poverty, but neither economic theorists nor populist politicians would seriously promote a decelerating of production, distribution, and consumption of financial lending practices, the ensuing sluggishness of economic mobility was thus certainly not what gourmets, health professionals, traffic planners, and new age critics had in mind when applauding the pleasures of deceleration.’ (Koepnick, 1-2)

At the other end, you have the extremes of ‘back to nature’ advisories being churned out, most times as another small business, for mostly urban people. It might just be the metaphor of our times, that the thing that is destroyed elsewhere—nature, natural environs, with some of the most intimate relationships between human societies and the flora, fauna and ways of living that exemplified that intimacy—is then recreated in the new city; at least attempts are made to sell that idea. For example, the Telangana government has recently started what is called the *Harita Haram* (Green Garland) programme, to make Telangana green, and is distributing tree saplings free of cost to people to grow more trees in their localities, towns, etc. This comes after destruction of forest habitat through other projects (which may have happened over the last several years, not necessarily under the present government in power, but that has not stopped); similarly, river systems are destroyed elsewhere to bring water to the cities.

Sight, touch, and feel are sensations that are most intimate, but distance is also created in these sensations in violent and conflict-ridden contexts where Nature becomes a distant phenomenon. What is naturally there, and idyllic, is not always beautiful in the typical sense of beauty, either. For example, in a place called Jageshwar in Kumaun region of Uttarakhand, where I once lived, there was ‘beauty’ of the place: a stream, Deodar trees, scores of Barking Deer, occasional night visits of Leopards, entire star constellations visible on every dark night (satellite TV had only ‘arrived’ in one rich household at that time) and then there was an ancient temple complex and an ancient caste system. There was beauty in nature sense of the term, and there was violence in sociological context. The lower caste communities stayed close to the river stream, and some

of them in typically beautiful picture-postcard-kind of landscapes up in the higher mountains. At one level, they were intimate with the environs and at another, perhaps that intimacy was also their distance from the larger social community, by the roadside, near towns and markets, and of course, the temple complex. There was also contestation over belonging in those spaces, defined by caste.

In southern India, the river Godavari and the villages around reveal the absolute photographic beauty. Many tribal communities / adivasis and fishing communities live closest to Godavari, are intimate with her, and understand perfectly her moods and temperament of each season. At another level, this intimacy makes them the most vulnerable to the distance that is created by the state through structures such as the Polavaram dam (in West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, or other dams, for that matter, on other rivers elsewhere). There is an almost Cartesian separation between people and nature and nature is considered apart from, outside of, the human society and history.

In many cases, the conflict between human population and wild animals, in places where many wild animals are on the verge of being declared vermin because they are charged with ‘destroying’ crops, for instance, the former intimacies shared between species, are forcibly destructed through the binary of human versus nature / wildlife, which is evident in policies of the state, that have of late taken over the preservation of the human species with a vengeance within a paradigm of total control, numerisation, surveillance and a universal moral sphere where anything could be declared as ‘unnatural’ (itself a paradoxical term) and either ‘vermin’ (because it has gone beyond its ‘natural’ tendency and begun to destroy the human effort of agriculture) or ‘unnatural tendency’ (homosexuality, as one instance) through an Act in a modern legal jargon. Peacock, supposed to be our ‘national’ bird, was declared ‘vermin’ in Goa. Dogs are being killed in Kerala with state sanction or with the state looking the other way. Monkeys are declared vermin in Himachal Pradesh. The terminology ‘vermin’ is an example of how deep the distance between nature and human world is, today.

*Intimacies and Belongings from Different
Locales, the Human Project, etc*

Here I share images and metaphors of everyday existence of one’s life (or, our lives, perhaps, if there are some commonalities to all our lives in today’s global context, which loves commonalities, which make

selling ideas, products easier) which are self-experienced (intimately engaging) and also ones observed, of other selves and spaces over decades, across geographical-cultural locales of India (mountain villages of Kumaun, Himachal Pradesh and hills and forests of Godavari or villages of the Deccan or cities of Delhi, Hyderabad, and others). I am not doing a Wordsworth in nature with a big N. Nor does my analysis fit into the deep ecology discourse. Rather, I seek to problematise ideas of *inside* and *outside*, *here* and *there*, and intimacy and distance as politically constructed or as constructions whose politics we need to be conscious of; as also of a pattern, a deeper idiom, of our being in, what I perceive as, an increasingly constructed *human project*. This project is the creation, especially, of post-colonial science, and has been in operation through nationalist policies on population, family planning, medicine, education, etc. But of late, the *human project* (as against, and superceding, the *human condition* which is more of a social-historical reality, the understanding of which is ideologically conditioned) is dangerously linked to global capital and has expanded its base; it has in fact intruded into several intimate spaces of private lives of people through technology and consists in keeping the human body as a site for market possibilities, through several experiments carried out overtly or covertly. In this *project*, species other than human are always ‘out there’ and resources are also ‘out there’ for exploitation and for currency conversion. Intimacy would kill the currency possibilities. Anthropocentric consumption and commodity overwhelm and in this *human project* many have been rendered dispensable / insignificant. Intimacy to, and belonging in, nature consists in the language people speak, about natural phenomena. The most recent metaphor I received and an older one—which I share here—would urge us to be conscious of these, which are part of people’s spoken languages. In recent times I have had the fortune of getting acquainted with some people from Lahaul-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh. In the course of a conversation around December-January (2016) about cold, and winter, one of them told me, *is baar barf rooth gayi; pata nahin kya hua; bus, rooth gayi*. [This time round, snow is annoyed; wonder what happened; she is just annoyed.]

People in the Godavari region, especially villages in East, West Godavari in Andhra Pradesh and a few villages in Telangana by Godavari, sometimes the people will foretell the river’s flow: *ee saari pedda Godaari raadandi*. [This time big Godavari (‘floods’) will not come.]

In both cases, snow, and river Godavari, respectively, are feminine.

And have an intensely personalised presence for people living in close proximity to each of these natural forces / phenomena. Snow, and the river, can get annoyed. In the language of the people by Godavari, 'she' "comes" (*ostundi*); she does not "flood". Recently, I read somewhere that the Eskimos have more than sixty words for snow (depending on the time, kind, form of snow, etc). People must have similar experience and intimate terms for deserts and forests, as well. In the villages of Godavari the agricultural seasons have their respective kinds of breeze as well. The winter breeze is not similar to the breeze of the other seasons. The colonial gazetteer, for instance, records one of these which is popularly known as *payiru gaali*.

'Light north-easterly breezes in January and February, the driest months of the year, are followed in March and April by light south and south-east winds which blow during the day but die down at sunset. This south breeze is called by the natives, *payiru gáli*, or the 'crop wind'... In December the wind blows from the east during the day and from the north during the night. The latter is called the hill (*konda*) wind.' (Hemingway, 1915: 12)

The *human project* has an in-built mechanism where nature is for extreme consumption and is commodified. Hence the intricacies of language would not matter. Nature, anyways, as I speak of it, is not about landscapes by themselves, but landscapes are part of the natural world, many of which have had very long-standing interactions with human societies, of varied kinds, and it is in the larger ecological sense that one speaks of it. But I am specifically focussing on spaces with sounds, lights, shades, which are receptacles of meaning for people who live in close proximity to specific natural environs which are today the battle-ground for resource extraction and the deep state. Even so, perspectives on nature and how it is seen vary for different communities. A Kondareddi perspective on a mango or tamarind tree would be different from that of a Kamma or Kapu one³. Incidentally, the Kondareddis, and even Koyas of east Godavari consider tamarind a sacred tree, but in some villages elsewhere in AP, the tamarind tree is feared, since they believe it houses ghouls. It may be interesting to understand these differences at some point. The way things in nature are perceived is part of the politics of economics and politics, in general. Several adivasis / tribal communities, dalits, fisherfolk are being forcibly dislocated from their natural environment that they have consciously (through knowledge systems that they practised across generations) conserved not for simply reasons of beauty in a vacuum, but by ways of utility

which are totally different from the greed of capital.

Metaphor of Distance—Verticality, TV, Water Taps

When one closely examines the cartography of urban life, the predominant metaphor is that of *verticality*. In this *verticality* of things are constructed illusions of intimacy when reality is just so far; or illusions of distance when the real is so near. The water tap, the moon, and the sunlight and mobile phones may be just few examples. But the more tangible, visible example is the high-rise apartment. Further up from the ground you see, more the mental, physical and emotional distance from the touch and feel of the ground, the earth, the soil and water. These are also amenable to new kinds of purity-pollution discourses. People are ‘outside of’ and ‘sheltered within’, and shielded from, nature. Glass-panes—increasingly used in city buildings—are metaphors of shields between people and nature, just as the sunlight might enter spaces within, but the nearness / the touch and feel of the heat of it, are far / distant. The din of 24x7 TV makes sure that your senses, of hearing, not just the everyday sounds, but also the silence, at times, are numbed. But this numbness and unfeeling is not limited to un-hearing of everyday sounds and birds and insects, but gradually, seeps through the system so that, apart from a spectacle, the ‘usual’ dislocations and displacements of people fail to move anyone beyond a few days. The nature of belonging constructed in cities is to that of a gated community-space, an apartment complex-space, and perhaps, a neighbourhood park-space where, again, the overwhelming, almost pathological, ‘feeling;’ if it can be called that, is ‘reduce weight’, do the ten rounds, bend, rise, bend, rise and then rush home or to work. The urban space (increasingly expanding, with thousands of smart cities planned), is a cultural and deeply political space, consciously constructed—as a politics—and it is a signifier of increased distance from the ground and earth and water and soil and the wind and the breeze, but by extension, also a signifier of the distance between a seemingly shielded, well-provided for space and the Kondareddis, Koyas, or perhaps the Dongria Kondhs and the Santhals and the largest section of dalits in the rural spaces, increasingly being dislocated. Perceptions of sharing spaces with animals and birds are nearly the same as perceptions of people that these spaces reinstate. Peacocks are to be declared vermin in Goa, hence ordered to be exterminated; monkeys are vermin in another state: exterminate. Whatever it is that disturbs the assumed (constructed) equilibrium: exterminate, or punish. Programmes such as Operation Green-Hunt (strange that it is called ‘Green’

'hunt'), sedition and imprisonment, and torture, are some of the means to straighten the deviant or exterminate them. Of course, the other side is equally true, where the ones 'hunted down' operate on a similar logic of exterminating (at different times) those who turn against them.⁴

The malady of living in sanitised, fully-serviced apartments (many come with the appendage of a 'no-pet policy' in many cities; and some of them have 'no salesmen policy') vertical and on a notional idea of ownership of the land beneath runs deeper than we imagine. Once these pockets of shielded spaces are created, with a heavy dose of TV and noise, you only occasionally 'escape' to 'quiet' and 'nature' and 'peace' for a few days to the exotic 'other' space, 'out there', which may have been once, or perhaps still is (in some cases) a place where tribal / adivasi communities and other dalits had homes, and everyday lives. Today these are eco-resorts (or dam sites, where tourist throng to see the gush of water post-torrential rains when the flood-gates are opened, to avoid disasters), sanitised of the everyday. Where natural quiet of the everyday becomes re-packaged as "quiet" and "Nature" and "eco" and is serviced to people from cities, sanitised of the people around and the animals and birds, who are then promised lesser spaces in 150 sq.ft; the former in R&R colonies and the latter in city zoos or shrinking National Park spaces. Resettlement homes in a colony called R&R (universally) come with gadgets of urban existence.

In the course of the rise of the city, universities and institutions, are increasingly part of these spaces of urban living, and to me these seem conscious, politically intended; as intended and planned as the verticality and vacuum-isation of senses and sensations⁵, so that the longest battle of Dongria Kondhs against the Vedanta company in Niyamgiri and of Koyas and Kondareddis against Polavaram dam on Godavari river, may create no more than a moment's unrest, and perhaps a few days of protest. Most fail to understand the language of Lodu Sikaka and his community when he once said (now famously):

*'Niyam raja is our god... this mountain is our temple, our god. Because of these mountains, our children live, the rains come, the water comes, the wind blows, the mountains bring water. If they take away these rocks, we will die. Eta Niyamgiri to amaar atma [this Niyam giri is our soul]...Vedanta has no right to touch our Niyamgiri mountain.'*⁶

What better exposition on human-ecosystem connections can there be than this, coming from people who should have been at the centre of the knowledge system and politics but are today on the fringes, because their language seems to many to be far too idealistic

at the best and ridiculously simplistic at the worst to people who look at progress and development only in terms of urban expansion and consistent consumption of products which companies such as Vedanta and others produce for the global market. What Sikaka spoke of, is also spoken of at global conferences on climate change; and government leaders agree that there is indeed something called Climate Change, a term which has recently been incorporated in the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests (it is now MoE&F and Climate Change). The intimacy of Lodu Sikaka with the mountain-forest is organic, everyday and not exotic; the 'outside' there is 'inside'—the mountain is where they live and work and is their god, and so they are constantly physically 'in touch' with this god even at a sensual level.

It is interesting to see that in the Sanskritic, which became the universalised, 'Hindu' tradition, the religion necessarily creates a distance between god and human, although bhakti is usually cited as merging that distance to a large extent by making the god an intimate friend, beloved, etc. of the human 'bhakta', yet the god is still outside, to be invited within the heart of the human devotee through devotion, through friendship, submission, subservience, depending on the way in which the devotee chooses to reach that merger with the divine; same goes for the Sufi tradition. That is a discourse I shall not engage with here, but I wish to point out that in most of the cases where an animal or bird or any form of wildlife is connected to the divine, what happens on the ground seems far away from the iconography which connects human / god with the natural world. For instance, Elephant-god, Monkey-god, Peacock: god's vehicle, Lion: goddess' vehicle, etc. The elephants in most places in India are either ill-treated as procession animals in temple towns or as labourers for forest departments or killed almost everyday by fast moving trains through elephant corridors. Many elephants find themselves attacked when they enter cultivated fields within or around forests. Monkeys have been declared vermin, as I said earlier; so also Peacocks, usually the vehicle for the god Kartikeya / Murukan. Dogs, incidentally, are associated with Bhairava, but the status of dogs in many parts of the country is too well-known to narrate here. Almost every animal has some religious significance. But the actual treatment shows no concern for that *bit* of religion, or their high connections with divinity, ever. The goddess is worshipped almost everywhere in this country, but women are raped almost every other day or restrained from following their dreams in most cases.

What I am trying to say is that in the act of worship itself is the

distance, consciously constructed. Once the intimacy is killed, killing or maiming, or raping becomes simpler. The goddess, the different vehicles of gods and goddesses, the animal-gods, are all 'out there' or 'up there', somewhere far away, very distant; once they are distant, the violence with their real animal / bird forms on the earth / ground, seems to affect no sense of horror in people. Praying to distant gods, god-vehicles, goddesses, comes far easier, and hence, the decimation, created after sufficient distance, is equally easy.⁷

In case of the Kondareddis, Kondhs, and several other tribal / adivasi communities (or in the case of dalits living by the sea or rivers) the forest / river is *both* sensual-real and utilitarian (in some cases, utilitarian and hence the feel, the touch, the reverence is both sensual and utilitarian, with no duality there); the utilitarian here, is *not* extreme consumption. It cannot be *extreme consumption* because it is revered, and since it is revered, is divine, its *being* and *presence* is most essential. Hence, there is no space for wanton destruction for greed. It is quite simple. Without being deterministic. The rules of hunting and cultivation are customarily respectful to laws of nature and seasons unlike the blanket bans and reservations of the Forest policies following the colonial legacy, which are signifiers of *extreme Nature*, where reserved forests can make way for plantations by industries (as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility and within the global Carbon Sink market paradigms).⁸ It is the most intimate spaces of marginal communities that are sought to be controlled and manipulated by the state and multinational corporations invoking a different kind of 'development-god'—there is an entire 'religion' in operation here, in the latter case, which is far more entrenched than the regular religious faith of common people.

There is no comprehensive account yet that seeks to analyse the overall attitude towards nature and the interconnectedness of life-systems in the traditional Left and the radical (and presently 'outlawed') Left, so far. In some pockets, the closeness of some Left groups (not necessarily / always Maoist) to people in tribal / adivasi areas, perhaps there is some acceptance of the people's ideas of land, forest, river, etc. But the Left political discourse—in general—remains largely anthropocentric. There is acceptance of people's dislocations from projects that affect their homes and livelihoods, for instance, but the stress is almost always about the human world, and not an entire eco-system; but more importantly, the language of the discourse remains within the dominant paradigm of compensation, R&R, 'development', even in projects of irreversible ecological destruction, wherein the human world is part of parcel of

that destruction, but not the only victim.

Then there is yet another discourse which calls to question protection of wild animal species and conservation, itself, in areas where there is human-animal conflict, without questioning the reasons for that conflict and demanding centrality to the human side of that conflict—in elephant corridors, tiger zones, etc. Both the extreme conservatism, and deep human Rights discourse, seems to reinstate the anthropocentric; keeping Nature or natural spaces as either sacrosanct, and hence distant, or unimportant for the discourse, and hence removed, from human lives.

Another metaphor that comes to my mind is that of the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the hospitals where the first thing that is struck off is the cord of intimacy between the family and the patient; what you see through the glass doors of separation is a distant body, under the control of gadgets controlled by the representative of the system (in this case, hospital doctors, nurses, etc). This metaphor could be used for several instances where an artificial distance is not just created, but also maintained and scrutinised by the system and its representatives. Natural resources are similarly being distanced from communities close to them—who are then thrown a few crumbs by way of compensation packages of a lifetime—and then forced to sit by and watch huge machinery on their fields, destroying them, destroying forest land, rivers and mountains for extracting minerals and resources towards something they say will benefit people in the long run but essentially for consumption elsewhere, ‘outside’ of their own historically lived spaces.

Water taps are metaphors of distance between a river and the ultimate consumption of a segment of a river’s identity, which is H₂O (the formula called water), simply put. The history or the historical relations of the river and the people—who have been dislocated and amputated from the river’s history and existence through a single big dam project (or several dam projects) which will then take the water into vertical city-spaces—are of no consequence. Here, in these city-spaces, there is no intimacy, nor belonging, to the idea of a river or river system. The river too, perhaps, does not belong in these spaces as a phenomenon of any significance. Water does. The water tap becomes the Operating System (OS) which must work 24x7, or hell will break lose. At the other end, the same water will be dreaded to the point of being cursed, if a stream or river dares to flow through the streets, of what once were the river’s own natural pathways, causing inundation of these vertical spaces which encroached upon the river’s natural course, filling them up with sand piles, in order

to build spaces distanced from both the river / stream/ lake and the idea of a river as a natural force which ‘flows’.

‘Taps, which bring water into individual homes, in an apartment in a city—as individuated units, apart from each, and hence ‘*apart-ment*’... denotes the breaking up into several individual units. So the use of water, the flow of it, is also individualised and in a sense invisible to the ‘others’ (in this complex)...what the state, via corporations, brings in through artificial channels into their homes (the way States use the idea of bringing Krishna to Chennai or Godavari to Hyderabad) is not a river but only a segment of a river’s identity, which is ‘H₂O=water’... The river itself, for increasingly urban spaces, is an abstract element or phenomenon, largely invisible; only its uses and its constructs (tanker, drainage systems, pipelines) are visible and hence understood... Any damming activity in a far-off, largely invisible space, seems too distant (metaphorically, at least) to the city-dweller. At the other end are gallons of water flowing into industrial complexes or premises or corridors, through similar pipelines, from an abstract distant river... Only the end result is visible—in the way it is constructed for us.’ (Umamaheshwari, 2016: 37)

How do you deal with the sacredness supposedly attached to Indian rivers? It does not matter too much. Just as we have dealt with sacredness and destruction of the very thing that was sacred, here too, you go ‘elsewhere’ to access that sacredness of a river: either the Krishna *pushkaram* or Godavari *pushkaram* (a once-in-twelve-years ritual cleansing supposed to cleanse people of their sins) or the Kumbh and Ganga and you return home to a city (if you are an urban dweller, and most of the friction of intimacy and un-belonging happens in these spaces) and you want the same Godavari or Krishna in your taps at home. By this time, she will become sufficiently desacralised, and turn into H₂O, without the associated sacredness or reverence. Here, the more you pay (in currency terms), the more tankers of water you get, to fill up the overhead tanks for the water you consume in the privacy of your homes.

Of Rivers, Damming, Forests

What is a river all about? A seemingly flat, two-dimensional surface? Or simply water resource? Does a river hold meanings and layers of history in the course she flows or through structures forced on her to divert the natural flow / direction? What about the life within rivers, of species, non-human? These questions would lead you to a river of communities and life histories and an eco-system that urges you to

understand that every large river has several smaller rivers, rivulets and streams contributing to that largeness or largesse. A river is not singular, though a river may be named that way; Godavari's identity is closely linked to that of Wainganga's, Wardha's, Pranahita's, Sabari's, and many others, which together make Godavari what she is towards one end of her expanse. At the extreme end, before joining the sea, she becomes two distinct Gautamis. For people living by the river, the river Sabari is distinct, as is Pranahita, or any other. Their intimacy would be with those rivers / streams, rivulets, etc. These aspects belong in a world that is far away from the political river, which is Godavari, which "wastes into sea" and must be dammed, at several places in Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and so on. Here, the internal combinations—or linkages—of a river system do not make any sense to the political games. Here the set of questions would be—how much TMC⁹ ft of water does this river have? How much can this river be 'utilised' to the last gallon? These questions belong in a world of techno-fixing and policy and power. There are no people here, communities of the riverside, river of the communities, or fish and other species in the river.

Malladi Posi, a fishworker / fisherman from Manturu (East Godavari) had queried me, once, ironically, "They won't give us Godavari for Godavari, will they?"

Posi is from the Palli sub-caste of fisher community, and he also does part-time ferrying of people from Manturu to Vadapally across the river, villages in the Polavaram dam submergence zone. This seemed to me his pun on the idea of 'land to land' (which is the way people refer to land for land compensation for the project, in these parts) guaranteed for the STs. It also meant he mocked at the normative 'compensation language', which has no consideration for river, which, to fisher communities, is 'land', a resource they have built their life histories on.

'Perhaps we have to go elsewhere, looking for a river, if not Godavari', reflects Sangani Eswara Rao of Kachluru in Tunnur panchayat, East Godavari district. Malladi Posi and Eswara Rao are fishermen, belonging to the Palli caste, from villages along the river Godavari that are threatened by displacement by the Polavaram dam. Posi and Rao's words throw up deeper questions: For whom does the Godavari flow? Just as tribal communities seek land for land, and forest for forest, can these fishermen seek a river for a river in compensation? Is the Godavari meant only for industry or agriculture, not for fishermen/fish workers? Whose river is the Godavari? What about those whose lives and livelihoods depend on 'hunting' fish (*caapala veta*, as they call it...)?...Should the Polavaram dam see completion, these communities could lose their

identity forever... There is no mention of fisher communities in the R&R (Rehabilitation and Resettlement) statistics of the Polavaram project; in a strange paradox, they are not counted as part of the population of the 'agency areas'. Although they have fished in these waters for centuries, subtle changes in their settlement patterns were never important enough to be recorded by census officials. When it comes to voting, however, they do seem to count as they have ration cards...' (Umamaheshwari, 2010)

The attitude towards the fisher communities exemplifies distance and disconnect. The state enumerates them but forgets the essence of people's lived histories. The intimacy of the fisher communities with Godavari is deep.

Sometimes intimacies are also constructed. During the Godavari and Krishna *pushakaram*, the state governed these intimacies constructed from a 'Hindu' ritual idea of river (though many communities *may* partake of these); these constructed intimacies do not ever understand the 'natural' intimacy and belonging-ness of people for whom the river may always be a precious presence, not a commodity, not an exotica either, definitely of 'use' (if they fish), to them, for their livelihoods—so there is the distance maintained between extreme obsessive indulgence in intimacy—and these are communities who actually understand a river's flow as well her moods and seasonal temperament; as they understand the fish cycles or cycle of other aquatic species, whose health is intrinsic to the health of the river and vice versa.

According to Ramaswamy Iyer, "Apart from the submergence of a certain area, dams and barrages have downstream impacts too: they reduce downstream flows and affect the river regime, its capacity for cleaning itself, its function as a recharger of groundwater, its role as the sustainer of aquatic life and vegetation and downstream communities and their livelihoods, the health of the estuary, and so on..."¹⁰

At this juncture, let me share two poems here which come from experiential and intimate spaces of two dalit poets, about two distinct rivers.

Maa aur Nadi

(Omprakash Valmiki, Dalit Hindi Poet)

*kitna gehra rishta thaa
maa aur nadi kaa
nadi kinaare ghar thaa
mere nanihaal kaa
sat kar behti thi hindon nadi*

*jiske ret mein upje
 kakdi, tarbooj aur kheere
 bhulaaye nahin bhoolte
 jaise maa ke haath ki bani roti-sabji aur sil par pisi
 chutney
 nadi,
 itihaas aur vartmaan donon hai
 maa ki tarah (Valmiki, 2011: 46)*

[What a deep relationship it was, between mother and the river
 On the river banks was my maternal home
 With the Hindon river flowing closely past
 One can never forget the cucumbers and musk melons that grew on the
 river-sands
 Just as one can't forget mother's *roti* and vegetables and
 the *chutney* ground on the grindstone
 the river
 is both history and the present
 just as mother is]¹¹

Godavari

(Yendluri Sudhakar, Dalit Telugu Poet)

*When I rest my head on your lap-banks
 I feel I am with my mother
 When I roll on the sand beds of your body
 I feel I am playing on my father's chest (Kallury, Translation. 2008: 185)*

Then there is yet another poetry from life which is lived by the fisher communities and other communities along Godavari: this poetry lies in the expression associated with Godavari's 'coming' (not "flooding"), which is the perspective that truly inheres a soul-connection with a natural phenomenon whose natural identity lies in flowing and the coming in spate of a river is expressed as a natural coming, rather than as a 'disaster'—the latter being a term deeply connected with ideas of 'national' management of natural phenomena, usually in ways more disastrous than the natural phenomenon itself. For the fishermen on Godavari, its flows are intrinsic to their own histories and identities. Fishing zones are culturally and inter-generationally fixed.

The other imaginary of a river is the Anicut over Godavari which is still maintained by the AP state. Sir Arthur Cotton, a government engineer, completed its construction in year 1852. The structure is popular as the Cotton Barrage, at Dowlaiswaram near Rajahmundry

in East Godavari, Andhra Pradesh. Cotton continues to be deified in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh to this day, and there are even Sanskrit verses penned on his greatness¹² by those who idolise the dam itself as a structure of great human achievement. The anicut led the agriculturists to become far more dependent on the structure thus established. The idea of land created here (in the delta) essentially emerged from the idea of the river. With the British colonial rule, some of the rivers became sites of state power and through the enlightenment, Baconian, vision of controlling nature—in this case, usually, floods—engineering experiments became the new modes of establishing, forcibly injecting, the seed of paternity over riverspaces. This engineering establishment set such a firm foot on Indian soil, that even today, the structure—, especially one that oversees dams, reservoirs and irrigation projects—apes the colonial construct. They remain paternal, and patriarchal.

‘In Arthur Cotton’s language, “the river must be restrained from wandering, which, from its having no hard strata in its course, it always does naturally, and all its branches must be provided with artificial embankments to prevent the country being flooded from the river...and it is necessary by artificial means, to keep the water constantly at a level which shall command the country, and also by a multitude of channels to lead it to every acre of land...The system of works now in progress in the Delta of the Godavery, therefore, are intended to embrace these four objects, viz—to restrain the river; to preserve the land from floods; to supply it constantly with water; and to pervade the tract thoroughly with means of very cheap transit.’ (Umamaheshwari, 2015: 225)

Discussing the forms in which the present shows signs of certain hangovers from the past, and the process called *ruination*—which could also be used as a metaphor to understand spoiling or reconfiguring of natural landscapes, of the marginalise and poor, usually—Ann Laura Stoler urges on,

‘[The] need to refocus on the *connective tissue* that continues to bind human potentials to degraded environments and degraded personhoods to the material refuse of imperial projects — to the spaces redefined, to the soils turned toxic, and to the relations severed between people and people, and between people and things. At issue are political lives of imperial debris and the uneven pace with which people can extract themselves from the structures and signs by which remains take hold...’ (Stoler, 2013: 8)

Further,

‘The question is pointed: how do imperial formations persist in their

material debris, in ruined landscapes and through social ruination of people's lives? ...It is rather to recognise that these are unfinished histories, not of a victimised past, but of consequential histories of differential futures.' (Stoler, 2013: 10-11)

I see the anicut on Godavari is an imperial ruin and Polavaram dam an ongoing ruination.

Controlling rivers towards revenue generation has become an immortal legacy of colonial science and technology mission; the distance created then, between: a) people and rivers; b) between rivers' natural flows / as also floods and holding the river waters through an entire mechanism 'releasing' and closing the gates (by the patriarchal engineering structure, which also leads to conflicts sometimes between states over water sharing on the one hand and unprecedented, human-made floods, on the other) and; c) between natural gravity and forced 'lift'.

I recount an event that occurred in Himachal Pradesh sometime early 2015. The event was reported as a 'freak accident'; but 'freak' it wasn't. In many ways, it could be seen as a kind of institutional murder (the institution in this case, could be the engineering establishment and the entity called the modern-day dam). Several young students from Hyderabad, on their way to Mandi lost their lives in the sudden gush of waters of Beas river; not a single body was found (barring one, many days later, in a decomposed condition, somewhere along the way). The fault was not the river's. But the waters released from the Larji dam, unannounced. Irony it was, that these were young engineering students from AP-Telangana, the state that deifies engineering and dam building projects. Some say the siren was perhaps inaudible to the students out there to have fun, clicking selfies. The idea behind this incident is the damming principle itself, based on controlling flows. The underside of the story was that the everyday this kind of release of dam waters is part of a nexus between the government authorities and sand mining mafia; the force of the water released and stopped leaves a pile of silt, which is then collected in truck loads. Here, river first becomes stored water and then mere sand particles, which then make homes in the cities. Each sequence distances the idea of the river from its end-perception. What was even more pertinent was that following this Larji dam incident, my BSNL mobile phone would send me this 'sms' everyday, for a long time thereafter: "We request you to avoid venturing into rivers or entering into river waters, for your own safety and well-being." This is yet another metaphor of our being in chains of an idea that removes us from what was once an un-oblivious part

of people's lives around rivers.

Frames, Images, Metaphors of Other Worlds

Finally, I move to some images etched in my memory, which signify kinds of intimacy and examples of distance. Women in the villages of Kumaun (at the time when I lived and worked there for a while) many years ago, used to go in small groups (usually friends went together) to collect fodder and fuel from the forests. Afternoons were times they sat together in the forest, sometimes by a small stream of river, or in a thicket of tall trees giving shade from the Sun, and indulged—in gossip perhaps, or sharing concerns regarding problems at home. Or a love story in the neighbourhood. These were very intimate spaces. Sometimes they bathed together, and lazed about, leaving their animals (if they had any) to graze around. Sometimes there would be sexual plays, too. They were uninhibited here. Many possibilities existed in these spaces. Interestingly, many of the folk songs in Kumaun, I would realise later, sung by women, had the character of the forest guard—*daroga*—who, in the songs, was also an intruder, and the state, in person, fining them for ‘destroying’ the forests and stealing wood. *He* was the *system*, which created the binary, of forest / Nature as ‘outside of’ the people. None of these songs ever idealised the forest guard. If there was another male character who found himself in most of the songs of women, it was the bus driver or jeep driver, the medium between the village and the outside world, either bringing in the beloved or taking the beloved far away, or the driver himself being the beloved in some cases. Intimacies always exist alongside a sense of belonging or, on the other hand, the friction caused from un-belonging in an intensely intimate space.

Other moments of intimacy come from a different world, one close to a (belonging to the world of) a river—Godavari. It was when four young boys of a fisher community from Devipatnam, by Godavari river, crossed me across to Singanapally, on a particularly windy summer afternoon, when the river was at her ebb; the nature of their navigation, with a tarpaulin sheet making up for the wind sail of an old boat, with joy and revelry of early teenage years (when the schools were closed for the summer vacations) was another playful moment with the river, whose moods and the nature of flow may have been an intrinsic part of several childhoods, spent in these environs, where the river becomes also a playground and challenges the children to play with her, navigate across, with smiles on their

faces as they ‘did it’. Here it is difficult to decide who belongs more here, and who is intimate with whom: the river, the children, both to each other or to the space around.

And then there is a completely contrasting moment that I recorded on the same river; where tourist cruises happen on the river, which could be any river, not just Godavari. Here there is an external gaze, a distant, and usually patronising, gaze at the vast expanse of picture-postcard river and villages and the hills around. The river here can be a dumping ground (of plastic coffee cups and soda bottles or leftover food); the people of the place are also objects of voyeurism as much as the river is. Would it be of some consequence that most of these tourists belong to upper castes and are usually city-dwellers?

One of the deeply philosophical-political ideas of Nature I also found in the exposition of the Kondareddi woman, Madi Muttem (or Madi Muttamma), from the village Kokkarigudem in East Godavari, AP. She said,

‘I am the MPTC¹³ (member) for two mandals—Kondamodalu and Tunnur...We cannot survive in plain area¹⁴; this is Agency¹⁵, and hence we have all things we need; in the town, in , plain area, you have to *buy* everything—vegetables, edible leaves, fruits, tamarind, etc. *Here*, in the agency, we get all of those *free*. We just need to buy salt, which we get from our village *santa* (the weekly village fairs). *There*, we cannot survive. They say they will build our homes in places which we shall show them; they have not yet shown us anything yet...’¹⁶

Her home lies within the submergence zone of the Polavaram dam and what she had said to me then addressed sites which were at once personal and political and historically rooted and where she belonged. And the *in-construction* sites that she spoke of were: Submergence Zone as a Site; Village as a Site and; an economic construct as a Site.¹⁷

Madi Muttem’s was a simple, deep and profound understanding of the *akkada* (*There*, distant, where she will never belong, even if forced to) and *ikkada* (*Here*, intimate). The concept of *ikkada* (Here) versus *akkkada* (there) was the most reflective philosophical point which nearly all the tribal women spoke to me about in the submergence zone. *Ikkada* and *akkada* would occur in a context of contrasts (of being the adivasi person rooted in a historical location versus becoming a state and market project, or in other words, the sacrificial goat for the bogey of public good).

‘*Akkada* or *There* is a nameless, disempowering, vague, abstract notion of a place they will be “thrown into” (*padestaaru*—*they will throw us*, said many, so they felt they were perceived as things that can be thrown into

someplace) and following from there, they will lose their identities and livelihoods. Even if they happened to know the name of the “RR colony” (in two cases in Polavaram mandal) it was always referred to as “there”, “that place” (vague, abstract, nameless); no matter how difficult lives were “here” (their homes by the tamarind and toddy and the forested hills)—it is still their home...’ (Umamaheshwari, 2014: 17-18)

‘Incidentally, the government machinery had the same language—*“ikkada meeru em chestaaru, adavillo undi? Akkada meeku anni sadupayalu untaayi”* (‘what will you do *Here*, staying in forests? *There* you will get all facilities’).’ (Ibid: 18)

Shane Phelan has written that,

‘Nature may be distance, the unreachable referent of our desire or need, but it is never really far at all. What would distance really mean in a world where habit is nature, where nature is cultivated? ... Instead of eliminating nature in political discourse, I would argue for the mediation of intimate distance... The elimination of nature can only further the solipsism of modern Western civilisation, in which the earth becomes ‘standing-reserve’ for appropriation by humans who have themselves become nothing but resources in a global economy...What is needed is a reconceptualisation that heightens respect and care without a return to medieval piety.’ (Phelan, 1992: 398-400)

The world market dogma today is promising cities that are clones of each other; rural spaces are redundant for them, either as idioms of the past and better dead and gone; forests are sites of timber management or entertainment / nature tourism. In some places, rocks and mountains, which sometimes inhere sacredness for some communities (Niyamgiri for the Dongria Kondh of Odisha, or the ancient rock-cut caves in northern Tamil Nadu for minorities such as the Tamil Jaina, tamarind and mango trees for the Kondareddi and Koya, among many examples), signify only extraction value for private Companies and the state. Human beings and nature are today sites of economic management and currency exchange. In a dam project while submergence of human habitations is calculated in terms of currency, and policies exist to compensate in monetary terms, the loss of habitat of bird species, amphibians, reptiles butterflies, wild animals—an entire, distinct earthspace—is non-existent in the vocabulary of compensation. That the earthspace cannot be compensated for in the same way as the elements of nature cannot be calculated in monetary terms, these too, lose their place in the larger history of the universe, which is far more expansive and older than human history.

The distance between the entrance and terminal gats at the

airports of big metros; the deity and the devotee in larger temples and; between the ground and the last floor of several skyscrapers, are peculiar metaphors of our times, which also add to the distance between human society and nature / the natural world, and people who still have deep bonds with the natural world, of which they have usually been both partakers, and caretakers, for 'smaller' needs, which never make sense in the bombardment of 8 or 9 per cent growth index.

NOTES

1. One of the largest dam projects (multi-purpose, as they all are, now) being constructed on Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh, at the site (which was once a village) Polavaram, is being built with billions of dollar investment to raise a 150 plus feet reservoir for producing 960 MW of electricity, for supplying water (and power) to multinational industries coming up in the south-east Indian coast, which include state and multinational corporations such as Reliance, Cairn Energy, among others, with a token supplementary benefit of irrigating 7 lakh acres of extra ayacut in the delta region and drinking water for Vishakhapatnam. One of the components is also linking Godavari with Krishna (transferring Godavari waters into Krishna, for use by Krishna river basin farmers / possible future real estate). Three hundred thousand (estimate, official) people from officially 276 (but could be far more, since the estimates are older than a decade that the government has never updated) villages, of which more than 270 are villages in V Schedule / tribal areas will be displaced. More than three thousand hectares of prime forest land (semi-deciduous and semi-evergreen) part of which lies in the Papikonda National Park, with more than 150 bird species, more than 90 wild animal species, including the Gaur, several species of reptiles, including the Golden Gecko, amphibians, an entire habitat of wild grasses, shrubs, etc will also be consumed / submerged in the giant project, which has the singular glory for having violated most of the provisions of the Indian Constitution including the PESA Act (Panchayati Raj extension to the Scheduled Areas) 1 / 70, inter-state water sharing clause between Odisha, Chhattisgarh and AP (with cases still pending between the three states on the issue of submergence), Wildlife Protection Act, among a few and is now a National Project. It is one project that saw the support of the Congress government and the present NDA-II government at the centre. Incidentally, Odisha and Chhattisgarh too will lose their farm lands to the dam, once constructed.
2. Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013
3. Kondareddis and Koyas are Scheduled Tribes (the former categorised as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group); Kapus and Kammas are landed upper castes of aristocratic, feudal lineage in Andhra Pradesh-Telangana.
4. However, violence of the state will always be far more ruthless and powerful, in any circumstance, anywhere in the world. The previous line of arguments is not linked directly to the latter half, but I am interested in understanding the language—of 'levelling' the population and living spaces through

- extermination—of constructing the ‘outside’, and hence, a danger to human society.
5. Which comes out in the open, at times, as it has, with the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a dalit student of the University of Hyderabad, in January 2016, whose scholarship money had been forcibly withheld for seven months by the university. In recent times, however, some of the central universities in bigger metros are gradually becoming visible sites of student resistance, connected with larger issues. But that is not the case with every central university.
 6. From the documentary film, *Mine: Story of a Sacred Mountain*; available at minefilm.com
 7. It is perhaps important to note that I am not an atheist, and hence the thinking about different religions, god / non-god concepts, divinity, universal spirit, animism, is a constant engagement and questioning at a personal level, with no resolution yet. One can only say that religion, per se, is complex, so is the idea of divinity, or non-divinity—in any form, across cultures. But the affairs of religion, conducted by mediators, become matters of regular, mundane politics. Since this is a paper on intimacy and nature, this note should make sense.
 8. An entire marketing transaction happens on Carbon sinks across the world and most of the so-called ‘First world’ countries have attempted to dump their responsibility towards reduction of fossil fuels on to increasing Carbon sinks in the so-called Third World nations, and earning brownie points for that. Nature here acts as a simple game of who grows more trees and continues to pollute under transnational agreements to compensate for the destruction already caused. Every thing has monetary value here. Hence, of course, Lodu Sikaka, in these contexts, seems like a simpleton.
 9. Thousand Million Cubic Feet (28.3 million cubic meters).
 10. Personal email communication (year 2010), as quoted in ‘Whose river is the Godavari?’, above mentioned.
 11. My translation.
 12. See, Umamaheshwari, 2015, p. 219. Cotton is referred to, in popular parlance, as “Delta Shilpi”- architect of the delta.
 13. Mandal Parishad Territorial Council, a unit of local self-governance (Gram Panchayat) in the village.
 14. That is how people in the V Schedule (tribal) area refer to the non-Scheduled Areas. V Schedule area is locally referred to as Agency, a term that came in with the colonial rule. Emphasis, wherever, mine.
 15. Many of them continue to refer to these parts as Agency Areas, as designated during the colonial period. Though sometimes they use Scheduled *prantam* (area) with Agency interchangeably. The opposite of Agency (non-Scheduled area) is Plain area, again in common parlance.
 16. Personal communication, on 13th June, 2008, at Kondamodalu.
 17. This line of argument comes from my earlier paper (titled, ‘Self, Other and Constructions of Perpetual Distancing: the ‘Tribal’ Person (Founded on Experiences from the Submergence Zone of the Polavaram Dam in AP-Telangana)’, presented at a seminar, *Revisiting Adivasi Autonomy: Self, Home & Habitat*, 19th to 21st February 2015, at the University of Hyderabad. Parts of the discussion are also in my book (2014), cited.

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