

BI-ANNUAL REFEREED MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

ISSN 2277-6141

Vol. 1, No.1,

July 2026

JOURNAL OF GEO-ENVIRONMENT OBSERVER



SILIGURI GEO-ENVIRONMENTAL WELFARE SOCIETY

&

CHOPRA KAMALA PAUL SMRITI MAHAVIDYALAYA



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For journal papers:

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For unpublished works: Gregory, M. (2004). The impact of trust in brand loyalty, *Unpublished PhD Thesis*. New Delhi, India: University of Delhi.

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Journal of Geo-Environment Observer (A Bi-Annual Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal)

ISSN: 2277-6141

Publication Frequency: 2 issues per year (July & January)

Publisher: Siliguri Geo-Environmental Welfare Society & Chopra Kamala Paul Smriti Mahavidyalaya

July 2026, Vol. 1, No. 1

Journal of Geo-Environment Observer

A Bi-annual Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN 2277-6141

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EDITORIAL

Journal of Geo-Environment Observer is a biannual refereed multidisciplinary journal dedicated for promoting excellence in research in geography and other fields of Social Science. The journal provides a platform for exchanging ideas, opinions and research results among geographers, environmentalists and other academics around the world. The aim of the journal is to disseminate knowledge and information in the field of geography, environment and other related fields of knowledge. This Special issue Vol.1 No1 on **'Wetlands and Traditional Knowledge: Celebrating Cultural Heritage'** covers diverse fields of research articles on Wetlands.

I convey my deep gratitude to all the budding scholars and veteran academics for sending their good piece of works. I also express my sincere thanks to the Editorial Advisory Board and referees for their immense help in our editorial tasks.

Rituals, Myths, Spiritual beliefs and Sustainable Conservation Practices of Wetlands in North Bengal

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Abstract

Wetlands in North Bengal are deeply embedded in the ritual traditions, myths, and spiritual beliefs of the region's diverse ethnic groups. This study embraces the interrelationship between cultural practices and the sustainable conservation of wetlands in North Bengal. The main objective of the study is to explore how ritual traditions, myths, and spiritual beliefs play an important role in the sustainable conservation of wetlands in North Bengal. Based on the Ethnographic Field Notes, Oral Histories and Myth Documentation, Document and Archival Analysis, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques and secondary data of 15 wetlands the findings of the present study show that ritual, myths and spiritual beliefs are not merely cultural expressions they are powerful tools for environmental conservation. Recognizing and preserving these cultural dimensions can contribute significantly to the long-term protection and sustainable management of wetlands.

Keywords: *Rituals; sacred wetlands; conservation; challenges*

Introduction

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on Earth, providing essential services such as water purification, flood control, biodiversity conservation, carbon storage, and livelihood support. However, rapid urbanization, pollution, climate change, unplanned tourism, changing socio-economic patterns. and unsustainable exploitation have led to the degradation of many wetland ecosystems. In this context, rituals, myths, and spiritual values play a significant role in promoting the conservation of wetlands. Wetlands are frequently sites of and spiritual fulfilment, and their waters are often used in rituals. Wetlands are life, pilgrimage and today the blessing of their waters is part of nearly every mainstream faith (Papayannis and Pritchard 2010). Rituals, myths and spiritual values can play a crucial role in shaping ecological health of the wetlands. Folk narratives connected with serpent worship, river goddesses, water spirits, and seasonal rituals and community festivals often encourage the sustainable management of wetlands over generations. In many indigenous cultures too, spiritual leaders and custodians of specific man-made and natural sacred sites in wetlands play a key role in environmental conservation and wise use of wetlands (Verschuuren, 2010). In this context, revisiting ritual traditions and spiritual values becomes important not only from an anthropological perspective but also as a means of developing culturally rooted approaches to conservation. Wetlands have long occupied a central place in the ecological, cultural, and spiritual landscape of North Bengal. Thus, the present study highlights the role of ritual traditions, myths, and spiritual beliefs associated with the conservation of the wetlands in North Bengal. The main objective of the study is to explore how ritual traditions, myths, and spiritual beliefs play an important role in the sustainable conservation of wetlands in North Bengal. However, the present study first describes the rituals, myths and

spiritual practices of the wetlands at world level and then it turns to Indian context with special reference to North Bengal. The study correlates between the rituals, myths, spiritual practices and sustainable conservation of the wetlands with suitable examples. Potential challenges have also been highlighted at the end of the study.

Present Study area

North Bengal lies in the lap of northern part of West Bengal, comprising eight districts Darjiling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Alipurduar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. It extends approximately from 24°40'20" N to 27°13' N latitudinally and from 87°59' E to 89°53' E longitudinally covering a geographical area of 21859 sq. km. The region embraces 17.20 million population (2011 census). Spread across the floodplains of the Teesta, Torsa, Jaldhaka, Mahananda, and numerous smaller rivers, the wetlands are not merely geographical formations but living cultural spaces that sustain biodiversity, livelihoods, ritual traditions, and collective memory.

Methodology

Information related to ritual, myths and spiritual values of wetlands were collected through published literatures in reputed journals, websites, reports etc. which generated a preliminary database for the present study. On the basis of these preliminary data and information available from local people and sometimes randomly on the way through different areas of the study area wetlands having rituals, myths and spiritual importance of the eight districts (Darjiling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Kochbihar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur & Malda) were identified. Initially, maps of the study area were collected and accordingly wetlands having rituals, myths and spiritual values were visited for the study. Primary data were collected by Ethnographic Field Notes, Oral Histories and Myth Documentation, Document and Archival Analysis and field survey. After an extensive survey of the study area based on criteria such as biodiversity protection, community participation, and cultural importance Matrix Ranking / Preference Ranking was used to assess community perceptions regarding the effectiveness and spiritual significance of various rituals, myths, and traditional practices associated with wetland conservation.

Factors causing threats to the existence of the wetlands were also identified during the field survey. The study embraces a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods to examine how rituals, myths, and spiritual values contribute to wetland conservation practices. However, all these collected primary and secondary information were later on systematically processed, arranged, tabulated and analyzed to have a clear view of the role of rituals, myths and spiritual values in the conservation of wetlands. The information collected from primary and secondary sources have been verified with the field experience.

Rituals & Spiritual activities in Wetlands

Rituals and spiritual activities play a vital role in the conservation of wetlands. Of late the importance of spiritual and religious values to biodiversity conservation is being rediscovered (Posey 1999) and consequently these values are increasingly recognised in wetland management. People living both in rural and urban areas relied on natural resources for survival, and as a result they designed the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the form of rituals. Rituals and spiritual activities are mostly practiced in the wetlands & thus these are preserved through this way. Wetlands may be seen as a source of spiritual

inspiration and experience. These values can be experienced and expressed by local inhabitants, conservationists, tourists, fishers and other people who deeply relate to wetlands. Spiritual values are understood as a particular sub-category of socio-cultural values. They embody the intangible and sometimes supernatural dimensions related to wetlands. Wetlands are frequently sites of spiritual fulfilment and their waters are often used in rituals and for healing purposes. Wetlands are life, pilgrimage and today the blessing of their waters is part of nearly every mainstream faith (Papayannis and Pritchard 2010). These intangible and other examples of spiritual services and religious aspects have implications for the management and conservation of wetlands.

Wetlands worldwide are deeply intertwined with human culture, inspiring rituals, festivals, and spiritual practices that honour water, biodiversity, and ecological balance, from ancient indigenous ceremonies to contemporary community celebrations. Osun-Osogbo Festival is held annually in the Osun River Sacred Grove in Nigeria. In this festival worshippers honour Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and water. Here the rituals include processions, offerings, and prayers at the riverine wetland. Loy Krathong is a Thai festival celebrated annually throughout Thailand and in nearby countries with significant South Western Thai cultures (Laos, Shan, Mon, Tanintharyi, Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis and Xishuangbanna). The name refers to "to float ritual vessel or lamp," and comes from the tradition of making *krathong* or buoyant, decorated baskets, which are then floated on a river or wetlands (Melton & Gordon, 2011). Many Thais use the *krathong* to thank the Goddess of Water and River, Goddess Khongkha. This festival traces its origin back to India (Agrawal, 2009). Nestled between Bolivia and Peru Lake Titicaca is not just the largest lake in South America but also a sacred site for various indigenous peoples, including the Aymara and Quechua. The lake holds profound spiritual significance, woven deeply into the cultural and religious fabric of these communities. The indigenous people regard Lake Titicaca as the "birthplace of the sun" and a sacred water body. Many myths and legends associated with the lake explain its origin and its role in the creation of humanity. Rituals performed at the lake aim to honour these traditional narratives and the nature spirits believed to reside within the waters. For them, the lake is a symbol of their culture and traditions. They have kept their ways of life and knowledge alive. The lake is crucial to their spiritual beliefs, livelihoods, and identity. It shows the deep connection between Titicaca and the Peruvian and Bolivian cultures.

In Japan, Shinto shrines near wetlands or lakes treat water bodies as abodes of spirits (*kami*) and rituals of purification are common. In Bali, temple rituals around lakes reflect the "water temple" irrigation-religion system linked to rice cultivation. Many African communities conduct rituals in sacred lakes and wetlands to appease spirits and ensure rainfall or fertility. Many indigenous Amazonian tribes regard wetlands as living entities or ancestors. The Māori people consider rivers sacred and perform rituals acknowledging them as ancestors. Native American tribes perform water blessing ceremonies to maintain ecological balance.

To Tibetan Buddhists, for example, high mountain lakes are sacred pilgrimage destinations known as 'the mirrors of the soul'. The lake of Lhamo La-tso, also known as 'Oracle Lake', was a site of visions for the second Dalai Lama since it has been visited by all eleven successive Dalai Lamas to receive visions. Buddhist Monks go to receive visions that aid the search of incarnations of the Dalai Lama. Tibet's lakes are also believed to be protected by the fish that live in it, which are regarded to be so sacred that hardly any Buddhist in Tibet would catch or eat fish today (Jacobsen et al., 2013). Lake Manasarovar lies at 4,590 metres above

mean sea level in the Tibet Himalayas & it is a place of pilgrimage attracting religious people from India, Nepal, Tibet and neighbouring countries. Bathing in the Manasa Sarovar and drinking its water is believed to cleanse all sins. The Kailash Manasa Sarovar Yatra pilgrimage takes place every year. Many wetlands are sacred to and venerated by local and indigenous people. An example is the lakes of the Niger Delta. The beliefs of the Bisieni and Osiama have not only led to the conservation of a top predator in the wetland ecosystem but they are also at the basis of customary fishing regulations which secure healthy fish populations (Anwana et al., 2010).

Wetlands in India are deeply intertwined with spiritual practices, serving as sacred spaces for worship, festivals, and community-based ecological stewardship. In India, for example, it is estimated that around 250 million people perform pilgrimages every year (Singh 2013) and many of these pilgrimages lead through and by wetlands and waters (Fallon and Jaiswal 2012). Several mainstream faiths Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, and Buddhism likely to view the wetlands as a godly creation (Palmer 2003). These religious associations of wetlands bring spiritual values to the wetlands. In southern India, temple tanks (kalyani or pushkarni) in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka combine ritual use with practical water management, capturing rainwater, recharging groundwater and regulating access during dry seasons. Pushkar lake of Rajasthan is another example of ritual & spiritual center. Chhath Puja, celebrated in North India (especially Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) is a unique expression of the association between culture, people, and wetlands. Devotees perform prayers and water-offering rituals to the setting and rising sun while standing in the water of local wetlands, rivers, and ponds. Khecheopalri Lake of Sikkim is considered as a 'wish-fulfilling lake'. Local Buddhists and Lepcha communities perform sacred annual rituals, including offering water and clearing fallen leaves using birds, which emphasizes their spiritual connection to the wetland.

In Assam some cultural festivals and religious rituals related to wetlands. Local people utilized the water bodies and the bank of the wetlands for performing those practices. Bihu festival is its example. People use the nearby wetlands to perform some cultural practices during the celebration of Bihu. Hundreds of people gather around the wetlands on the occasion of "Goru Bihu" and celebrate the event. People used to take baths along with their cattle and perform some traditional way of worshiping the cattle. Mishing community of Assam carry out certain religious rituals exclusively in wetland areas that reflect integral connection between their spiritual practices and the wetland environment. 'Gharar Dangoriya Hokam' and 'Buha Dangoriya Hokam' are the examples of such rituals. In the Sundarbans, rituals centered on Banabibi reinforce norms of restraint and risk-sharing, guiding when and how people fish, collect crabs or harvest honey in a fragile mangrove ecosystem. Wetlands in North Bengal (especially in the Dooars, Terai, and riverine floodplains like the Teesta and Torsa basins) are not just ecological zones—they are deeply embedded in local ritual life, folk beliefs, and spiritual practices of communities such as the Rajbanshi, Rabha, Mech, and other local people.

Wetlands as Sacred Natural Spaces

In many parts of North Bengal, wetlands (locally called *beel*, *jheel*) are treated as living sacred entities rather than just water bodies. Some wetlands serve as the centres of ritual life, folk beliefs, and spiritual practices of the Rajbanshi, Rabha, Mech, and other local people. These wetlands include-

Baneswar Mohan Dighi

The Mohan Dighi (large pond) of Baneswar Shiva Temple area is famous for its rituals. It is a well-known sacred pond located in the town of Baneswar, near Cooch Behar. This sacred large pond is closely associated with the famous Baneswar Shiva Temple. The dighi is famous for its population of **sacred turtles**, locally called "*Mohan*". If anybody calls them as 'Mohan' they come forward to that person. Devotees make vow to fulfil their wishes. These turtles are protected and revered by locals. Feeding the turtles is a common activity for pilgrims and tourists. The pond is considered holy due to its connection with Lord Shiva.

Palika Beel of Tufanganj-II Block

Palika village, under Mahishkuchi-1 Gram Panchayat in Tufanganj-II Block of Koch Bihar district, is a place of worship where Manaskamana Kali Puja is performed with a blend of devotion, faith, and tradition. During Maghi Purnima (the tenth month of the Bengali calendar) many people take a holy bath in the adjacent Palika Beel.

The history of this puja in Palika village is quite miraculous. One night in 1360 B.E., a Kali devotee, Jatindra Mohan Nath, received a divine dream. Goddess Kalika instructed him to organize a puja and a ritual bath on the auspicious day of Maghi Purnima on the banks of Palika Beel, where Shani Barman used to worship 'Bura Thakur' under an ancient banyan tree. Following this dream, with the help of Shani Barman and the initiative of Jatindra Mohan Nath, the first puja was started in a small jute-straw temple. The history of the holy water body called 'Kali Ganga' is associated with this temple. The year after the first bath was held in 1360 (Bengali calendar), a terrible flood in 1361 filled most of Palika Beel. However, surprisingly, a pond-like water body was created in front of the temple, which still exists today. Devotees believe that this water body was created by the will of the Goddess; hence, it is named 'Kali Ganga'. Even today, millions of devotees take a holy dip in this sacred water with faith and devotion. Over time, the jute temple of Palika village has been transformed into a beautiful brick temple. The top of the temple is visible from afar.

The fairgrounds are no longer desolate but have become festive. With the gathering of lakhs of devotees on the auspicious occasion of Maghi Purnima and the presence of thousands of shops, Palika village has now become one of the religious tourist centers of North Bengal. People, regardless of caste, creed, or religion, flock to this historic fair in the hope of fulfilling their desires.

Garteswari Mandir pond (Satkura, Jalpaiguri)

The Garteswari Mandir pond is located in South Berubari/Satkura area of Jalpaiguri district. The pond lies right beside the temple premises and forms part of the sacred complex. The temple is dedicated to Goddess Garteswari, a form of Durga. The pond is used by devotees for ritual washing and purification before entering the temple. Local people consider the pond holy, especially during puja days. Various ritual events and seasonal worship are held at the temple.

Jainti forest Pokhri Mai sacred Lake

It is a wetland inside forest and is worshipped as a deity called Pokhri Mai (pond goddess). The sacred lake in the Jayanti Forest, nestled in the Buxa Tiger Reserve in the Alipurduar district of West Bengal, is called Pokhri Lake or Pukri Mai. Pokhri Lake is located about 4 km from Jayanti and it is situated at an altitude of approximately 1,100 feet near the Jayanti river. It is a natural lake located on top of Pokhri Hill, nestled within a lush green forest and is

considered extremely holy by local villagers and Buddhists for its spiritual values. Visitors are advised not to touch the water with their feet and not to catch the fishes of the lake. It is said that if one catches the fishes of the lake the person will face accident of misfortune. It holds religious significance for both Hindus and Buddhists, attracting locals and Bhutanese pilgrims who come to pay homage. The lake is known for its serene ambiance, clear waters, and the presence of large Magur fish and turtles, making it a visually refreshing and spiritually uplifting spot. Access to the lake involves a forest trek, offering opportunities to enjoy the surrounding flora and fauna. The trek to reach Pokhri is a joyfu; experience that provides a close-up to nature. An Annual festival is celebrated on Baisakh full moon (Buddha Purnima). Both Buddhist and Hindu Pilgrimages gather here. Offerings are given by Pilgrims at the Holy wetland. There is no built temple—the wetland itself is sacred.

Lota Devi Temple Wetland

The rituals at Lotadevi Temple wetland involve a blend of spiritual cleansing, offering to the deities and the preservation of the pond's ecosystem. Here are some of the key rituals performed at the temple pond:

- **Purification:** Devotees immerse themselves in the pond water to cleanse their bodies and souls, preparing for worship and rituals.
- **Offerings:** Ritual offerings, such as flowers, rice balls, and other food items, are made to the deities, symbolizing devotion and remembrance.
- **Water Processions:** During festivals, the deities are carried in ceremonial boat rides, creating a vibrant celebration of faith and devotion.



Fig1 : Lota Devi Temple

These rituals not only serve as a means of spiritual renewal but also as a reminder of the importance of preserving sacred spaces and the natural environment that supports them.

There are few turtles at the Lotadevi Kali Temple Pond. The species was confirmed as the Indian Roofed Turtle. The Indian roofed turtle (*Pangshura tecta*) is a species of turtle in the family Geoemydidae. It can be distinguished by the distinct "roof" at the topmost part of the shell. It is found in the major rivers of South Asia. (Grey, 1831). The species has been inhabiting the pond since a long time. A number of pilgrims flock to this sacred pond to perform their rituals by pouring milk in the pond water, offering sweets and fruits to the turtles and lighting Diyas and candles on the edge of the pond, smearing the place with Sindoor and oil.



Fig2 : Lota Devi Temple Pond

The 'Kurma Avatar Temple' is built to restore the faith of the pilgrims for the place and to

give recognition to the turtles as the sacred animal of the temple. The small alter contains a tank to hold the water and milk whatever the devotees would spill during the rituals. This ensures the pond pollution free.

Bairagi Dighi

Bairagi Dighi is situated near Madan Mohan Temple. This temple is very sacred in the heart of the people of Koch Bihar. During old time on every auspicious occasions the Hindu subjects used to go to this temple first to take blessing of Lord Madan Mohan (an avatar of Lord Krishna) specially during marriage. According to Hindu marriage customs both the families of the bride and the groom are supposed to collect water from seven ghats. Maharaja considering this fact of Hindu marriage custom perhaps intentionally built seven ghats all around this pond so that his Hindu subjects do not face any problem during their marriage ceremony. This seven ghats around the same pond is the main feature of this pond.

Bairagi Dighi in Cooch Behar is not only a place of water but also a symbol of spirituality and cultural significance. The pond is surrounded by temples and is a site of religious rituals, particularly during the Raas Utshav festival. The seven ghats around Bairagi Dighi are designed to facilitate the collection of water for Hindu marriage ceremonies, reflecting the cultural practices of the community. The pond's design and its association with religious practices highlight its importance in the spiritual and cultural life of the people of Cooch Behar.

However, there is a popular belief that the water of this pond is very holy. Therefore, the water of this pond is given great importance in all auspicious occasions or pujas. In addition, the water of this pond is also used in all pujas of Madanmohan Bari. However, it is believed that this pond became the Vairagi Dighi during the royal period. At one time, there was a Vairagi Akhara along this pond. At that time, many Vairagi used to come and bathe here. And they used to sit and sing kirtan by it. Therefore, this pond was named Vairagi Dighi. The excavation of the pond started approximately in 1870 to 71. However, the complete excavation was completed by 1875.

Tapan Dighi

Tapan Dighi, also known as Tarpan Lake, is located in the village of Tapan in Dakshin Dinajpur. It is a huge lake that is located at Tapan around 35 km north-west of Balurghat and 15 km. from Gangarampur. The lake is about 2 Km in length and about 1 Km in breadth. Tapan Dighi has historical roots dating back to the Sen dynasty. According to local myths, the lake was dug by King Laxman Sen to offer Tarpana. Tarpana is a Vedic offering practice where water is ceremonially offered as homage to ancestors which imbues the site with ritual meaning beyond simply being an ecological feature. The northern lakeside has other ancient archaeological remains and relics (including brick mounds and scattered icon remnants) suggesting the area was part of extensive cultural landscapes, which adds to its spiritual-historical resonance. The mounds are believed to date back to the Buddha period, hinting at ancient settlements. Today, locals continue small rituals along the lake, keeping centuries-old traditions alive and offering visitors a glimpse of authentic rural Bengal culture.

Kal Dighi

Kal Dighi is situated at Rajibpur just 3 km away from Gangarampur. It is a big waterbody of about 85 acres. The total area of the Kal Dighi is about 4.4 square km. Though no one knows when it was actually dug but there is a mythological tale behind the naming of this waterbody. According to the mythological tale, King Bana of Bangarh had two wives. One

was dark and the other was fair in complexion. He dug two large water bodies and named them after their wives as Kaldighi and Dhal Dighi. Today Kal dighi has become a great tourist spot. Different varieties of water birds like lesser whistling ducks, moorhen, water hen, grey lag goose, bronze winged jacana, pheasant tailed jacana etc. are found round the year.

Dhal Dighi

The lake is adjacent (about 200 m) to Kal Dighi and it often appears with it as a pair of large water bodies. It is a large historic lake dating back to the Pal Dynasty and located 1 km away from Gangarampur town. The lake binds historical memory with spiritual practices. On the northern bank of Dhal Dighi is the grave (dargah) of Shah Ata (often locally referred to as Atash Fakir), a Sufi saint whose shrine serves as a place of spiritual devotion and prayer for people from nearby areas. Devotees visit the grave to pay respects and seek blessings. The presence of the saint's shrine by a major water body binds historical memory with spiritual practice.

Ramkeli Madanmohan Jiu Mandir Kundas

Ramkeli Madanmohan Jiu Mandir lies in a small village of Ramkeli in Malda district. It is a historic Vaishnava temple site associated with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the great religious reformer of Bengal and Mahavaishnava saints like Rupa & Sanatana Goswami. It has multiple sacred water bodies (kundas/ponds) within and around the temple compounds. These include Radha Kunda, Shyam Kunda, Rup Sagar, Lalita Kunda, Bishakha Kunda, Surabhi Kunda, Ranjha Kunda, Indulekha Kunda and others. They were reportedly dug by the Vaishnava saints during their stay and are revered by pilgrims who connect them with Krishna's pastimes and devotional lore. Worshippers bathe, offer water to deities, and circle these ponds as part of devotional practice, especially during the annual Ramkeli Mela (a major Vaishnava pilgrimage fair). These sacred Ponds surrounding Ramkeli Madanmohan Jiu Mandir are connected to Krishna's pastimes and devotional lore.

According to local folklore in the summer of 1515 AD, Prabhu was travelling to Vrindavan and for a short while he had stayed at Ramkeli. Two brothers, Rupa and Sanatan Goswami who lived a life of opulence and luxury, were so inspired by Prabhu's spiritual lessons that they decided to denounce luxury and embrace Vaishnavism after listening to his speech. At the temple entrance there is a pair of 600-year-old Kadamba and Tamal tree under which Prabhu meditated for hours during his stay. It is as famous as the Mahabodhi tree of Bodhi Gaya.

The Goswami brothers had also organized a big fair to celebrate Prabhu's visit at Ramkeli. However, some say the fair was started to mark the conversion of Rupa and Sanatan to Vaishnava culture. Since then, every year during Jaistha Sankranti of the Bengali calendar, a big fair is organized by the temple when thousands of Prabhu's followers gather from around the world. Free accommodation is arranged in the temple quarters. Six days of naam-kirtan (devotional songs dedicated to Lord Krishna) are offered to the temple deity and Prabhu on a grand scale. The small village turns to a melodic land during that one week of the fair.

Masan Thakur & the wetlands

Māsān, a folk god of the Rajbansis of North Bengal and its temple is mostly found near the wetland. It is a male spirit and worshiped in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur. It is the most dangerous and most dreaded of all spirits and so people worship Masan with great care. "Masan is the offspring of the union of Kali (mother) and Dharma (father). Once, mother Kali went to bath in a river. She was alone. Suddenly god

Dharma appeared. They had union and Masan was born”(Sanyal,1965:162).“Masan is the spirit of Lord Śiva” (Roy,1970: 18 and Roy,2012:19-20). It is said that there are sixteen or eighteen types of Māsāns. They are Bārika Māsān, Tisilā Māsān, Ghāter Māsān, Chutsiā Māsān, Colār Māsān, Bohitā Māsān, Kāl Māsān, Kuhuliā Māsān, Nānghā Māsān, Bisuā Māsān, Obuā Māsān, Suknā Māsān, Bhulā Māsān, Demsā Māsān, Ungiā Māsān, Narha Māsān, Jāluā Māsān, Porā Māsān etc. Among these Jalua

Masan lives near the wetlands. The Māsāns attack to both male and female at any time of the day or night. The affected person begins to eat the burnt earth of the oven, burnt wood, and charcoal and gradually goes to death. To save the evil attack of the Masan, people worship this spirit with burnt earth, charcoal, fries, roasts, and an earthen lamp. They are kept on a plantain leaf. The image of Māsān is made with cork resembling a man riding a horse.

Galakata Masan Baba Temple (Cooch Behar) is situated between two ponds, this open-air shrine lacks a traditional priest and allows individuals to worship according to personal customs. Tuesdays and Saturdays are highly significant for local visitors. Baladanga Masan temple of Koch Bihar district lies near a small wetland (Biswas,2025). Jaluyā Māsān of Dhumdahpara area of Chamta village under Sitai block is a Masan deity which is worshipped on the occasion of Ashokashtami Snan (ritual bathing). His mount (vahana) here is the shol fish. Although the water-dwelling spirit

Jalkawri is typically a female entity, in Cooch Behar she bears a strong resemblance to the male spirit deity Jaluya Masan. The person possessed by this spirit is compelled—usually in the dead of night or around midnight, while in a semi-conscious or dream-like state—to go fishing, being driven to take up a fishing rod, net, or spear and head toward the water (Chatterjee,2025).

Teesta Burir Puja

Teesta Burir Puja is a traditional river-centric folk ritual of North Bengal devoted to the spirit known as 'Teesta Buri'. Teesta Buri is regarded as the mother or guardian goddess of the Teesta River. The festival embraces community reverence for the river's power, seeking protection from floods and ensuring fertility and prosperity for nearby villages. The puja is mainly performed in Teesta River floodplain wetland areas especially in Jalpaiguri, Maynaguri and Fulbari areas of North Bengal.

Charak festival & the wetlands

Charak festival, held in the Bengali month of Chaitra (March- April) is closely related to wetlands. In this festival a large wooden pole is worshipped by the saints near a wetland before the day of the Charak festival. On the day of the Charak festival the sunken wooden pole is picked up from the wetland after worship and is carried to an open field where Charak fair is held. Men dressed as Hara and Parbati and Yoginis sing and dance with music of 'dhol' that is drum and 'Kānsi' that is bell-metal (Roy & Roy,2015). The custom of hooking the skin of the back of a man and moving suspended round the wooden pole is a common feature. 'Gambira' songs are sung and subscriptions are raised from every house (Roy,2017).

Table 1: Classification of the wetlands based on rituals, myths & spiritual value

Types of wetlands	Features	Examples
Sacred Temple Wetlands	These wetlands are attached to temples and worship sites. These are considered as sacred places for ritual purification. Holy dips (Snan) are believed to wash away sins and negative karma and brings blessings. Bathing during religious festivals or auspicious days.	Palika Beel of Tufanganj-II Block, Garteswari Mandir pond (Satkura, Jalpaiguri), Ramkeli Madanmohan Jiu Mandir Kundas, Lota Devi Temple pond, Bairagi Dighi & Baneswar Mohan Dighi,
Supernatural or divine Wetlands	Lakes and ponds linked with local spirits, forest deities, supernatural force or guardian deities. These are seen as sacred landscapes inhabited by divine forces.	Jainti forest Pokhri Mai Lake, wetlands having Masan temples such as Baladanga, Bhetaguri area of Dinhata I block, Galakata Masan Baba Temple of Koch Bihar
Memorial or Ancestral Wetlands	Wetlands where Tarpana or Vedic offering practice into water is done as a homage to ancestors. Offerings are performed in the form of Diyas (oil lamps) floating on water, flowers, leaves and incense sticks or remembrance rituals	Tapan Dighi
Mythological wetlands	These wetlands bind mythological tale with spiritual practices	Dhal Dighi, Kal Dighi,
Ceremonial Wetlands	Wetlands used for seasonal festivals, rain rituals, harvest ceremonies, or water worship. Teesta Burir Puja is its example	Teesta River floodplain wetlands especially in Jalpaiguri, Maynaguri and Fulbari area of Siliguri

Role of Rituals, myths & spiritual values in Conservation

Rituals tied to wetlands such as offerings, festivals, prayers etc. elevate their status beyond mere resources. When a wetland is seen as spiritually important, communities are less likely to exploit or damage it. For example, people never dare to exploit the Pokhri Lake of Jayanti because if they touch the water by leg there is a chance of being faced by unwanted accident. The historic sacred pond, locally called 'Mahan Dighi' adjacent to the Baneswar (Baneswar) Shiva Temple is believed to have spiritual purity and local taboos around its protection. Devotees feed the century-old soft-shell turtles of the Dighi as a religious act, and polluting or harming the pond is strictly forbidden by local custom. Local people never poach tortoise from the Baneswar Shiva Temple Dighi as it brings misfortune who will harm the tortoise. Again, rural folk avoid the marshy wetland areas where Masan idol exists. It is the most

dangerous and most dreaded of all gods. The Māsāns attack to both male and female at any time of the day or night. The affected person begins to eat the burnt earth of the oven, burnt wood, and charcoal and gradually goes to death. To save the evil attack of the Masan people avoid the wetland and thus the wetland saves itself from human intervention.

The seven ghats around Bairagi Dighi of Cooch Behar are designed to facilitate the collection of water for Hindu marriage ceremonies, reflecting the cultural practices of the community. The holy Raas-Danda (sacred wooden pole) used in the annual Koch Bihar Raas Mela (Rash Yatra) festival is traditionally kept submerged in this water body before the festival commences. Thus, the dighi has been a sacred place. The Lotadevi Kali Temple pond 'Kurma Avatar' (the Indian Roofed Turtle) not only serves as a means of spiritual renewal but also as a reminder of the importance of preserving sacred spaces and the natural environment that supports them. Pilgrims recognise the turtles as the sacred animal of the temple and so they protect the pond. Holy bath during the Maghi Purnima (the tenth month of the Bengali calendar) in the Palika Beel of Mahishkuchi-I Gram Panchayat in Tufanganj-II Block of Koch Bihar district is considered very sacred and it is blended with devotion, faith and tradition. The Beel has thus been protected by the local people. Tapan Dighi is a place associated with Vedic offering practice where water is ceremonially offered as homage to ancestors. Kal Dighi of Gangarampur is protected by local inhabitants for its mythological tale. The presence of a Sufi saint's shrine binds the Dhal Dighi with historical touch with spiritual practice. Sacred Ponds surrounding Ramkeli Madanmohan Jiu Mandir of Ramkeli village of Malda are connected to Krishna's pastimes and devotional lore. Charak festival, held in the Bengali month of Chaitra (March-April) is closely related to wetlands. In this festival a large wooden pole is worshipped by the saints near a wetland before the day of the Charak festival. On the day of the Charak festival the sunken wooden pole is picked up from the wetland after worship and is carried to an open field where Charak fair is held.

As a whole, sacred wetlands are conserved because of the following functions of the people-

- People never urinate or defecate in the sacred wetlands as it is considered as sin. As the wetlands are considered the dwelling place of the gods no dirty or any pollution is observed in the wetlands.
- Nobody throw any garbage into the wetlands as people think as a holy place
- Fishing in the sacred wetlands is strictly prohibited and it helps to increase the fish population
- People dare not to construct any building by filling the sacred wetlands as it brings misfortune
- People do not wash clothes in the sacred wetlands and thus these become water pollution free
- Sacred Temple Wetlands are mostly free from the invasion of water hyacinth. Hence Eutrophication process is not active in these wetlands.
- Rituals bring people together. Collective activities like cleaning water bodies before festivals or maintaining sacred groves around wetlands encourage shared responsibility. This builds a sense of ownership, which is critical for conservation.
- Certain rituals impose taboos—like not cutting vegetation or restricting access to parts of a wetland. These function as community-enforced conservation rules.
- By passing rituals from one generation to the next, communities also pass on respect

for wetlands. This cultural continuity can be more durable than external conservation campaigns.

Potential challenges

Not all rituals are beneficial. Some modern practices—like idol immersion with toxic paints or mass gatherings—can pollute wetlands. Regular floating of Diyas or oil lamps can cause water pollution. So, there is a need to adapt rituals in environmentally sustainable ways.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rituals, myths and spiritual values play an important role in the sustainable wetlands management of North Bengal. Wetlands are frequently sites of spiritual fulfilment and their waters are often used in rituals. These play a significant role in promoting the conservation of wetlands by shaping human attitudes and behaviours toward nature. Traditional beliefs and ritual practices often regard wetlands as sacred spaces associated with deities, ancestral spirits, or religious ceremonies. Ritual practices encourage local communities to protect the wetlands from destruction and overexploitation. Rituals, myths and spiritual beliefs help to maintain ecological balance by limiting harmful activities, fostering respect for natural resources and transmitting conservation ethics across generations. Spiritual values strengthen the emotional and moral connection between people and wetlands, encouraging collective responsibility and sustainable use of resources. Communities that view wetlands as sacred are often more willing to participate in their protection and restoration. Therefore, integrating traditional cultural practices with modern scientific conservation approaches can create more effective and culturally sensitive wetland management strategies. As a whole, rituals, myths, and spiritual values are not merely cultural expressions; they are powerful tools for environmental conservation. Recognizing and preserving these cultural dimensions can contribute significantly to the long-term protection and sustainable management of wetlands.

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Submitted: April 2026

Revision Submitted: May 2026

Accepted: June 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Wetlands, Women, and Ecological Resistance: An Ecofeminist Reading of Select Indian Fiction

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Abstract

Ecofeminism provides an important critical framework for examining the interconnected domination of women and nature within patriarchal social structures. In Indian fiction, wetlands, rivers, tidal landscapes, marshes, and backwaters often emerge as significant ecological spaces through which issues of gender, power, displacement, memory, and resistance are articulated. This paper explores the representation of wetland spaces in select Indian fiction through an ecofeminist lens, focusing on how ecological landscapes parallel women's social conditions while also enabling forms of resilience and agency. The study analyses Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Nair's *Mistress*. These texts are set in distinct ecological regions of India and present women negotiating structures of patriarchy, exclusion, emotional regulation, and ecological vulnerability. The paper argues that wetlands are not passive settings but active narrative forces that shape human relationships and challenge rigid social boundaries. In these novels, women and wetlands occupy comparable marginal positions: both are exploited, misunderstood, and controlled, yet both demonstrate endurance, regenerative power, and resistance. By linking ecological crisis with gender injustice, the selected texts challenge anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions and imagine alternative ethics based on coexistence, care, and fluid identity. The paper concludes that Indian fiction offers a compelling literary vision in which environmental and gender justice are fundamentally interconnected.

Keywords:*Ecofeminism; wetlands; Indian fiction; women, ecology; resistance; gender studies*

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed growing concern over environmental destruction, climate crisis, shrinking biodiversity, and social inequality. At the same time, feminist criticism has continued to expose systems of gendered oppression that regulate women's bodies, labour, sexuality, and freedom. Ecofeminism brings these two fields together by examining the relationship between environmental exploitation and patriarchal domination. It argues that the same ideological structures that justify the control of women also authorize the destruction of nature. This perspective becomes particularly meaningful in literary studies because literature frequently uses natural landscapes to reflect human conflict, social hierarchy, memory, trauma and hope. In many postcolonial societies, ecological damage is tied to questions of class, caste, gender, and development. Indian fiction, with its regional

diversity and rich environmental imagination, offers significant material for ecofeminist analysis. Among ecological spaces, wetlands hold special relevance. Wetlands include mangroves, marshes, estuaries, deltas, riversides, lagoons, and backwaters; they are biologically fertile zones that support livelihoods, regulate water systems, and sustain diverse life forms. Yet wetlands are often dismissed as wastelands, drained for profit, polluted by industry, or rendered invisible in mainstream development discourse. Their unstable and fluid nature also makes them symbolically rich in literature.

Wetlands exist between categories: between land and water, settlement and wilderness, order and unpredictability. Women in patriarchal societies are similarly pushed into liminal positions-valued for labour and reproduction yet denied autonomy and authority. This parallel makes wetland especially productive for ecofeminist interpretation.

This paper examines the relationship between women and wetland spaces in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Nair's *Mistress*. These texts represent different ecological regions of India: the Sundarbans, Kerala's riverine landscape, and the backwaters of Kerala. Through these settings, the novels investigate how women negotiate exclusion, violence, desire, and selfhood. The study argues that wetlands function as sites of ecological resistance and feminine agency, challenging rigid patriarchal and anthropocentric worldviews.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the representation of wetlands and watery landscapes in select Indian fiction.
- To analyze the relationship between women and ecological marginality through an ecofeminist lens.
- To explore how wetland spaces function as sites of resistance, memory, survival, and transformation.
- To compare the selected texts in terms of gender, ecology, and power.
- To demonstrate the relevance of Indian fiction to contemporary debates on environmental and gender justice.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in literary analysis. Primary texts are examined through close reading, with particular attention to imagery, setting, symbolism, characterisation, and narrative structure. The theoretical framework is grounded in ecofeminism, particularly the works of Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, and Val Plumwood. Secondary sources on environmental criticism, feminist theory, and Indian literature are also used to contextualise the argument.

Ecofeminism: Theory and Context

Ecofeminism emerged as a critical movement in the late twentieth century. It challenged the assumption that environmental issues and feminist concerns are separate fields. According to Karen J. Warren, "There are important connections between the unjustified domination of women and the unjustified domination of nature"(Warren, 2000,p.1). This statement captures the central ecofeminist insight that systems of hierarchy operate across gender and ecology alike. Patriarchal cultures often rely on binary oppositions: man/woman,

culture/nature, reason/emotion, human/animal. In these structures, the first term is privileged and the second subordinated. Women are associated with body, emotion, reproduction, and nature; men with reason, authority, and civilisation. Such thinking enables domination. Val Plumwood argues that nature has historically been constructed as inferior and available for mastery (Plumwood, 1993). Wetlands especially have been viewed as chaotic or unproductive spaces needing control through drainage, embankment, tourism, or urbanisation. Yet wetlands are among the most ecologically vital environments on earth. In the Indian context, Vandana Shiva emphasises that women's daily lives are closely connected with natural resources such as forests, seeds, water, and soil. Women often bear disproportionate burdens when ecological destruction occurs. This perspective is particularly relevant in rural and coastal communities where livelihoods depend directly upon ecological and water systems. Thus, ecofeminism in Indian literary studies must address not only gender but also caste, labour, indigeneity, displacement, and development politics. The selected novels reveal these layered realities through their treatment of wetlands and women.

Wetlands and Feminine Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is perhaps one of the most significant Indian novels centred on wetland ecology. Set in the Sundarbans, the novel portrays a world shaped by tides, storms, shifting islands, and the constant presence of danger. The landscape itself becomes a character. Ghosh writes:

"The tide country's rivers, creeks and estuaries are all mutable, changing from day to day, from hour to hour. The very boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 7). This passage is crucial to the paper's argument. The instability of the wetland resists rigid categorisation and anthropocentric control. From an ecofeminist perspective, such fluidity challenges patriarchal systems that depend on fixed binaries-male/female, human/nature, ruler/ruled. The Sundarbans refuse containment just as the women in the narrative resist complete social regulation.

The protagonist Piya Roy, a marine biologist of Indian origin raised in America, enters this landscape with scientific curiosity rather than colonial authority. She seeks to understand river dolphins and forms respectful relationships with local people. Her identity as a woman scientist is significant because scientific institutions have historically privileged masculine authority. Piya represents an alternative mode of knowledge rooted in observation, humility, and ecological care rather than conquest. The figure of Kusum further deepens the ecofeminist dimension of the novel. Her experience of displacement and violence echoes the vulnerability of the islands themselves. Political systems treat both refugees and wetlands as expendable. Yet Kusum's courage, labour, and memory continue to influence the narrative long after her death, suggesting that marginalised lives possess enduring ethical significance. The Sundarbans are dangerous. tigers kill humans, storms destroy homes, and tides erase settlements. However, danger here does not imply uselessness. Instead, it reveals nature's autonomy and resistance to commodification. The wetland becomes a symbol of ecological freedom because it cannot be fully mastered by state power, tourism, or development.

Through Piya, Kusum and the tidal landscape, Ghosh suggests that coexistence-not domination-is the only sustainable ethical relationship between humans and nature.

River, Trauma, and Gender in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents water as memory, desire, decay, and transgression. Set in Kerala, the novel uses the river not merely as scenery but as a living witness to personal and social tragedy. Roy describes ecological decline vividly:

"The river was no more than a swollen drain now, choked with weeds and garbage..." (Roy, 1997, p. 120). This image of pollution mirrors the corruption of social relations in the novel. The damaged river parallels the emotional and social violence produced by caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and hypocrisy. The degradation of ecology thus becomes inseparable from the degradation of human relationships. Ammu, one of the novel's central figures, suffers because she refuses to remain within socially approved roles. As a divorced woman, she is denied dignity and freedom. Her desires are effectively criminalised while male privilege remains unquestioned. Ammu's condition reflects ecofeminist insights into how patriarchal systems fear female autonomy and seek to regulate women's emotional and sexual agency. The river also functions as a liminal space where forbidden encounters occur. It becomes a zone beyond official surveillance, allowing moments of intimacy across caste boundaries. Yet the same river is linked with loss, trauma, and death. This duality-freedom and danger-resembles the condition of wetlands themselves: spaces of possibility that are simultaneously vulnerable to destruction. Roy's narrative repeatedly foregrounds "small things": silenced emotions, marginal lives, hidden wounds, and fragile moments of tenderness. Women and ecological spaces alike are reduced to the margins of dominant history. Yet these margins retain emotional and ethical power. Memory survives where authority seeks erasure.

Backwaters, Desire, and Identity in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

Anita Nair's *Mistress* extends the ecofeminist discussion through its setting in the backwaters of Kerala. Unlike the violent unpredictability of the Sundarbans or the traumatic riverine memories in Roy's novel, the backwaters in *Mistress* are quieter, layered, and psychologically resonant. Yet beneath their apparent calm lies tension, secrecy, and emotional conflict. The novel explores desire, marriage, betrayal, art, and selfhood. Water becomes the ideal metaphor for these unstable emotional states. The backwaters move slowly, silently, and persistently through the landscape, suggesting that suppressed emotions also continue beneath social appearances. Nair writes, "The backwaters slipped silently through the land, carrying stories, secrets, and desires that no one spoke aloud" (Nair, 2005, p. 73). This passage captures the hidden life of both landscape and women. Patriarchal societies often value silence, obedience, and outward harmony, especially from women. Yet inner life cannot be permanently controlled. Like water, it finds channels through which to move.

Female characters in the novel negotiate expectations regarding loyalty, sexuality, beauty, and emotional labour. They are frequently viewed through the desires or judgments of others rather than through their own self-definition. This reflects a broader ecofeminist concern:

both women and nature are objectified and treated as surfaces for consumption.

The backwaters also carry economic significance through tourism. Landscapes become commodities, packaged for pleasure and profit. This commodification parallels the commodification of women's bodies and emotions within patriarchal structures. What appears beautiful is often subjected to control, regulation, and exploitation. At the same time, water offers a language of transformation. One of the most compelling symbolic formulations in the novel is: "She felt herself move like water-yielding on the surface, relentless underneath" (Nair, 2005, p. 201). This image is deeply ecofeminist because it rejects simplistic notions of weakness. Adaptability is represented as strength; softness coexists with persistence. Women may be expected to absorb and accommodate external pressures, yet beneath those pressures remains agency, intelligence, desire, and resistance. Thus, *Mistress* contributes to the paper's argument by presenting wetlands as psychological and gendered spaces where hidden identities continue to flow beneath restrictive norms.

Comparative Discussion: Women and Wetlands as Marginal yet Powerful Spaces

A comparative reading of the three novels reveals several shared patterns that support the argument of this paper.

Marginality

In all three texts, wetlands are geographically and symbolically peripheral spaces. The Sundarbans exist at the edge of the nation-state; Roy's riverine world exists beyond respectable domestic order; the backwaters occupy spaces between tourism spectacle and local reality. Likewise, women characters often inhabit marginal social positions.

Piya is culturally in-between; Kusum is displaced; Ammu is stigmatised; and the women in *Mistress* struggle within emotional confinement. These parallels show how patriarchy and developmental modernity push both women and ecological spaces to the margins.

Exploitation

All three novels portray systems that instrumentalise both land and women.

- In *The Hungry Tide*, state power treats vulnerable populations and unstable land as expendable.
- In *The God of Small Things*, caste and patriarchy regulate desire while ecological neglect degrades the river.
- In *Mistress*, tourism and social expectations commodify both landscape and femininity. Ecofeminism helps expose these linked structures of use, commodification, and control.

Resistance Through Fluidity

Unlike rigid monuments or fenced territories, wetlands shift, overflow, regenerate, and evade permanent control. This fluidity becomes a metaphor for feminine resistance. Piya resists through scientific commitment and empathy. Ammu resists through emotional autonomy and desire. Women in *Mistress* resist through interior truth and self-recognition. None of these resistances take the form of simplistic heroic rebellion. Instead, they emerge through survival, memory, adaptability, and persistence.

Major Findings of the Study

- Wetlands are active narrative spaces rather than decorative settings. They shape plot, emotion, and social meaning.
- Women and wetlands share structural marginalisation. Both are treated as useful yet subordinate by dominant systems.
- Ecological instability becomes a form of symbolic power. The fluidity of wetland landscapes challenges rigid patriarchal binaries.
- Indian fiction links environmental justice with gender justice. Ecological damage is inseparable from social inequality.
- Resistance is represented through endurance, adaptability, and persistence rather than overt rebellion alone. Regional landscapes enrich feminist discourse by grounding theory in specific ecological realities such as mangroves, rivers, and backwaters.

Relevance to Contemporary Times

This topic has urgent contemporary significance. Across South Asia, wetlands are threatened by pollution, land reclamation, rising sea levels, tourism pressure and climate change. At the same time, women-especially poor, rural, migrant, and coastal women-often bear disproportionate burdens during ecological crises. The selected novels anticipate these realities. They show that environmental loss is never merely environmental it is social, emotional, and political. They also remind readers that communities historically dismissed as peripheral possess vital ecological knowledge concerning coexistence and survival. In the age of climate crisis, literature becomes a space for ethical imagination. These texts demonstrate that sustainability requires gender-sensitive and community-based approaches rather than purely technocratic models of control.

Conclusion

An ecofeminist reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Anita Nair's *Mistress* demonstrate that wetlands are central to understanding the politics of gender and ecology in Indian fiction. These landscapes are fertile yet fragile, life-giving yet threatened, neglected yet indispensable. The women associated with them occupy similarly contradictory positions within patriarchal societies. In all three novels, wetlands become spaces where official boundaries weaken. They unsettle distinctions between land and water, centre and margin, obedience and desire, control and freedom. Through this instability, they offer a language of resistance. The study also shows that domination of women and domination of nature are not separate phenomena. Both arise from hierarchical systems that value control over relationship, ownership over care and profit over life. By exposing these systems, the selected texts call readers toward more ethical forms of coexistence. Ultimately wetlands in these novels are not wastelands. They are archives of memory, habitats of resilience, and symbols of transformative possibility. Likewise, the women inhabiting these liminal ecological spaces are not passive victims but agents of endurance, knowledge, and transformation. Indian fiction thus provides a compelling literary vision in which ecological justice and gender justice must be imagined together.

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Submitted: March 2026

Revision Submitted: April 2026

Accepted: May 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Ecosystems to Ethos: Environmental Ethics of Wetlands

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Abstract

Wetland are among the most productive and ecologically significant ecosystems on Earth; however, they are increasingly vulnerable to degradation, reclamation, and climate-induced transformations. This paper reinterprets wetlands not merely as biophysical systems but as moral landscapes that embody ecological, culture, and ethical values. Moving “from ecosystem to ethos,” the study situates wetlands within the framework of environmental ethics, emphasizing their intrinsic worth beyond utilitarian benefits such as water purification, biodiversity conservation, flood regulation, and livelihood support.

Drawing upon eccentric and land ethic perspectives, the paper argues that wetlands deserve moral consideration as living communities rather than exploitable resources. It critically examines anthropocentric development paradigms that marginalize wetland ecologies and proposes an ethical shift toward stewardship, intergenerational justice, and ecological responsibility. By integrating place-based values and the cultural meanings attached to wetland landscapes, the study highlights how local knowledge systems and traditional practices contribute to sustainable coexistence.

The study further examines how the ethical recognition of wetlands can guide policy frameworks, conversation strategies, and models of community participation. It argues that environmental ethics offers a strong normative foundation for balancing development with ecological integrity. By grounding environmental decision-making in moral responsibility, the paper emphasizes the need for sustainable and inclusive approaches to wetland governance. Ultimately, it asserts that protecting wetlands is not only an ecological necessity but also a moral obligation, vital for sustaining both human and non-human life amid growing environmental uncertainty.

Keywords: *Environmental Ethics; Wetlands; Ecocentrism; Intrinsic Value; Intergenerational Justice.*

Introduction:

Wetlands occupy a distinctive position within global ecological and cultural landscapes. As transitional zones between terrestrial and aquatic systems, they sustain rich biodiversity, regulate hydrological cycles, and support the livelihoods of millions. Ecologically, wetlands function as nurseries for diverse species and as natural buffers against floods and climate variability. Yet, despite their significance, wetlands – areas to be drained, reclaimed, and transformed for agriculture, urban expansion, and industrial development. This historical pattern reflects a utilitarian and anthropocentric worldview that privileges immediate human benefits over ecological integrity.

Within the framework of environmental ethics, such an approach reveals a moral limitation. Anthropocentrism assigns value to nature primarily in terms of its utility to humans, thereby marginalizing the intrinsic worth of non-human entities. In contrast, Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” calls for an expanded moral community that includes “soils, waters, plants, and

animals” (Leopold, 1949). From this ecocentric standpoint, wetlands are not inert resources but members of the biotic community deserving of ethical consideration.

Furthermore, Holmes Rolston III argues that ecosystems possess value independent of human preference, as they embody complex processes of life and evolutionary creativity (Rolston, 1988). Applying this reasoning to wetlands shifts the discourse from exploitation to moral responsibility. The transformation from “ecosystem” to “ethos” thus signifies an ethical reorientation – one that recognizes wetlands as moral landscapes imbued with intrinsic value.

This paper contends that wetlands must be understood not only as ecological systems but also as ethical entities. Reframing wetlands through the lens of environmental ethics establishes a normative foundation for their respect, protection, and sustainable governance in an era of accelerating environmental change.

Conceptual Framework: Environmental Ethics and Wetlands

Environmental ethics contests the long-standing assumption that nature possesses value only insofar as it advances human interests. Within classical anthropocentrism, ecosystems are interpreted instrumentally, evaluated primarily in terms of their economic or developmental utility (Passmore, 1974). Wetlands, under this paradigm, become resources to be drained, reclaimed, or commodified. In contrast, ecocentric and biocentric perspectives affirm that non-human beings and ecological systems have intrinsic worth independent of human preference (Taylor, 1986; Naess, 1989). This shift from instrumental to intrinsic valuation reorients moral consideration toward the integrity of ecological communities.

Aldo Leopold's “land ethic” provides a foundational framework for such reorientation. Leopold famously argues that the ethical community should be enlarged to include “soils, waters, plants, and animals”. Wetlands, as complex ecological assemblages, exemplify this enlarged community. Humans, in Leopold's formulation, are “plain members and citizens” rather than masters of the land. J. Baird Callicott further elaborates that Leopold's ethic grounds moral obligation in the stability and beauty of the biotic community (Callicott, 1989). From this standpoint, wetlands must be regarded not as marginal lands but as vital participants in ecological wholes.

Holmes Rolston III contends that ecosystems embody systemic and evolutionary value that cannot be reduced to market calculations (Rolston, 1988). Wetlands sustain intricate nutrient cycles, hydrological processes, and habitats for diverse species; their value lies in these self-organizing capacities. Lawrence E. Johnson similarly argues that species and ecosystems possess moral considerability as ongoing life-processes (Johnson, 1991).

Deep ecology, articulated by Arne Naess, reinforces this framework by advocating biospheric egalitarianism and the inherent right of all forms of life to flourish (Naess, 1989). Val Plumwood critiques anthropocentric dualisms that separate humans from nature, urging instead an ethic of ecological interdependence (Plumwood, 2002). Likewise, Bryan G. Norton emphasizes the importance of contextual and place-based environmental values in shaping ethical policy (Norton, 1994).

The concept of intrinsic value remains central. As Peter Singer acknowledges, expanding moral concern beyond humans requires overcoming species-based prejudice (Singer, 1979). Holmes Rolston and Eugene Hargrove both stress that environmental policy must rest upon recognition of nature's independent moral standing (Hargrove, 1989; Rolston, 1988). Wetlands, therefore, possess worth beyond economic utility; their biodiversity, evolutionary history, and ecological functions constitute moral claims demanding respect and protection.

Grounded in these theoretical foundations, wetlands emerge not merely as ecosystems but as ethical communities. Environmental ethics thus reframes wetland conservation as a matter of justice, responsibility, and moral accountability rather than mere resource management.

Wetlands as Moral Landscapes:

Wetlands are not merely hydrological formations; they are living ecological communities characterized by interdependence, resilience, and ecological reciprocity. These ecosystems perform essential environmental functions, including flood regulation, groundwater recharge, carbon sequestration, and the provision of habitats for numerous plant and animal species (Mitsch and Gosselink, 2015). However, their significance extends beyond their ecological services and economic benefits. From the perspective of environmental ethics, wetlands can be understood as moral landscapes that embody both ecological and cultural values.

Environmental philosophers argue that ecosystems possess intrinsic value that cannot be reduced solely to their utility for human purposes. Holmes Rolston III maintains that ecosystems represent complex evolutionary processes and therefore deserve moral respect and protection (Rolston, 1988). Similarly, Aldo Leopold's land ethic broadens the moral community to include "soils, waters, plants, and animals," thereby recognizing the ethical importance of landscapes such as wetlands (Leopold, 1949). Within this framework, wetlands are not passive resources but active members of the broader biotic community.

In many societies, wetlands also carry deep cultural, spiritual, and symbolic meanings. Traditional fishing practices, seasonal festivals, and local rituals are often closely connected to wetland environments. As Ramachandra Guha notes, local ecological traditions frequently reflect a respectful and sustainable relationship between communities and their natural surroundings (Guha, 2000). These place-based cultural values demonstrate how wetlands shape identity, memory, and collective belonging.

Recognizing wetlands as moral landscapes transforms the discourse from exploitation to stewardship. Rather than asking how wetlands can merely support economic development, ethical reflection requires asking how development can respect and preserve wetland integrity. Environmental ethics thus encourages a shift toward responsible governance, ecological care, and long-term sustainability.

Critique of Anthropocentric Development Paradigms:

Modern development paradigms frequently treat wetlands as obstacles to economic progress. Rapid urbanization, infrastructure expansion, and industrial activities often lead to wetland encroachment, drainage, and pollution. Such practices are rooted in a narrow conception of economic growth that prioritizes short-term gains while ignoring ecological limits and long-term environmental consequences (MEA, 2005). Wetlands, which function as vital ecological buffers and biodiversity reservoirs, are therefore marginalized within conventional development policies.

This trend reflects a broader anthropocentric worldview that reduces nature to a commodity valued primarily for its market utility. John Passmore observes that anthropocentric ethics often legitimizes the exploitation of natural systems by framing them solely as resources for human consumption (Passmore, 1974). Similarly, Holmes Rolston III argues that reducing ecosystems to economic assets undermines recognition of their intrinsic and systemic value (Rolston, 1988). Wetlands, in this reductionist framework, are frequently assessed only in terms of their potential for land conversion or commercial benefit.

Such an instrumental approach neglects the long-term ecological consequences of wetland

degradation. As the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment notes, the loss of wetlands disrupts hydrological cycles, accelerates biodiversity decline, and weakens ecosystem resilience (MEA, 2005). Moreover, it raises serious ethical concerns regarding intergenerational equity. Bryan G. Norton emphasizes that environmental policy must account for the rights and well-being of future generations who depend upon healthy ecosystems (Norton, 1994). Climate change further exacerbates wetland vulnerability through rising temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, and sea-level rise, intensifying the urgency for responsible environmental governance.

From the standpoint of environmental ethics, these anthropocentric development paradigms require critical reassessment. Aldo Leopold's land ethic advocates a shift from domination to responsibility, urging humans to preserve the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold, 1949). Accordingly, development must be reoriented toward sustainability, ecological balance, and moral accountability. Recognizing wetlands as ethically significant landscapes encourage

Stewardship, Intergenerational Justice and Ecological Responsibility:

Environmental stewardship emphasizes care, responsibility, and guardianship toward the natural world. Within the framework of environmental ethics, stewardship recognizes that present generations hold ecological resources, including wetlands, in trust for future generations. Aldo Leopold's land ethic highlights this responsibility by asserting that ethical conduct involves preserving the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold, 1949). From this perspective, wetlands must be protected not merely for their immediate utility but for their enduring ecological significance.

The principle of intergenerational justice further reinforces this ethical obligation. Environmental philosopher Bryan G. Norton argues that environmental decision-making should account for the rights and well-being of future generations who depend on healthy ecosystems (Norton, 1994). Similarly, Edith Brown Weiss emphasizes that each generation acts as a trustee of the Earth, responsible for maintaining ecological balance and passing on environmental resources in on worse condition than they were received (Weiss, 1989). Wetland degradation, therefore, raises serious ethical concerns because it compromises ecological resilience and diminishes the environmental inheritance of future societies.

Ecological responsibility also extends beyond formal policy frameworks to everyday social and cultural practices. Community-based conservation initiatives and participatory governance models encourage local communities to become active stewards of wetland ecosystems. Ramachandra Guha observes that indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge systems often embody sustainable practices developed through long-term interactions with nature (Guha, 2000). Integrating such knowledge into environmental governance strengthens ethical engagement with wetlands and promotes culturally rooted conservation strategies.

By embedding environmental ethics within governance structures and community practices, wetland conservation can move beyond reactive protection toward proactive ecological care. Such an approach fosters collective responsibility, ensuring that wetlands are preserved as living ecosystems that sustain both present and future generations.s policies that respect ecological limits while promoting long-term environmental justice.

Policy Implications and Ethical Governance:

The ethical recognition of wetlands carries significant implications for environmental policy and governance. From the perspective of environmental ethics, wetlands should not be

treated merely as economic resources but as ecologically valuable systems deserving protection and responsible management. Effective conservation strategies must therefore integrate ecological assessments, cultural values, and active community participation. Scholars such as William J. Mitsch and James G. Gosselink emphasize that sustainable wetland management requires scientific understanding combined with socially inclusive governance approaches (Mitsch and Gosselink, 2015).

Legal and institutional frameworks also play a crucial role in protecting wetland ecosystems. Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III argues that ecological systems possess intrinsic value and therefore deserve moral and legal recognition within environmental policies (Rolston, 1988). Strengthening regulatory mechanisms against wetland encroachment, pollution, and unsustainable development is essential to maintaining ecological balance. International initiatives such as the Ramsar Convention similarly highlight the need for coordinated legal protection and sustainable use of wetlands across national boundaries (Matthews, 1993).

Integrating environmental ethics into policy discourse ensures that ecological integrity is not subordinated to short-term economic interests. Aldo Leopold's land ethic advocates decision-making that preserves the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community," offering an ethical foundation for environmental governance (Leopold, 1949). Such an ethical framework encourages policymakers to adopt holistic and long-term perspectives in environmental planning.

Ultimately, ethical governance requires balancing development with ecological sustainability. By incorporating ethical reasoning, ecological science, and community engagement into policy frameworks, societies can ensure that wetlands are conserved as vital ecosystems that sustain biodiversity, cultural heritage, and human well-being.

Conclusion:

The transition from "ecosystem" to "ethos" represents a significant ethical transformation in the way wetlands are understood and governed. Rather than being viewed merely as physical resources or marginal landscapes, wetlands must be recognized as dynamic ecological communities that possess intrinsic value. Environmental ethics provides a critical normative framework for acknowledging this moral status and guiding responsible environmental action. By expanding the scope of ethical concern beyond human interests, it encourages a deeper respect for the ecological integrity of wetland systems.

Safeguarding wetlands, therefore, is not only a matter of scientific management or economic calculation but also an ethical responsibility. Wetlands sustain biodiversity, regulate ecological processes, and support the cultural and material lives of human communities. Their degradation threatens both ecological stability and social well-being. In the context of increasing environmental uncertainty, climate change, and ethical recognition of wetlands has become even more urgent.

Affirming the moral significance of wetlands encourages a shift from exploitation to stewardship and from short-term gain to long-term sustainability. Protecting these ecosystems requires ethical commitment, inclusive governance, and ecological responsibility at both local and global levels. Ultimately, the future of ecological integrity depends on our willingness to embrace wetlands not merely as ecosystems to be managed but as moral landscapes that deserve respect, care, and protection for the benefit of present and future generations.

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Submitted: March 2026

Revision Submitted: April 2026

Accepted: May 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Wetlands and Tribal Livelihoods in Kranti Block of Mal Subdivision: An Ecological and Socio-Economic Analysis

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Abstract

Wetlands in the Mal subdivision of Jalpaiguri district play a crucial role in sustaining tribal livelihoods. The wetland provides essential resources such as fish, water, fuel and agricultural support. The present study examines the relationship between wetlands and the socio-economic conditions of tribal people. The main objective of the present study is to study the socio-economic conditions of wetland-dependent tribal households and the major environmental challenges affecting wetlands. Chi-square test, correlation analysis, and the Wetland Dependency Index (WDI) have been applied to represent the socio-economic conditions of wetland-dependent tribal households. The findings show that wetlands are not only ecological assets but also economic lifelines for tribal communities in the Kranti block of Mal subdivision. Wetlands in Mal Subdivision are increasingly facing environmental degradation due to anthropogenic pressure and changing climatic conditions.

Keywords: *Wetlands; Tribal Livelihoods; Socio-Economic condition; Ecological Sustainability.*

Introduction

In India, tribal communities have traditionally maintained a close relationship with natural ecosystems, including wetlands. Their livelihoods, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge systems are deeply connected with local environmental resources. However, rapid socio-economic transformation, population pressure, changing agricultural practices, and developmental interventions have altered this relationship, creating new challenges for sustainable resource management. Understanding the interdependence between wetlands and tribal livelihoods is therefore essential for promoting ecological conservation alongside socio-economic development. The Kranti Block of Mal Subdivision in Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal, is characterized by a network of rivers, marshes, ponds, floodplains, and seasonal wetlands that support diverse ecological communities. The region is inhabited by several tribal groups, including the Oraon, Munda, Santhal, and other indigenous communities, whose livelihoods are closely linked to wetland resources. These wetlands contribute significantly to agriculture, inland fisheries, domestic water use, livestock rearing and the collection of natural resources, thereby playing an important role in ensuring food security and household income. At the same time, increasing anthropogenic pressures, environmental degradation, and changing climatic conditions pose significant threats to the

sustainability of these wetland ecosystems. The present study seeks to examine the relationship between wetland ecosystems and the livelihood strategies of tribal communities in the study area. It aims to analyse the ecological characteristics of wetlands, assess their contribution to household livelihoods, identify the socio-economic dependence of tribal populations on wetland resources, and evaluate the challenges affecting their sustainable management. However, the present study first describes the occupational structure and wetland dependency of the people of Kranti block and then it proceeds to highlight the wetland cultivation and wetland dependency level with average monthly income. At the end of the study, environmental challenges faced by wetlands of the study area have been mentioned.

Study Area

The present study was carried out in Kranti Block of Mal Subdivision, located in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, India. The block lies within the Mal subdivision of Jalpaiguri district and comprises the Gram Panchayats of Kranti, Rajadanga, Changmari, Lataguri, Chapadanga, and Moulani where numerous small wetlands exist across the floodplain landscape.

Table no.1: Wetlands of Kranti Block

Wetland Area	Type
Teesta Floodplain Wetlands (Rajadanga-Kranti area)	Riverine/Floodplain Wetland
Changmari Wetlands	Seasonal Marsh
Moulani Wetlands	Floodplain Depression
Chapadanga Wetlands	Seasonal Wetland
Lataguri Wetlands and Village Ponds	Freshwater Wetlands
Various local <i>beels</i> (oxbow water bodies) near the Teesta channels	Oxbow/Floodplain Wetlands

Source: Primary field survey 2025; Wetland classification based on National Wetland Atlas guidelines (SAC, ISRO, 2013)

Kranti Block is inhabited by various tribal communities, including Oraon, Munda, Santal, Mahali, and other Scheduled Tribe groups. For generations, these communities have maintained a close relationship with wetland resources which contribute significantly to their food security, income generation and cultural practices. Wetlands provide fish, edible aquatic vegetation, fuel materials and water for agriculture. However, increasing anthropogenic pressure, land-use change, wetland degradation and climate variability have emerged as major challenges affecting the livelihood security of tribal households. The selection of Kranti Block as the study area is significant because it offers an opportunity to examine the relationship between wetlands and tribal livelihoods.

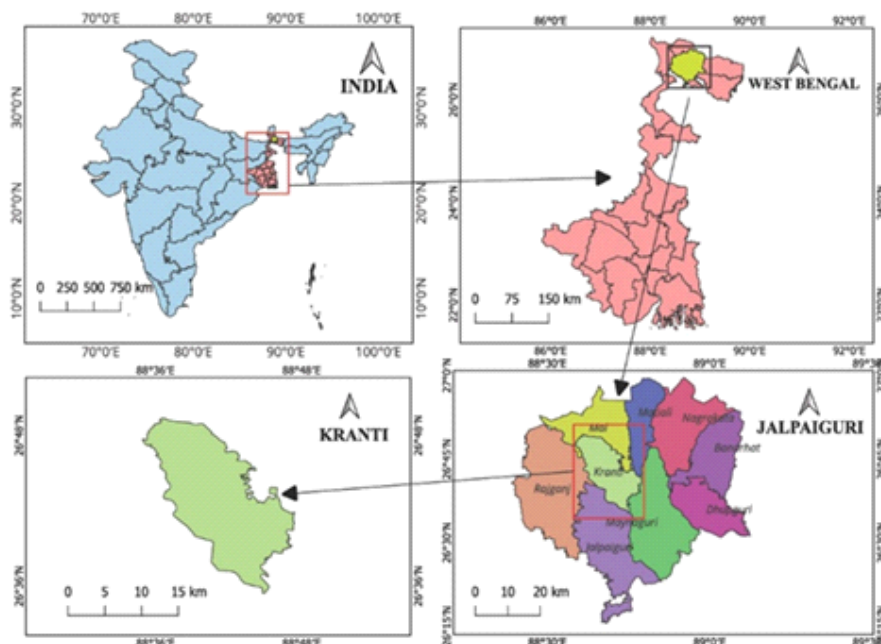


Fig.1: Location Map of Kranti Block

According to the Indian Space Research Organisation National Wetland Atlas (2011), North Bengal contains a significant concentration of inland wetlands associated with Himalayan River systems. The wetlands of Mal subdivision, therefore, play a crucial ecological and socio-economic role in sustaining rural and tribal livelihoods.

Database and Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data are collected through field survey of the households of Kranti Block. Direct observation is used to record daily activities, living conditions, and social interactions. Secondary data are collected from Census reports, government publications, research journals, books, the Wetland Atlas prepared by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and reports of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Simple random sampling method is adopted for selecting households from the tribal communities of the Wetland-adjacent tea garden areas in Kranti Block of Mal subdivision. A total of 120 households are surveyed during the field investigation. The variables used in the present study include household income, wetland dependency level, occupation type and access to wetland resources. The collected data were analysed using different statistical techniques, tabulation, chi-square test, and correlation techniques to assess the relationship between wetland resources and livelihood patterns.

Overview of the Study Area

The analysis of field data reveals that wetlands play a crucial role in sustaining the livelihoods of tribal communities in Kranti block. The occupational structure, income pattern, and livelihood dependency of tribal households are closely associated with wetland resources.

Occupational Structure and Wetland Dependency

The surveyed households were engaged in fishing, agriculture, tea garden labour, and the collection of wetland resources. Among the total surveyed households, fishing accounted for 31.7%, agriculture for 21.7%, tea garden labour for 26.7%, and collection activities for 11.7%.

Table 2: Occupation and dependence on wetland

Occupation Type	Number of Households	Percentage (%)
Fishing	38	31.7
Agriculture	26	21.7
Tea Garden Labour	32	26.7
Collection Activities	14	11.7
Others	10	8.2
Total	120	100

Source: Field Survey(2025)



Fig 2 : Field survey (2025)

The findings indicate that wetlands provide direct employment through fishing and indirect support through irrigation, livestock rearing, and the collection of aquatic resources.

Wetland Cultivation and Agricultural Productivity

Wetland cultivation in the Kranti block is primarily concentrated in low-lying floodplain areas. Paddy cultivation, jute cultivation, and seasonal vegetable farming are commonly practised by tribal households.

Table 3: Average Agricultural Productivity in Wetland Areas

Crop Type	Average Yield (kg/hectare)	Average Annual Income (₹/hectare)
Paddy	2,250	42,000
Seasonal Vegetables (mostly Rabi and tomato, cabbage, cauliflower and others)	5,140	37,000
Jute	1,100	33,000
Fish Farming (Composite)	1,280	48,000

Source: Department of Agriculture, Govt. of West Bengal(2023)

Fish farming provides the highest economic return among wetland-based activities. Seasonal vegetable cultivation also provides considerable income due to year-round irrigation support from wetlands.

Chi-Square Analysis

To test whether occupation depends on wetlands or not a chi-square (χ^2) test is applied.

Table 4: Occupation & the Wetland Access in Kranti Block

Occupation	Wetland Access (Yes)	Wetland Access (No)	Total
Fishing	35	3	38
Agriculture	18	8	26
Tea Garden Labour	10	22	32
Others	7	17	24
Total	70	50	120

Source: Field survey (2025)

Chi-Square Formula: $\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$

Where O = Observed frequency, E = Expected frequency

Results:

Calculated χ^2 value = 18.64

Degree of freedom (df) = 3

Critical χ^2 value at 0.05 significance level = 7.815

Since the calculated value (18.64) is greater than the table value (7.815), the null hypothesis is rejected. The result confirms a statistically significant relationship between wetland accessibility and occupational structure. Households with access to wetlands are more likely

to engage in fishing and agriculture, whereas households without access are more dependent on tea garden labour and other activities.

Income and Livelihood Analysis

The study further reveals that households with greater dependence on wetlands have relatively higher average monthly incomes.

Table 5:Wetland Dependency level & Average Monthly Income (₹)

Dependency Level	No. of households	Average Monthly Income (₹)
High	42	8,500
Medium	48	6,500
Low	30	4,800
Total	120	-

Source: Field survey (2025)

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient:

$$r = \frac{n\sum XY - (\sum X)(\sum Y)}{\sqrt{[n\sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2][n\sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}}$$

Here, X=Wetland Dependency Score (Independent Variable)

Y = Average Monthly Income (Dependent Variable)

r = 0.998

The Pearson correlation coefficient (r = 0.998) indicates an extremely strong positive relationship between wetland dependency and household income among tribal people in Kranti Block. The findings suggest that wetlands function as vital natural resources, supporting livelihoods through activities such as fishing, the collection of aquatic plants and animals and other wetland-based occupations. These activities contribute significantly to household income, food security and employment generation. The analysis demonstrates that higher dependence on wetlands is associated with higher income levels, highlighting the economic importance of wetland ecosystems in the study area. Consequently, any degradation or loss of wetlands may adversely affect the socio-economic well-being of tribal communities, whose livelihoods are closely linked to these ecosystems. These findings are consistent with the observations of R. Das et al. (2015) and S. N. Prasad et al. (2002), who

emphasized the crucial role of wetlands in sustaining rural livelihoods, supporting income diversification, and enhancing household resilience.

Environmental Challenges

Wetlands in Mal Subdivision are increasingly facing environmental degradation due to anthropogenic pressure and changing climatic conditions. These challenges directly affect ecological sustainability and the livelihoods of tribal communities that depend on wetland resources.

Wetland Encroachment and Land-Use Change

Rapid expansion of settlements, agricultural land, and tea garden activities has led to the shrinkage of wetland areas in the Dooars region. Field observations during the survey revealed that nearly 28% of respondents reported a reduction of nearby wetland areas over the last decade due to conversion into agricultural fields and settlement expansion. According to the Indian Space Research Organisation National Wetland Atlas, West Bengal has experienced considerable wetland modification because of increasing population pressure and land-use transformation (Space Applications Centre, 2011). Similar findings were observed by Prasad et al. (2002), who reported that unplanned developmental activities are major causes of wetland degradation in India.

Pollution and Tea Garden Runoff

Chemical fertilisers and pesticides used in tea gardens surrounding wetland areas significantly affect water quality. During the field survey, approximately 41% of households reported declining fish availability and deterioration in water quality. Agricultural runoff containing chemical residues contributes to eutrophication and aquatic biodiversity loss (Mitsch & Gosselink, 2000). Tea garden waste and domestic sewage also increase organic pollution in seasonal wetlands.

Overexploitation of Wetland Resources

Increasing dependency on wetlands has intensified pressure on aquatic resources. Excessive fishing, overharvesting of aquatic plants, and indiscriminate collection of fuelwoods have disturbed the ecological balance. **The fieldsurvey indicates that nearly 52% of fishing households have experienced a decline in fish catch during the last five years. This decline is associated with overfishing and habitat degradation.** Das et al. (2015) similarly observed that excessive extraction of wetland resources threatens long-term sustainability in West Bengal.

Siltation and Drainage Problems

Heavy monsoonal rainfall and soil erosion from nearby upland areas contribute to silt deposition in wetlands. Siltation reduces water-holding capacity and affects aquatic biodiversity. Field study revealed that several seasonal wetlands become shallow during winter due to sediment accumulation. Reduced water depth negatively affects fishing activities and irrigation potential.

Climate Change and Hydrological Variability

Climate variability has emerged as a major environmental challenge in the Dooars region. Irregular rainfall patterns, floods, and prolonged dry periods influence wetland hydrology and ecological productivity. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014), wetland ecosystems are highly vulnerable to climate-induced hydrological changes. During field surveys, nearly 46% of respondents reported increased flooding and unpredictable rainfall affecting fishing and agriculture.

Loss of Biodiversity

Wetlands in the study area support a variety of fish species, aquatic plants, and migratory birds. However, habitat destruction and pollution have contributed to a decline in biodiversity. Respondents reported a decreasing availability of indigenous fish species such as Rohu, Catla, and other small indigenous wetland fishes. The environmental challenges identified in the study demonstrate that wetland degradation is closely linked to socio-economic vulnerability among tribal populations. Encroachment, pollution, overexploitation of resources, and climate variability collectively threaten the ecological balance and the sustainability of livelihoods. Therefore, sustainable wetland management, scientific monitoring, and active community participation are essential for balancing ecological conservation with livelihood security.

Ecological Sustainability

Ecological sustainability is essential for maintaining the balance between wetland ecosystems and tribal people in Kranti Block of Mal Subdivision. Wetlands provide important ecosystem services such as flood control, groundwater recharge, biodiversity conservation, nutrient cycling and climate regulation, which directly support the livelihood systems of tribal communities (Mitsch & Gosselink, 2000). Sustainable use of wetland resources through controlled fishing, eco-friendly cultivation, and conservation of aquatic biodiversity is necessary for ensuring long-term livelihood security. Wetlands in the Dooars region also function as natural reservoirs by storing excess rainwater during the monsoon and releasing it gradually during dry periods, thereby reducing flood hazards and maintaining hydrological stability (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Protection of biodiversity is another important aspect of ecological sustainability. Wetlands support fish species, migratory birds, amphibians, and aquatic vegetation, all of which are crucial for ecological balance and subsistence livelihoods (Prasad et al., 2002). Community participation and indigenous ecological knowledge among tribal populations can contribute significantly to sustainable wetland management and conservation practices.

Conclusion

Wetlands are not only ecological assets but also economic lifelines for tribal communities in the Kranti block of Mal subdivision. The present study confirms their crucial role in livelihood sustainability. However, degradation threatens both ecology and economy, making conservation essential. Increasing environmental challenges, such as wetland encroachment, pollution from tea gardens, overexploitation of aquatic resources, siltation, and climate variability, are threatening both ecological balance and livelihood security. Degradation of wetland ecosystems directly affects tribal communities that are economically dependent on these natural resources. Therefore, sustainable wetland management is essential for maintaining ecological sustainability and improving socio-economic resilience among tribal populations.

The study concludes that the balanced integration of ecological conservation and livelihood development is crucial for achieving sustainable development in the study area. Wetlands should therefore be recognised not merely as ecological entities but also as vital socio-economic resources that support tribal well-being and environmental stability.

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Submitted: April 2026

Revision Submitted: May 2026

Accepted: June 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Wetlands, Traditional Knowledge and Urdu Language & Literature: An Interdisciplinary and Eco-Critical Study

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Abstract

In the contemporary era, while industrial development, the technological revolution and unplanned urbanization have provided material comforts to human life, they have simultaneously severely disrupted the ecological balance of the planet. Wetlands (aquatic habitats/waterlogged lands) serve as the backbone for maintaining this global biological equilibrium. The "traditional knowledge" of local communities plays a pivotal role for centuries in the conservation of these water bodies. This paper provides an academic and investigative analysis of how wetlands and their associated traditional wisdom have been the cradle of human civilization, and how Urdu language and literature have absorbed these natural phenomena, water culture, and ecological consciousness. From classical poetry to modern fiction and elegiac literature (Marsiya), Urdu literature has not only depicted the aesthetics of nature but has also intellectually advocated for the preservation of water bodies through the lens of eco-criticism. This article offers a comprehensive, interdisciplinary exploration of this vital subject.

Keywords: *Wetlands; Traditional Knowledge; Urdu Literature; Eco-Criticism; Water Culture; Biodiversity*

Introduction

An area of land that is covered by water, either permanently or seasonally, and where biological activities revolve around water, is internationally designated as a 'Wetland'. According to the Ramsar Convention (1971), wetlands encompass lakes, marshes, ponds, riverbanks, wet meadows, and coastal areas. They are often referred to as the "lungs" or "biological kidneys" of the earth because they naturally purify water, maintain groundwater tables, and mitigate the intensity of floods.

Human history bears witness to the fact that the world's great civilizations flourished along the banks of rivers and water bodies, such as the Indus Valley, Tigris-Euphrates, and Nile Valley civilizations. Over time, populations residing in these habitats acquired a profound wisdom born not from formal textbooks, but from observation, experience, and co-existence with nature. This is termed "Traditional Knowledge". Urdu language, as the custodian of the composite Ganga-Jamuni culture of the subcontinent, has the soil of these water bodies, the chirping of their birds and the tranquility of water deeply embedded in its essence.

The Sociological and Ecological Nexus of Wetlands and Traditional Wisdom

Traditional knowledge refers to the cumulative body of wisdom, art, and skills that are passed down through generations by people of a specific geographical region to understand and sustain their environment. "The traditional knowledge of local communities is older and more tested than any scientific laboratory, for it teaches the art of living in harmony with nature." (Swaminathan, M.S., 2012, p. 145). Regarding wetlands, this knowledge

encompasses the following domains:

- **Water Management:** Building traditional structures like Johad (earthen ponds), Baoli (stepwells), Ahar, and ponds to harvest rainwater has been a time-tested indigenous craft in the subcontinent, ensuring water security even during peak summers.
- **Biodiversity Awareness:** Local fishermen and farmers instinctively understand which aquatic plants (such as lotus or a balanced growth of water hyacinth) prevent water pollution and know precisely in which seasons migratory birds arrive.

The Hydrological Lexicon of Urdu

From a linguistic perspective, Urdu possesses a vast ocean of vocabulary to articulate the various states of water, aquatic bodies, and their ecosystems. This richness stands as testament to how closely Urdu-speaking societies have lived alongside water and wetlands. Key indigenous and traditional terms used in Urdu are organized in the table below:

Table 1: Urdu terms and ecological meaning

Term in Urdu	Conceptual and Ecological Meaning
Aabgah / Daldal	A harmonious blend of soil and water that creates a sustainable habitat for rare flora and fauna.
Johad / Talab	The largest traditional source of water in rural life, essential for recharging groundwater tables.
Kol / Chham	Vast natural depressions where rainwater accumulates, forming temporary or permanent wetlands.
Kachhar / Sona	The moist banks of a river or lake where rare herbs and crops thrive due to high humidity.

These words are not merely vocabulary, they are integral components of the traditional understanding through which our ancestors recognized the sanctity of water.

Wetlands and Landscapes of Nature in Classical and Modern Urdu Poetry

Urdu poetry originates fundamentally with the depiction of nature. From early Deccan poets (such as Quli Qutub Shah and Wali Deccani) to the golden era and modern times, poets have consistently made water bodies, rivers, and the birds surrounding them the central theme of their verse. For instance-

Nazeer Akbarabadi and Rural Water Bodies

The people's poet, Nazeer Akbarabadi, captured the festivals, rivers, ponds, and monsoons of the subcontinent with a vividness that serves as a historic document for ecological studies. In his poem "Barsat ki Baharein" (The Splendors of Rain), the turbulence of water and the lushness of earth represent a dynamic portrait of a thriving wetland:

*"Kya kya machi hain yaarobarsat ki baharein
 Sabzon ki lehrahahat, baghat ki baharein
 Boondon ki jhamjhamahat, qatrat ki baharein
 Har jabicharahahaisabzaharibichone
 Kya kya machi hain yaarobarsat ki baharein!"*

(Akbarabadi, Nazeer, Kulliyat-e-Nazeer Akbarabadi, 1988, p. 320.)

Allama Iqbal and Migratory Birds

One of the most beautiful aspects of wetlands is that they become sanctuaries for birds migrating from Siberia and colder regions during winter. Allama Iqbal utilized these birds—especially the falcon (Shaheen) and other avian travellers—as metaphors for the flight and liberty of the human soul. When Iqbal evokes the banks of a river or the silence of water it reflects a deep ecological and philosophical consciousness:

**"Dariya ka sukootthashafaqthi
Khalwat thi, chamantha, jooy-e-haqthi"**
(Iqbal, Allama Muhammad, 1968 p. 112)

His verses frequently capture the eternal bond between water and mountain streams:

**"Jooy-e-kohistanuchakti, koodti, gussemein laal
Zeer-o-bam mein is kebaajasabajtahai madam"**

Mir Anees and Aquatic Imagery in Elegiac Verse (Marsiya)

In Urdu elegiac poetry, particularly through the pen of Mir Anees, one finds exquisite descriptions of the banks of the Euphrates (Farat), marshy waterfronts, the rising tide of rivers and the arrival of birds on water at dawn, bridging human emotion directly with natural aesthetics:

**"Thandi hawameinsabz-o-sahra ki wohlehak
Nahar-e-Farat kewohmusafir, wohmurghak
Woh mauj ka talatum, wohpaani ki chamak"**

Eco-Criticism and the Decline of Traditional Wisdom in Urdu Fiction

In contemporary literary criticism, 'Eco-Criticism' has emerged as a major school of thought, examining the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Urdu fiction has keenly felt and expressed the degradation of rural life and its water resources.

- **Munshi Premchand:** In Premchand's short stories (such as *Poos ki Raat*, *Sawa Ser Gehun*, and *Kafan*) and his novels, the social and ecological significance of rural ponds, wells, and johads are highlighted. Ponds were not merely water sources but hubs for social cohesion and traditional knowledge systems.
- **Intizar Husain:** Husain's works are deeply influenced by mythological and traditional knowledge. His novel *Basti* and numerous short stories serve as elegies for drying rivers, felled trees, and departing birds. This represents the mourning of modern destruction of wetlands and nature at the hands of humanity. He writes:
"When settlements are ruined, their ponds dry up first. And when ponds dry up, birds and blessings abandon that settlement."
(Husain, Intizar, 1980, p. 75)
- **Rajinder Singh Bedi:** Whether in his novella *Ek Chadar Maili Si* or his short stories, the fragrance of Punjab's streams and moist fields is thoroughly woven into the narrative, connecting human emotions with the cycles of nature.

Ecological Challenges in West Bengal and the Response of Local Urdu Literature

The region of West Bengal is geographically home to some of the largest deltas and wetlands in the world, such as the Sundarbans and the East Kolkata Wetlands. This territory is globally renowned for its traditional water filtration systems, aquaculture and paddy cultivation. However, recent decades have seen rapid, unplanned construction in areas like Chopra, Uttar Dinajpur, and other border zones, causing traditional ponds and marshes to disappear at an alarming rate.

Urdu writers and poets of Bengal have expressed deep anxiety over this fading aquatic culture. When the moisture of the soil vanishes, traditional songs and local idioms disappear from the spoken lexicon as well. Modern poets have integrated this tragedy into their creative consciousness.

As articulated by a contemporary poet (writing under the pen name Aleem):

***"Khushki pe zindagi ka fasana to haimagar
Talab-o-aabgah se raunaqzameen ki hai"***

This couplet reflects the fundamental truth that if ponds and wetlands are erased, the biological soul of the planet will perish.

Recommendations for Academic Integration

The preservation of wetlands and traditional wisdom cannot be confined strictly to the sciences; the humanities and literature departments must step forward. The following actions are vital moving forward:

1. Interdisciplinary Research: University Urdu curricula should incorporate specialized courses on 'Literature and Environment' (Eco-criticism).
2. Preservation of Indigenous Lexicon: Traditional names of water management systems and medicinal herbs preserved by rural elders should be compiled into Urdu glossaries and encyclopaedias.
3. Academic Seminars: Educational institutions should organize national and international seminars that bridge science and literature to awaken ecological consciousness.

Conclusion

The conservation of wetlands and traditional knowledge is not merely a scientific necessity but a prerequisite for our cultural, linguistic and literary survival. Urdu language and literature have historically protected nature and portrayed humanity as a co-traveller with the universe. The need of the hour is to apply the principles of eco-criticism to our literary heritage, deriving the energy needed to guide the new generation away from concrete jungles back toward the coolness of ponds, the flight of birds and the preservation of greenery. If we fail to protect these wetlands, we will lose not only a vital ecosystem but also the very culture and traditional wisdom that form the sweetness of our language and the beauty of our literature.

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Submitted: May 2026

Revision Submitted: May 2026

Accepted: June 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Beels, Dighis and Livelihoods: Wetland Culture and Its Socio-Ecological Significance in the District of Uttar Dinajpur

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Abstract

Wetlands are ecologically and culturally vital landscapes that have shaped human civilization across centuries. Uttar Dinajpur district of West Bengal is a part of the historically rich Pundravardhana region with numerous wetlands locally known as beels, dighis and floodplain depressions created by rivers such as the Mahananda, Punarbhaba and Kulik. This paper presents an analytical study of the wetland culture of Uttar Dinajpur by examining its historical formation, socio-economic functions, ecological importance and contemporary threats. The study argues that wetlands in this region are not only ecological units but are living cultural systems embedded in the agrarian identity, folk traditions and indigenous knowledge practices of local communities. Key wetlands such as the Kulik Bird Sanctuary or Raiganj Wildlife Sanctuary, Nehali Beel and Jolohari Beel are analyzed as examples of the broader wetland heritage. The paper concludes that sustainable and community-driven conservation strategies are urgently needed to protect these landscapes from increasing pressures of encroachment, siltation and pollution.

Keywords: *North Bengal; Raiganj; Ecology; Biodiversity; Sustainable Conservation*

Introduction

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on Earth. They serve as habitats for diverse flora and fauna, regulate water cycles, support agriculture and sustain human livelihoods. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of 1971 defines wetlands broadly to include marshes, fens, peatlands and water bodies either natural or artificial and permanent or temporary, whose depth does not exceed six metres (Ramsar Convention, 2013). Globally, wetlands cover approximately 12.1 million square kilometres and support the livelihoods of over one billion people (Davidson, 2014). In the Indian subcontinent, wetland-based cultures have ancient roots. The state of West Bengal with its network of rivers, floodplains and deltaic systems, contains a remarkable diversity of wetland types. Uttar Dinajpur, a northern district of West Bengal, is situated in the Gangetic plains and is drained by river systems including the Mahananda, Punarbhaba, Nagar, and Kulik. Over time these rivers have generated a mosaic of natural and human-made wetlands including floodplain lakes (beels), excavated tanks (dighis), and seasonal marshes that now define the ecological and cultural character of the district. Despite growing scholarly attention to wetland ecology in India, the cultural dimensions of wetlands in the Uttar Dinajpur district remain understudied (Gopal, 2013; Prasad et al., 2002). The present study attempts to address this gap by offering an integrated analytical account of wetland culture which is defined here as the complex of economic practices, ecological knowledge, social relationships and symbolic meanings that communities have built around wetland landscapes. By examining specific wetlands,

historical records and livelihood systems, the study demonstrates that wetland conservation in this region cannot succeed without recognizing and protecting its associated cultural heritage.

Uttar Dinajpur and Its Wetland Landscape

Uttar Dinajpur district with headquarter at Raiganj is located between latitudes 25°10'N and 26°44'N and longitudes 87°49'E and 88°23'E. It covers an area of approximately 3,140 square kilometres and had a population of 3,007,134 as of the 2011 Census (Census of India, 2011). The district shares its northern western border with Bihar and its eastern border is fringed by Bangladesh. It is part of the historically significant Dinajpur region, once a part of the ancient kingdom of Pundravardhana was also a major administrative unit during British Bengal.

The landscape is predominantly flat and low-lying alluvial plain. The Mahananda River flows along the western edge of the district while the Kulik River drains the central areas and joins the Mahananda near Raiganj. The Punarbhaba flows along the eastern margins. Frequent flooding and river course migration have historically produced numerous oxbow lakes and floodplain wetlands across the district which is known as beels. Alongside these natural wetlands, centuries of human settlement have produced an extensive network of excavated tanks known as dighis for water storage, irrigation, fishing and religious use.

Historical Formation of Wetland Culture in Uttar Dinajpur

The relationship between human settlement and wetlands in the Dinajpur region dates back to ancient times. Archaeological and historical evidence links the region to Pundravardhana, an important administrative division under the Mauryan and Gupta empires, where fertile alluvial soils and perennial rivers supported dense human populations (Gopal, 2013). Early settlements naturally gravitated toward wetland margins which offered a reliable combination of water, rich agricultural soil, fish and plant resources.

During the medieval period, under the Pala and Sena dynasties, rulers and landlords began constructing large excavated reservoirs called dighis to manage water for agricultural and domestic use. This was especially important given the nature of the Barind tract or Barind Bhumi which was a slightly elevated lateritic area in parts of Dinajpur that experienced acute water shortages in non-monsoon months. The construction of dighis was thus a sophisticated response to environmental variability, reflecting early hydraulic engineering knowledge. Ramsagar Dighi, located in the old Dinajpur region (now in Bangladesh), was excavated by Maharaja Ramnath in the 18th century and remains one of the largest historic dighis associated with this tradition.

Under British colonial rule, the attitude toward wetlands shifted significantly. Colonial revenue policies favoured arable land over wetlands, leading to systematic land reclamation and drainage projects that reduced the extent of beels and marshy areas (Prasad et al., 2002, p. 18). The transformation of wetlands into paddy fields increased short-term agricultural output but diminished ecological diversity and disrupted traditional wetland-based livelihoods. This period marks the beginning of a long process of wetland loss in the Dinajpur region that has been continued into the post-independence era as well.

An Ecological and Cultural Overview

Kulik Bird Sanctuary

The most ecologically significant wetland in Uttar Dinajpur is the Kulik Bird Sanctuary which is also known as Raiganj Wildlife Sanctuary. It is situated on the banks of the Kulik River near Raiganj town. Spread over approximately 1.30 square kilometres, the sanctuary is

one of the largest heronries in Asia and is recognized as a globally important bird area. It provides seasonal nesting habitat for tens of thousands of migratory and resident birds, including the Asian Openbill Stork (*Anastomus oscitans*), Indian Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), Little Cormorant (*Microcarbo minor*), and various species of egrets (Gopal, 2013). The sanctuary represents the intersection of ecology and local culture as the communities near the Kulik River have historically regarded nesting birds as auspicious and folk traditions associate the arrival of migratory birds with the onset of the agricultural season.

Nehali Beel

It is a large floodplain wetland located near Raiganj. It is an important example of a naturally formed beel shaped by the lateral migration of the Kulik River. The beel supports rich aquatic macrophyte communities including species such as water lily (*Nymphaea nouchali*), water chestnut (*Trapa natans*), and (*Eichhornia crassipes*), alongside significant fish diversity (Prasad et al., 2002). Local fishing communities especially those from the Jaliya and Kaibarta communities are dependent on Nehali Beel for subsistence and commercial fishing across generations. The beel also functions as a groundwater recharge zone and as a flood buffer during the monsoon season.

Jolohari Beel and Madhya Kachnar Beel are two ecologically studied wetlands in the region known for their aquatic macrophyte diversity and role as natural water reservoirs during the monsoon. Madhya Kachnar Beel has been specifically documented for its value as a bioindicator site and the presence and composition of macrophyte communities in the beel reflect the overall ecological health of the surrounding landscape (Prasad et al., 2002). These beels are embedded in local agricultural rhythms, their water is used for small-scale irrigation during the dry season (rabi) and their fish resources provide supplementary protein and income for marginal farming households.

Dimensions of Wetland Culture

Fishing is the most visible and economically significant aspect of wetland culture in Uttar Dinajpur. Traditional fishing communities particularly from the Jaliya or Kaibarta caste have developed sophisticated knowledge systems around fish ecology, seasonal migration patterns and sustainable harvesting techniques. Traditional gear such as jhakijal (cast nets), khaljal (drag nets) and bana (bamboo traps) have been used for generations in the district's beels and rivers. These tools reflect an intimate ecological knowledge of aquatic environments the depth of a beel, the seasonal movement of fish species and the growth cycles of aquatic plants are all factored into traditional fishing practice. Fish species commonly harvested include Rohu (*Labeo rohita*), Catla (*Catla catla*), Magur (*Clarias batrachus*), Singhi (*Heteropneustes fossilis*) and Shoal (*Channa striata*). Many of these species have significant cultural value. Some fish are considered auspicious in marriage ceremonies and religious offerings reflecting the deep integration of aquatic resources into the social life of the community (Gopal, 2013).

Paddy cultivation in the low-lying wetland margins (boro and aman paddy) is another central component of wetland culture. Farmers in Uttar Dinajpur have traditionally practiced flood-recession agriculture by sowing rice in the retreating floodwaters of beels as they dry partially during the winter months. This technique is an elegant adaptation to the hydrological rhythms of the wetland landscape which requires no additional irrigation. Wetland plants such as water chestnut (*Trapa natans*) and lotus stems are also harvested as supplementary food crops which has been contributing to both household nutrition and local

markets.

Perhaps the most undervalued dimension of wetland culture is the body of indigenous ecological knowledge that communities have accumulated over centuries. In Uttar Dinajpur, this includes knowledge of seasonal water level changes and their agricultural implications, identification and use of wetland plants for food, fodder and traditional medicine, methods for predicting monsoon intensity based on bird behaviour and plant flowering and techniques for maintaining beel embankments and traditional irrigation channels (khals) (Prasad et al., 2002). This knowledge is rarely documented but plays a critical role in resource management. It is transmitted orally from parents to children within fishing and farming households and is reinforced through community practices and seasonal festivals.

Wetlands in Uttar Dinajpur are also cultural spaces. They host seasonal festivals, religious ceremonies and social gatherings that reinforce community bonds and ecological awareness. The folk performance tradition known as Khan which encompasses devotional singing, storytelling and music which often draws themes from river and wetland life, celebrating the generosity of water bodies and mourning their degradation. Religious practices such as Tusu Puja which is observed during the harvest season and Ithu Puja which is associated with water and fertility are performed near wetlands reinforcing the sacred dimension of these landscapes. Community fishing events where groups jointly cast nets in a beel and share the catch and serve simultaneously as economic activity and social ritual.

Thus, beyond their cultural importance, wetlands in Uttar Dinajpur perform essential ecological services. First, they function as biodiversity reservoirs. The Kulik Bird Sanctuary alone hosts over 160 species of bird. Beels like Nehali and Jolohari support high diversity of aquatic macrophytes, macroinvertebrates and fish which make them critical nodes in the regional food web. Second, wetlands play a major role in hydrological regulation. They absorb excess monsoon runoff reducing flood peaks in downstream areas and slowly release stored water into the dry season. These sustain base flows in rivers and recharging shallow aquifers on which millions of rural households depend (Davidson, 2014). Third, wetlands in this region contribute significantly to climate regulation. Macrophyte communities in beels sequester carbon in plant biomass and sediment while the evapotranspiration from open water surfaces moderates local temperatures and maintains atmospheric humidity (Gopal, 2013). Fourth, wetlands function as natural water treatment systems as aquatic plants and microbial communities in beels absorb excess nutrients and break down pollutants from agricultural runoff improving the quality of water that eventually flows into the river system (Prasad et al., 2002). These services are provided freely and continuously and have enormous but largely uncalculated economic value for the district.

Threats to Wetland Culture and Ecology

Despite their ecological and cultural importance, wetlands in Uttar Dinajpur face severe and accelerating threats. Encroachment for agricultural expansion and urban development is the most immediate threat. The extent of beel area in Uttar Dinajpur has reduced significantly over the past five decades. Beels are drained and converted into paddy fields, fish ponds or construction sites resulting in destruction of both the ecological and cultural value they contained.

Moreover, pollution from agricultural runoff particularly pesticides and synthetic fertilizers is a growing threat to wetland biodiversity. Excessive nutrient loading causes eutrophication in beels, leading to algal blooms that deplete dissolved oxygen and kill fish populations. Siltation driven by soil erosion in the river catchments progressively reduces the depth and

water retention capacity of beels. Many historic dighis in the region now suffer from siltation, weed infestation and a lack of desiltation maintenance.

Overfishing and the use of destructive fishing methods including the use of pesticides and fine-mesh nets have reduced fish diversity in many beels. As indigenous fishing communities face economic pressure, they are forced to adopt more intensive harvesting practices that erode the very resource base on which their livelihoods depend. Finally, the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems as younger generations migrate to urban areas and formal employment, threatens the long-term survival of wetland culture even if the wetlands themselves are physically preserved (Gopal, 2013).

Conclusion: Towards Sustainable Conservation

Effective conservation of wetlands in Uttar Dinajpur requires an approach that integrates ecological science, policy and community participation. Legal protection is a necessary but insufficient condition. Many beels lack formal protected status and are therefore vulnerable to encroachment and conversion. The Government of West Bengal has listed several wetlands under the West Bengal Wetland Policy (2012), but enforcement remains inconsistent.

Community-based management of wetlands offers a more promising pathway. Fishing communities have been given formal resource rights through Joint Aquatic Management Projects where they have demonstrated greater investment in sustainable harvesting and habitat protection (Prasad et al., 2002). Recognizing and integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into formal conservation planning is equally important.

Ecological restoration including desiltation of beels, removal of invasive species and replanting of native macrophytes is technically feasible and has been demonstrated successfully in case of wetland systems in West Bengal (Gopal, 2013). Cultural dimensions of conservation must also be addressed supporting folk traditions, festivals and community institutions connected with wetlands. Education programs that document and transmit indigenous ecological knowledge to younger generations can help bridge the cultural gap that threatens the continuity of wetland culture.

Hence, wetlands in Uttar Dinajpur district are far more than ecological features on a map. They are the material foundation of an entire cultural system, a system of livelihoods, knowledge, traditions and identities that has evolved over centuries in intimate relationship with the rivers and lakes of the district. The beels of Raiganj, the Kulik River's heronry, the sacred dighis of the region and the folk practices of fishing communities together constitute a rich and irreplaceable wetland heritage. This heritage is now under serious threat. Ecological degradation, encroachment, pollution and the erosion of indigenous knowledge are all eroding the foundations of wetland culture in the district. With appropriate legal protection, community-based resource governance, ecological restoration and recognition of indigenous knowledge, the wetlands of Uttar Dinajpur can be sustained not as museum pieces but as living and productive landscapes that continue to support the people who have cared for them across generations. Future research should focus on systematic mapping of wetland extents over time, quantification of ecosystem services in economic terms and longitudinal studies of community-based conservation outcomes in this region. The wetland culture of Uttar Dinajpur deserves both scholarly attention and policy priority as a matter of cultural, ecological and developmental significance.

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Submitted: March 2026

Revision Submitted: April 2026

Accepted: May 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Colonial Perceptions of Wetlands in North Bengal: A Historical Analysis of Degradation and Transformation

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Abstract

Wetlands in North Bengal have historically functioned as dynamic ecological systems supporting diverse livelihoods and biodiversity. However, during the British colonial rule these landscapes were reinterpreted as unproductive, unhealthy dangerous spaces associated with disease specially malaria and in need of transformation. This article examines how colonial perceptions shaped policies that led to large-scale wetland degradation through drainage, plantation, roadways and railways and other infrastructural interventions. At the same time, it explores the emergence of selective conservation practices such as forest reservation and water regulation, which were primarily driven by economic interests. By analysing colonial medical discourse, administrative reports and environmental changes, the study argues that colonial governance simultaneously degraded wetlands and introduced controlled forms of environmental management. These historical processes continue to influence present-day ecological challenges in North Bengal.

Keywords: *Plantations; Environmental History; Colonial Control; Transformation; Degradation.*

Introduction

North Bengal, located at the foothills of the Himalayas and within the broader Gangetic deltaic system, has historically been characterized by rivers, marshes and seasonal wetlands. The area especially comprising Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri and the Duars, is marked by a dense network of rivers such as the Teesta, Torsa, and Jaldhaka creating a large part of seasonal wetlands by floods and changes of their courses. These wetlands were integral to local life and historically supporting fishing, agriculture, transport and the livelihood in general. However, during the colonial period, British administrators and medical officials increasingly viewed these landscapes as sources of danger rather than productivity.

Wetlands came to be associated with disease, particularly malaria, which was one of the most widespread and feared illnesses in colonial Bengal. The transformation of wetlands into symbols of environmental degradation and disease was not a neutral process. Under the colonial rule, they came to be seen as barriers to development. Instead, it reflected colonial anxieties and scientific misunderstandings along with the economic interest. British administrators classified wetlands as waste and sought to transform them into productive land. This shift was not merely environmental but ideological, rooted in utilitarian and revenue-driven thinking.

Most of the studies of wetland focus on Bengal as a whole. There is limited region-specific work on North Bengal, especially Darjeeling, Terai and Duars. However, a critical and analytical study of colonial perceptions of wetlands of North Bengal has been attempted with two parallel processes which are environmental degradation through intervention and selective conservation for economic control. By focusing particularly on tea plantation zones

and riverine plains the study contributes to environmental history and colonial medical history.

Environmental history of colonial India has increasingly focused on how nature was reshaped through imperial knowledge systems. Scholars like Sujata Mukherjee emphasizes the role of environmental thinking in shaping colonial medical and administrative policies. (Mukherjee, 2008). Radhika Das Roy highlights how disease and environment were linked through spatial categorization. (Roy, 2017) David Arnold and Richard Grove have argued that colonialism produced both environmental destruction and early conservation practices. Grove, in particular, sees colonial conservation as a response to ecological crises caused by imperial expansion.

Wetlands in Colonial Bengal: Perception and knowledge

During pre-colonial period, wetlands in Bengal were taken as dynamic ecological zones that changed with seasons. Local communities adapted their livelihoods accordingly. Fishing communities, boatmen, farmers and peasants depended on wetlands for survival. Riverine plains and marshy lands were used extensively for fishing and seasonal cultivation (O'Malley, 1907). The deltaic environment was fluid and constantly shifting. Rather than imposing rigid boundaries, indigenous practices worked with seasonal variations. Local communities adapted to seasonal flooding using wetlands for rice cultivation, fishing, grazing and many more.

The British introduced fixed land systems, revenue policies and infrastructure projects that sought to stabilize and control the environment. Wetlands which were once seen as productive were now redefined as obstacles to development. Thus, the ecological balance was disrupted with the introduction of colonial land policies. Wetlands were thus redefined through a colonial economic lens ignoring their ecological value. One of the most significant shifts during colonial rule was the redefinition of wetlands as unhealthy environments. Terai and Duars were referred to as malarious and unhealthy tracts. (O'Malley, 1907). This perception was influenced by the miasma theory, which suggested that diseases were caused by bad air arising from decaying organic matter. Wetlands, with their stagnant water and vegetation, were therefore considered dangerous. Colonial officials described them as malarious regions, implying that they were inherently diseased landscapes.

Medical discourse played a crucial role in shaping this perception. Colonial doctors and administrators linked environmental features such as marshes and stagnant water bodies with disease outbreaks. This association was not always based on scientific evidence but on prevailing medical beliefs. Sujata Mukherjee has shown that colonial thinking emphasized environmental causation of disease, particularly linking malaria to specific landscapes. (Barman, 2020) Moreover, in North Bengal, malaria was particularly severe in tea plantation areas. The combination of forest clearing, water stagnation, and labour migration created ideal conditions for the spread of disease. Research shows that malaria frequently affected plantation workers and local populations, becoming a major public health issue. (Bhattacharya, 2011). Wetlands were thus not just physical spaces but became medicalized environments. This process also involved the creation of malarial zones in administrative records. Regions like North Bengal were categorized based on their supposed disease environment, reinforcing stereotypes about the land and its inhabitants.

Wetlands were drained to make land suitable for agriculture. According to colonial reports, large tracts of marshland in Jalpaiguri were reclaimed for cultivation in the late nineteenth century (Bengal District Records, 1895). However, drainage disrupted natural water

systems, leading to flooding, soil degradation and loss of wetland ecosystems.

The Duars region became a major site of tea plantation expansion after its annexation in 1865. Plantation records show that wetlands and forests were cleared extensively. Key impacts included alteration of drainage systems, soil erosion, reduction of biodiversity etc. Labourers working in these plantations faced harsh conditions often living near degraded wetlands. Thus, the colonial interventions in North Bengal fundamentally altered wetland ecosystems. Drainage projects aimed at expanding agriculture led to the disappearance of natural wetlands and reduced the capacity of land to retain water. The growth of tea plantations in the Duars intensified deforestation and disrupted natural drainage patterns causing soil erosion and ecological imbalance. Railway construction and embankments, designed for transport and flood control, often obstructed natural water flow, resulting in waterlogging and stagnant pools. Together, these interventions reshaped the hydrology of the region, reduced biodiversity and increased environmental vulnerability, demonstrating how economic priorities frequently overrode ecological sustainability in colonial policy. Arabinda Samanta notes that such environmental changes contributed to ecological imbalance and disease (Samanta, 2001). Colonial governance relied heavily on mapping and classification. Wetlands were marked as unused or waste, enabling state intervention. Using Michael Foucault's concept of power and knowledge, it can be argued that such classifications were tools of control. By defining wetlands as degraded spaces, colonial authorities justified their transformation. The Darjeeling Gazetteer itself functioned as a tool of knowledge production, shaping administrative decisions.

Colonial knowledge production was central to the transformation of wetlands into malarial landscapes. Through surveys, medical reports and administrative records, British officials created a body of knowledge that linked geography with disease. For instance, the concept of Burdwan fever of 1870s illustrates how colonial authorities categorized diseases in relation to specific locations. These labels reinforced the idea that certain regions were inherently unhealthy (Roy, 2017). Likewise, North Bengal also became part of a broader imperial map of disease. Wetlands were not just local features but were integrated into global narratives about tropical disease environments.

Environmental Control and Transformation:

The British perception of wetlands as dangerous led to efforts to control and transform them. Colonial authorities implemented various measures including drainage projects, embankments and irrigation, plantation development, medical interventions etc. Wetlands were drained to reduce water stagnation and make land suitable for agriculture. Drainage was seen as a way to eliminate disease and increase productivity. Embankments were constructed to control flooding and regulate water flow. While they improved agricultural output in some areas, they also interfered with natural sedimentation and drainage processes. In North Bengal, tea plantations transformed large areas of forest and wetland. These plantations required a stable labour force and infrastructure, leading to further environmental changes.

During early colonial periods, wetlands formed a dominant ecological feature of North Bengal, particularly in the Terai and Duars regions. These areas were part of an active alluvial system shaped by rivers such as the Teesta, Torsa, and Jaldhaka. Rather than existing as isolated water bodies, wetlands were integrated into floodplains, forests, and grasslands. Terai is consisted of 'low-lying marshy tracts intersected by numerous streams and subject to seasonal inundation' (O'Malley, 1907; 32). Similarly, early descriptions of Jalpaiguri indicate the presence of extensive swampy terrain and waterlogged plains. Although precise

measurement is not available, environmental historians estimate that 30–50% of the Terai–Duars belt consisted of wetlands and marshy landscapes during this period (Arnold, 1996). These wetlands were continuous and ecologically functional, supporting fishing, grazing and seasonal agriculture.

The most significant changes occurred after the annexation of the Duars by the British in 1865. This period witnessed rapid environmental transformation driven by plantation expansion and infrastructural development. Archival records from the Darjeeling Planters' Association indicate that large tracts of forest and marshland in the Duars were cleared for tea cultivation between 1870 and 1900 (Darjeeling Planters' Association, 1900–1920). Wetlands were drained to stabilize land for plantation use. Administrative reports from Jalpaiguri document systematic reclamation of marshlands for agriculture. One report notes that 'considerable areas of swamp have been brought under cultivation through drainage and settlement' (Bengal District Records, 1895; 112). Railway construction and embankments altered natural drainage systems, leading to both the destruction of natural wetlands and the creation of artificial stagnant water bodies. Studies of districts like Malda indicate the persistence of multiple wetlands, though in reduced and fragmented form. For instance, more than 50 wetlands have been identified in Malda district alone, many of which are remnants of larger historical systems (Islam, 2022).

By the early twentieth century, the continuous wetland systems of North Bengal had been significantly fragmented. Although no exact figures exist for North Bengal alone, modern retrospective estimates suggest that wetlands in West Bengal covered approximately 0.345 million hectares in the twentieth century, with a substantial portion located in northern districts (Ghosh, 2005). However, these wetlands were no longer continuous but existed as isolated patches such as oxbow lakes, marshes and residual floodplain depressions.

The historical evidence indicates that wetlands in North Bengal were once extensive and interconnected ecological systems that played a crucial role in sustaining local livelihoods. Colonial intervention, particularly after 1865, led to their systematic transformation through drainage, plantation expansion and infrastructural development.

By 1947, wetlands had not disappeared entirely but had been significantly reduced in large scale and continuity. They survived mainly as fragmented remnants within an increasingly controlled and economically oriented landscape. This transformation reflects a broader shift from an ecological regime based on adaptation to one based on extraction and control, the effects of which continue to shape the region's environmental challenges.

Conclusion

The study of wetlands in North Bengal during the colonial period reveals a major shift in both perception and use of these landscapes. Before British rule, wetlands were an essential part of the natural environment and local economy. They supported fishing, seasonal agriculture, grazing and transport and communities had developed adaptive ways to live with floods and changing river systems. Once wetlands were classified as wastelands, colonial authorities found justification to intervene and transform them. These interventions significantly altered the ecological balance of the region. Wetlands, which once acted as natural regulators of water were reduced and fragmented. This led to increased flooding, waterlogging, soil degradation and loss of biodiversity. Such environmental changes contributed to ecological instability (Samanta, 2001). Moreover, although wetlands were blamed for diseases like malaria, colonial modifications of the landscape often created stagnant water conditions that worsened the spread of disease.

The impact on local livelihoods was also profound. Communities that depended on wetlands lost access to vital resources. Traditional knowledge systems that managed wetlands sustainably were ignored and new economic systems especially plantation labour created exploitation and displacement. At the same time, colonial rule introduced limited forms of environmental management including forest reservation and water regulation. However, these measures were selective and mainly served economic purposes rather than ecological conservation. Colonial conservation was often designed to protect resources for imperial use rather than to preserve ecosystems (Grove, 1995).

Colonial policies were to transform wetlands in North Bengal from dynamic ecological systems into controlled and exploited landscapes. This transformation not only reshaped the landscape but also altered human-environment relationships in lasting ways. Therefore, future research and policy must take into account both historical processes and local knowledge to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands in the region.

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Submitted: March 2026

Revision Submitted: May 2026

Accepted: June 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Educational Sociology, Traditional Knowledge and Wetland Conservation: A Synthesis

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Abstract

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems on Earth, providing essential ecological, economic, and cultural services. However, increasing urbanization, pollution, unsustainable resource use, and climate change have placed these ecosystems under significant threat. This paper examines the interrelationship between educational sociology, traditional knowledge, and wetland conservation, emphasizing the importance of education and social institutions in promoting sustainable environmental practices. Educational sociology provides a framework for understanding how schools, families, communities, and cultural institutions shape environmental awareness, values, and conservation behaviour. At the same time, traditional knowledge, developed through generations of close interaction with local ecosystems, offers valuable insights into the sustainable management of wetland resources, including water conservation, biodiversity protection, and responsible harvesting practices. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge into formal and informal educational systems can strengthen conservation efforts by preserving cultural heritage, encouraging community participation, and fostering environmental stewardship. The paper argues that collaboration among educational institutions, local communities, policymakers, and environmental organizations is essential for achieving effective and sustainable wetland conservation. By combining sociological perspectives on education with indigenous and local knowledge systems, a more inclusive and participatory approach to wetland management can be developed, contributing to ecological sustainability, social well-being, and the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Keywords: *Educational Sociology; Traditional Knowledge; Practical Strategies; Challenges*

Introduction

Educational sociology examines the relationship between education and society, focusing on how social values, cultural traditions and institutions influence learning and human behavior. In the context of environmental sustainability, it highlights the role of education in developing awareness, attitudes, and responsible actions toward the conservation of natural resources. Among these resources, wetlands are vital ecosystems that provide essential ecological, economic, and social benefits, including water purification, flood control, biodiversity conservation, climate regulation and livelihood support for millions of people. Wetlands are "among the most productive and dynamic ecosystems on Earth, playing a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and supporting human life" (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2016, p. 4). On the other hand, Traditional knowledge, developed through generations of interaction with the natural environment, plays a significant role in the sustainable management of wetlands. Indigenous and local communities possess valuable knowledge about seasonal water cycles, sustainable fishing practices, medicinal plants,

biodiversity conservation, and the wise use of wetland resources. This knowledge, combined with modern scientific understanding, can strengthen conservation efforts and promote sustainable development.

From the perspective of educational sociology, integrating traditional knowledge into formal and informal education helps preserve cultural heritage while fostering environmental responsibility among present and future generations. Educational institutions, families, communities, and social organizations all contribute to transmitting conservation values and encouraging active participation in wetland protection. Therefore, the integration of educational sociology, traditional knowledge and wetland conservation offers a holistic approach to addressing environmental challenges, promoting sustainable resource management, and ensuring the long-term health of wetland ecosystems. However, the present study first describes the conceptual framework of Educational Sociology and then it proceeds to highlight the traditional knowledge and wetland conservation. At the eleventh hour of the study some challenges of the wetland conservation have been pointed out from educational sociology point of view.

Conceptual Framework: Educational Sociology

Educational sociology is "a significant branch of Sociology, examines the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between education and society" (Dewey, 1938, p. 18). It explores how social structures, institutions, cultural values and group interactions influence educational systems and processes. A central idea in educational sociology is that education does not occur in isolation. Schools, teachers, students, and curriculum are all shaped by the broader social, economic, and cultural context. When education ignores local culture and knowledge, students often find it irrelevant and fail to connect it with their lived experiences. A key insight of educational sociology is that education extends far beyond the boundaries of formal schooling. It includes informal and non-formal modes of learning that occur within families, communities, religious institutions and everyday social interactions. In this context, "traditional knowledge—transmitted orally through generations via storytelling, observation, participation and cultural practices—serves as a vital component of informal education" (Berkes, 2012, p. 53). This form of education is continuous, context-specific, and practice-oriented. By recognizing and integrating traditional knowledge into formal education, we can make learning more meaningful, culturally relevant, and effective for environmental conservation.

Theoretical Perspectives

John Dewey emphasized "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1938, p. 87). He argued that real learning happens when students engage directly with their environment and solve practical problems. Dewey supported practical and community-based education and suggested that wetland conservation can be taught through field visits, environmental projects and participation in local conservation activities. For Dewey, the school should be a miniature society where students learn democratic values and civic responsibility. Paulo Freire believed "education should create awareness about social and environmental problems" (Freire, 1970, p. 41) and encouraged people to take action for social change. His concept of critical pedagogy is very useful for environmental education because it asks students to question unsustainable practices and become agents of change in their own communities.

Rabindranath Tagore "promoted nature-based education at Visva-Bharati University" (Tagore, 1961, p. 28) and believed students should learn in close connection with nature. He

set up open-air classrooms and emphasized art, music and direct experience with the natural world. His ideas support environmental awareness and wetland protection. Mahatma Gandhi supported sustainable living and respect for natural resources. He believed local communities should protect their environment through simple and responsible lifestyles. Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya and self-reliance aligns closely with community-based conservation.

Traditional Knowledge and Wetland Conservation

Traditional ecological knowledge is rooted in lived experiences and close interaction with the environment over hundreds of years. It significantly influences how individuals and communities perceive and interact with nature and helps develop environmentally responsible behaviour. Unlike modern scientific knowledge which is often compartmentalized, traditional knowledge is holistic and integrates ecological, social, spiritual, and economic dimensions. The key contributions of traditional knowledge to wetland conservation are as follows. First, in Sustainable Resource Management, local communities utilize natural resources in a balanced and responsible manner to ensure long-term availability. They often have rules about how much can be harvested and when. Second, communities "follow natural cycles and restrict the use of certain resources during breeding or regeneration periods" (Berkes, 2012, p. 65) to prevent overexploitation. This shows an understanding of ecological processes. Third, "many wetlands, forests, and water bodies are considered sacred due to religious or cultural beliefs" (Berkes, 2012, p. 71) which discourage destructive activities and promote conservation. Fourth, local communities develop informal systems of rules and norms to control resource use that encourage collective responsibility. Finally, traditional knowledge also includes methods of conflict resolution and adaptation to climate change, such as early warning systems for floods and cyclones which are crucial for wetland communities.

Transmission of Traditional Knowledge

Educational sociology places significant emphasis on the role of education in preserving, transmitting, and transforming cultural knowledge within society. In traditional societies, education is not confined to schools. It happens continuously through daily life. Transmission occurs primarily through three modes. First, Oral traditions and storytelling: "elders share their experiences, observations and wisdom about nature with younger generations" (Berkes, 2012, p. 55). These narratives not only convey practical knowledge but also embed moral values and cultural meanings. Second, Community participation and observation. By actively engaging in daily activities such as fishing, farming, or resource collection, individuals acquire hands-on knowledge by watching and imitating elders. Third, Apprenticeship and experiential learning: younger members of the community learn directly from skilled practitioners through practice and guidance. However, this chain of transmission is currently under threat. Modern education systems, mass media and migration are weakening the connection between younger generations and traditional practices. If formal education does not take responsibility to document and teach this knowledge, a vast repository of ecological wisdom may be lost within one or two generations.

In West Bengal, wetlands play a vital role in shaping the socio-economic and cultural life of local communities. The state has diverse wetland ecosystems ranging from coastal mangroves to inland freshwater marshes.

Sundarbans: "The Sundarbans provides a significant example of how traditional knowledge contributes to wetland conservation and sustainable resource management" (Gadgil & Guha, 1993, p. 111). Local communities use indigenous techniques for fishing, honey collection and forest resource management that have been developed over generations. "Fishing methods are often selective and designed to avoid harming juvenile species, while honey collection is carried out in a manner that does not destroy bee populations" (Gadgil & Guha, 1993, p. 113). People also have deep knowledge about tiger behaviour, tidal patterns, and medicinal plants of the mangrove forest.

East Kolkata Wetlands: This Ramsar site is a remarkable example of traditional wastewater management. For over a century, local communities have used Kolkata's sewage to create fish ponds and agricultural fields. This system recycles nutrients, treats waste naturally, and provides livelihood to thousands of people. The knowledge of canal maintenance, fish species selection, and crop rotation has been passed down informally without any formal training.

Chupir Char, Purba Bardhaman: This oxbow lake is famous for migratory birds and freshwater fish. Local fishermen voluntarily stop fishing during the breeding season. They also protect certain large trees on the lake bank because of religious beliefs. This cultural practice indirectly protects bird nesting sites. These cases clearly show that conservation is already happening at the grassroots level. What is needed is recognition, documentation, and support from formal institutions.

Practical Strategies for Integration

Within educational sociology, education is seen as a powerful tool for connecting cultural practices with formal learning and for bringing about social change. Several practical strategies can be adopted to integrate traditional knowledge with formal education for wetland conservation.

Curriculum Development should incorporate local environmental knowledge into school syllabi. By including examples and case studies from nearby ecosystems, such as wetlands, students can better relate theoretical concepts to their real-life experiences. Textbooks can include stories, proverbs, and practices from local communities. Experiential Learning is crucial. "Students participate in field visits to wetlands and interact directly with local communities. Such experiences enhance practical understanding" (Dewey, 1938, p. 89). Students can learn by doing surveys, water testing and biodiversity documentation.

Challenges

Educational sociology emphasizes that wetland conservation is not only an environmental issue but also a social and educational one. Effective conservation depends on building environmental awareness, fostering positive social values, encouraging community participation and strengthening educational institutions so that people adopt sustainable attitudes and behaviours toward wetlands. "Traditional knowledge provides valuable insights into sustainable resource management, while educational sociology offers a framework for integrating this knowledge into formal education" (Berkes, 2012, p. 80).

Conclusion

Wetland conservation is not only an environmental issue but also a social and educational concern. The relationship between communities and wetlands in regions such as West Bengal highlights the importance of cultural practices in conservation. If we want wetlands to survive, the people who depend on them must see value in protecting them. Education is the

most powerful tool to build that value and sense of responsibility. By integrating traditional knowledge through an educational sociology lens, we can create a conservation model that is ecological, cultural, and educational at the same time. West Bengal has both the wetlands and the knowledge. What it needs now is the institutional will to connect them. Only then can we achieve truly sustainable conservation for future generations.

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Submitted: May 2026

Revision Submitted: May 2026

Accepted: June 2026

Refereed Anonymously

Socioeconomic benefits of Indigenous-Led Wetland Conservation Approaches: A Study of Community-based Resource Management

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Abstract

Wetlands are among the most ecologically productive and socio-economically valuable ecosystems worldwide, providing essential services such as water purification, flood control, carbon storage, biodiversity conservation and livelihood support. However, they are increasingly threatened by anthropogenic pressures including agricultural expansion, urbanization, industrial pollution and climate change. In response to these challenges, Indigenous-Led Wetland Conservation has gained recognition as an effective and sustainable management approach based on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Community-Based Resource Management (CBRM). This paper examines the socio-economic benefits of indigenous-led wetland conservation within the framework of community-based resource management. The paper explores how indigenous practices contribute to food security, poverty reduction, livelihood diversification, biodiversity conservation, climate resilience and social cohesion. The main objective of the present study is to examine the role of indigenous knowledge systems in wetland conservation under community-based resource management and to analyze the socio-economic benefits derived from indigenous-led wetland conservation practices. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on indigenous conservation and sustainable development. They will provide valuable insights for policymakers, conservation organizations, development practitioners and local communities seeking to design inclusive and effective wetland management strategies.

Keywords: *Theoretical Framework; TEK; Socio-economic Benefits; Case studies; Challenges; Policy*

Introduction

Wetlands occupy a crucial place in global ecosystems due to their multifaceted roles in supporting biodiversity, regulating the water cycle and supporting human livelihoods. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) wetlands provide a variety of ecosystem services, including provisioning services such as fish, reeds and freshwater; regulating services such as flood control and water purification; supporting services such as nutrient cycling; and cultural services including spiritual, recreational and educational values. Despite their importance, wetlands around the world are experiencing rapid degradation and loss. Davidson (2014) estimates that more than half of the world's wetlands have disappeared since the beginning of the 20th century, mainly due to land-use change, infrastructural development, pollution and unsustainable resource extraction. Climate change is exacerbating these pressures by altering hydrological systems, increasing the frequency of extreme weather events and disrupting wetland-dependent ecosystems. Wetland degradation not only threatens biodiversity, but also affects the livelihoods of millions of people who directly depend on these ecosystems for fishing, agriculture, grazing and other income-generating activities (Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2021). Community-based resource management (CBRM) provides a conceptual framework for

understanding indigenous conservation practices. CBRM emphasizes decentralization, participatory governance and the empowerment of local communities in decision-making regarding natural resources (Fabricius and Koch, 2004). Within this framework, indigenous-led wetland conservation represents a model of sustainability, in which local knowledge systems and institutions play a central role in effectively managing ecosystems. Research evidence is increasingly demonstrating that indigenous-managed lands contribute significantly to global conservation outcomes. Garnett et al. (2018) highlighted that indigenous territories overlap with a significant portion of the world's remaining biodiversity hotspots, indicating that indigenous stewardship is crucial for conservation success. In wetland ecosystems in particular, indigenous practices such as seasonal harvest restrictions, sacred site protection, cyclical fisheries, and traditional water management have proven effective in meeting socio-economic needs while maintaining ecological integrity. This study investigates the socioeconomic benefits of indigenous-led wetland conservation approaches through the lens of Community-Based Resource Management. It seeks to examine how indigenous governance systems, traditional ecological knowledge, and participatory conservation practices influence livelihood improvement, social well-being, and sustainable natural resource management. The study also explores the challenges associated with implementing indigenous-led conservation initiatives and identifies strategies for strengthening community participation and policy support.

Research gaps

Despite the growing recognition of indigenous conservation systems, several gaps remain in research. First, there is a lack of quantitative data on the economic valuation of indigenous-managed wetlands. Second, many studies focus on terrestrial ecosystems and the number of studies that specifically address wetland systems is small. Third, despite its proven effectiveness, indigenous knowledge is often underrepresented in formal policy frameworks. Further interdisciplinary research integrating ecology, economics, anthropology and political ecology is needed to fully understand the complexities of indigenous-led wetland management systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two complementary theoretical perspectives: community-based resource management (CBRM) and political ecology. Together, these frameworks provide a powerful perspective from which to understand how indigenous-led wetland conservation systems work and why they are effective in achieving both environmental sustainability and socio-economic benefits.

Community-Based Resource Management (CBRM)

CBRM theory emphasizes the role of local communities in the sustainable management of natural resources. It challenges centralized governance models by arguing that resource users, who are directly dependent on ecosystems, are often in the best position to manage them sustainably (Ostrom, 1990). The theory is built on the principles of collective action, local knowledge and decentralized decision-making.

Ostrom's (1990) seminal work on common-resource management shows that communities can successfully manage shared resources when clear boundaries, collective-choice mechanisms, monitoring mechanisms and conflict-resolution mechanisms are in place. In the context of wetlands, these principles are reflected in indigenous institutions, which regulate fishing seasons, control access to water bodies, and enforce customary conservation policies. CBRM also highlights the importance of trust, social capital and local accountability. Indigenous communities often rely on strong kinship ties and cultural norms which reinforce

the sustainable use of resources. These informal institutions often prove more effective than formal regulatory systems, especially in remote or marginalized areas.

Political Ecology

Political ecology provides a critical perspective for examining power relations in environmental governance. It emphasizes that environmental degradation and conservation outcomes are determined not only by ecological factors, but also by political, economic, and social structures (Robbins, 2012). From a political ecology perspective, wetland degradation is often associated with unequal power relations, including land evictions, state-led development projects and commercial exploitation of natural resources. Indigenous peoples are often marginalized in decision-making processes, despite their deep ecological knowledge and dependence on wetlands.

The integration of CBRM and political ecology suggests that indigenous wetland conservation is both an ecological and socio-political process. While CBRM explains how local governance systems work effectively, political ecology highlights the larger structural forces that shape rights and control over wetland resources. Together, these frameworks demonstrate that indigenous-led conservation is not simply a traditional practice, but rather a sophisticated system of environmental governance that integrates ecological knowledge, social organization, and cultural values.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in Wetland Management

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) plays a central role in indigenous wetland conservation. It includes detailed understandings of the water cycle, species behavior, seasonal changes, and ecological interdependencies (Burks, 2018). Indigenous communities use TEK to inform fisheries practices, agricultural cycles and water management decisions. For example, seasonal knowledge of fish reproduction patterns often helps to regulate fishing during spawning periods. Similarly, indigenous floodplain agricultural systems are designed to align with natural flood cycles which ensure soil fertility and ecosystem regeneration.

Traditional governance and institutional arrangements

Indigenous wetland management is typically governed by traditional institutions which regulate access, use and conservation of resources. These institutions may include village councils, committees of elders or group-based governance systems. Such institutions establish rules and regulations regarding who can enter the wetland, when resources can be extracted and how violations of the rules will be punished. These rules are often linked to cultural and spiritual belief systems, which reinforce adherence to and enforcement of the rules. In many cases, sacred wetlands are protected by cultural taboos, which prohibit exploitation. These culturally protected areas often act as havens for biodiversity which contribute significantly to conservation outcomes.

Sustainable Harvesting Methods

Indigenous communities use sustainable harvesting techniques to prevent overexploitation of wetland resources. These include periodic fishing, selective harvesting and seasonal restrictions. Periodic fishing systems ensure that certain areas of the wetland remain intact for periods of time which helps fish populations recover. Selective harvesting ensures that only mature species are harvested which protects reproductive populations. These practices demonstrate an innate understanding of environmental and long-term sustainable systems

Wetland Restoration and Adaptive Management

Indigenous communities also engage in a variety of wetland restoration practices, such as replanting native vegetation, maintaining waterways and restoring degraded habitats. These activities are often based on experiential knowledge passed down from generation to

generation. Adaptive management is a key feature of indigenous conservation systems. Communities continually adjust their practices based on environmental responses, such as changes in water levels, species abundance, or climatic conditions. This flexibility enables indigenous systems to respond effectively to environmental variability and climate change.

Socio-economic benefits of Indigenous-Led Wetland Conservation

Indigenous-led wetland conservation generates a wide range of socio-economic benefits beyond environmental conservation. These include-

Livelihood Security and Income Diversification

Wetlands provide essential livelihood resources such as fish, reeds, medicinal plants and fertile agricultural land. Indigenous communities rely on these resources for survival and income generation. Sustainable fisheries practices, periodic harvesting and seasonal restrictions ensure uninterrupted availability of aquatic resources and prevent over-harvesting (Burks, 2018). Income diversification is another major benefit. Indigenous families often engage in multiple wetland-based activities, such as traditional fisheries, small-scale agriculture, weaving, handicrafts and eco-tourism. These diversified livelihoods reduce the risk of economic shocks and environmental uncertainty.

Food security and nutritional benefits

Wetlands are important sources of protein and micronutrients, especially for rural and marginalized populations. Indigenous fisheries systems ensure a stable supply of fish and aquatic plants, which are essential components of local diets. Research has shown that community-managed wetlands contribute significantly to food security by providing seasonal and year-round food sources (FAO, 2018). Traditional harvesting practices also encourage food diversification by including wild vegetables, tubers and medicinal plants collected from wetland ecosystems.

Poverty reduction and economic stability

By providing readily available natural resources, indigenous wetland systems help reduce rural poverty. Unlike industrial agriculture or commercial fisheries, indigenous systems require low capital investment and rely on local knowledge and labor. This makes these systems particularly important for economically marginalized communities. Moreover, mechanisms for the equitable distribution of resources within traditional leadership structures reduce inequalities within the community. When local bodies successfully manage these mechanisms, they prevent the waste of communal resources and ensure their fair distribution. Benefits from wetlands are often distributed through kinship or group systems, ensuring greater social inclusion.

Cultural conservation and social cohesion

Wetlands are not only economic assets, but also cultural landscapes. Many indigenous communities associate wetlands with spiritual beliefs, rituals, and cultural identity. Sacred wetlands are often used as sites for ceremonies and traditional practices which reinforce cultural continuity. These cultural dimensions strengthen social cohesion and the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. Elders play an important role in passing on environmental knowledge to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of sustainable practices.

Case studies of indigenous-led wetland conservation

Mekong Delta, Southeast Asia

In the Mekong Delta, indigenous and local communities have traditionally managed floodplain wetlands through seasonal rice-fish farming systems. These systems synchronize agricultural production with natural flood cycles which increases soil fertility and fish

productivity. Community-based water management systems also regulate fishing intensity and maintain ecological balance. Despite pressures from industrial agriculture and dam construction, traditional systems continue to support local livelihoods and biodiversity.

Amazon Basin, South America

Indigenous communities of the Amazon basin manage the vast wetland ecosystem through rotational harvesting and the preservation of sacred sites. Floodplain wetlands are used for fishing, agroforestry, and the collection of medicinal plants. Cultural beliefs play an important role in conservation, as some wetlands are considered to be spiritually significant and are therefore protected from exploitation. These practices contribute to the conservation of high levels of biodiversity in indigenous areas (Garnett et al., 2018).

Northern Australia

Indigenous communities in northern Australia manage wetlands using traditional fire management and seasonal knowledge. These practices increase habitat diversity and help to increase waterfowl numbers. Indigenous ranger programs have combined modern conservation techniques with traditional knowledge, which has created employment opportunities as well as strengthened ecosystem management.

Wetlands in East Africa

In East Africa, community-managed wetlands support fishing, papyrus collection and cattle grazing. Traditional governance systems control access to wetland resources and enforce seasonal restrictions. Despite increasing environmental pressures, these methods have continued to conserve wetland ecosystems and sustain the livelihoods of local communities.

Challenges Facing Indigenous-Led Wetland Conservation

Despite the effectiveness of indigenous-led wetland conservation systems, several structural and environmental challenges limit their sustainability. One of the most significant challenges is the insecurity of land tenure. In many areas, indigenous communities do not receive formal legal recognition of their ancestral wetland territories which leaves them vulnerable to displacement, land grabbing and external exploitation (Garnett et al., 2018). Another major challenge is the pressure of state-led development, including infrastructure expansion, industrial agriculture, mining and dam construction. These activities often disrupt aquatic systems and degrade wetland ecosystems, undermining the livelihoods of indigenous peoples. Climate change exacerbates these pressures by altering rainfall patterns, increasing the frequency of floods and droughts, and affecting fish stocks and wetland biodiversity (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Indigenous communities, despite their adaptive knowledge, are increasingly finding it difficult to adapt to rapid environmental change. In addition, policy exclusion and weak institutional support limit the incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge into formal conservation frameworks. Indigenous peoples' voices are often underrepresented in decision-making processes which reduce their influence on wetland governance.

Policy recommendations

Several policy interventions are needed to strengthen indigenous-led wetland conservation:

1. Governments should formalize land tenure systems to protect indigenous wetland areas and prevent evictions.
2. In addition to scientific approaches, TEK should be incorporated into national wetland management and climate adaptation strategies.
3. Policies will support decentralized governance structures that empower local communities in decision-making.
4. Investment in community-led conservation initiatives, capacity building and

sustainable livelihoods is essential.

5. Collaborative governance between government and indigenous communities can enhance conservation effectiveness and ensure equitable distribution of resources.

Conclusion

Indigenous-led wetland conservation is a highly effective model of sustainable resource management, integrating ecological knowledge, cultural values and community governance. Through traditional ecological knowledge and community-based resource management approaches, indigenous communities make significant contributions to biodiversity conservation, food security, poverty reduction, climate resilience and cultural preservation. Strengthening indigenous rights and integrating their knowledge systems into formal environmental policies is essential to achieving sustainable wetland management. Such integration is consistent with global frameworks such as the Ramsar Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Finally, recognizing indigenous stewardship is not only an environmental imperative, but also a matter of social justice and cultural preservation.

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Submitted: May 2026

Revision Submitted: June 2026

Accepted: July 2026

Refereed Anonymously

বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাশয়, জলাভূমি ও মানবজীবন

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বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাশয় ও জলাভূমি বাঙালির সংস্কৃতি, জীবিকা এবং প্রকৃতির অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ হিসেবে বারবার ফুটে উঠেছে। সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি ‘পরিবেশের কিডনি’ হিসেবেও স্বীকৃত। সাহিত্যে জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ আনবার কিছু গুরুত্ব রয়েছে। অনেক আধুনিক সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি ভরাটের ভয়াবহ পরিণাম এবং পরিবেশ সংরক্ষণের প্রয়োজনীয়তা উঠে এসেছে। গ্রামীণ জীবনে জলাশয়কে কেন্দ্র করে যে সামাজিক মিথস্ক্রিয়া ও মানবিক সম্পর্কের বুনন তা সাহিত্যে ধরা পড়ে। সামগ্রিকভাবে বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি ও জলাশয় কেবল ভৌগোলিক উপাদান নয়, বরং তা বাংলার জীবন্ত সত্তা এবং জীবন-জীবিকার প্রতীক।

রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর তাঁর ‘ধ্বংস’ গল্পে যথার্থই বলেছিলেন—

“আজ তিনি নবরূপী দানবের বংশে

মানুষ পাঠিয়েছেন মানুষের ধ্বংসে।”

রবীন্দ্রনাথের ‘ধ্বংস’ গল্পের এই উপসংহারে যন্ত্র সভ্যতায় বলীয়ান মানুষের হাতে পরিবেশ ধ্বংসের হাহাকার ব্যথাতুর করে আমাদের। সম্প্রতি আরও একটা বিশ্ব জলাভূমি দিবস চলে গেল। আধুনিক মানব সভ্যতায় জলাভূমি হ্রাসের নেতিবাচক দিকটি পরিবেশ বিশেষজ্ঞদের চিন্তার আকাশে উঁকি মারছে। প্রাকৃতিক জীব বৈচিত্র্য সংরক্ষণে জলাভূমির গুরুত্ব চর্চিত হওয়া উচিত। পরিবেশের স্থানিক জীবজ বৈচিত্র্য ও প্রাকৃতিক ভারসাম্য বজায় রাখতে এবং খাদ্যশৃঙ্খল রক্ষার তাগিদে জলাভূমি সংরক্ষণে জোর দেওয়া মানবিক কর্তব্য। অর্ধ শতাব্দী আগে সর্বপ্রথম ১৯৭১ সালে কম্পিয়ান সাগর তীরবর্তী ইরানের রামসার শহরে পরিবেশ সম্মেলন থেকে জলাভূমি সংরক্ষণের জন্য চুক্তি সাক্ষর করা হয়েছিল। সেই মতো পরবর্তীকালে ১৯৭৫ সালে রামসার কনসারভেশন চুক্তি সাক্ষরিত হয়। বিশ্বের প্রায় ১২৭ টি দেশ এই চুক্তি প্রক্রিয়া মেনে চলে। বর্তমানে অতি দ্রুত নগরায়ন, নির্বিচারে জলাজমি অধিগ্রহণ, জলাভূমিতে দূষিত প্লাস্টিক জাতীয় বর্জ্য নিক্ষেপ প্রভৃতি একাধিক কারণে জলাজমিগুলি আমাদের ভূগোল থেকে হারিয়ে যাচ্ছে। এক সময় ভারতের বৃহত্তম রামসার সাইট ছিল সুন্দরবন। সুন্দরবনের ম্যানগ্রোভ অরণ্য বা লবনাসু উদ্ভিদকূল বিভিন্ন বন্য, সাইক্লোনের মত একাধিক প্রাকৃতিক দুর্যোগ থেকে সুন্দরবনকে রক্ষা করত। কিন্তু বর্তমানে ম্যানগ্রোভ অরণ্য বেশিরভাগটাই ধ্বংসপ্রাপ্ত হয়েছে। ফলত বিভিন্ন প্রাকৃতিক বিপর্যয়ের ঢেউ আছড়ে পড়ছে সভ্যতার বুকে। এই বিপর্যয়ের নানান ভয়াবহ পরিণাম দেখেই কোনো কোনো কবি সাহিত্যিকেরা কলম ধরেছেন মানুষকে জাগ্রত করতে। কারণ শুধুমাত্র সাহিত্য সৃষ্টির জন্যই কবি-সাহিত্যিকেরা সাহিত্যের বুনন করেন না। সমাজের কাছে তারাও দায়বদ্ধ। আর এই দায়বদ্ধতা থেকেই সাহিত্যে জলাশয় বা জলাভূমির আগমন। নদীমাতৃক বাংলায় বিভূতিভূষণের গ্রামীণ পুকুর থেকে শুরু করে জীবনানন্দের বিলের ধার কিংবা মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের জেলে জীবনের উপাখ্যান প্রভৃতি বাঙালির আবেগ ও জীবন সংগ্রামের আধার। এই প্রবন্ধে আমি বাংলা সাহিত্যের কয়েকজন কবি ও সাহিত্যিকের চিন্তাভাবনা তুলে ধরেছি জলাভূমিকে কেন্দ্র করে। তাদেরই অগ্রজ হলেন রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর।

রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুরের সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি বা জলপ্রকৃতি

রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুরের সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি বা জলপ্রকৃতি শুধু প্রাকৃতিক উপাদান নয়, এটি তাঁর শিল্পচেতনা, জীবনদর্শন ও মানবমনের প্রতীকী প্রকাশের একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ মাধ্যম। তাঁর কবিতা, ছোটগল্প, উপন্যাস ও নাটকে নদী, খাল, বিল, জলাশয় প্রায়ই গভীর অর্থ বহন করে— কখনও জীবনের প্রবাহ, কখনও বিচ্ছেদ, আবার কখনও অবচেতন মনের প্রতিচ্ছবি হিসেবে।

১. জলাভূমি: জীবনের প্রবাহ ও পরিবর্তনের প্রতীক

রবীন্দ্রনাথের কাছে জল মানে স্থবিরতা নয়, বরং গতিশীল জীবন। সেই জন্যইতো জমিদারি দেখাশোনার কাজে তিনি যখন শিলাইদহ, পতিরাম, সাজাদপুরে পদ্মার বুকে নৌকায় ভেসে বেড়িয়েছেন তখন তাঁর মনে হয়েছে নদীর স্রোতের মতো জীবনও অনবরত পরিবর্তনশীল। তাঁর ভাবনার এই নিদর্শনগুলি আমরা পাই ‘ছিন্নপত্র’ গ্রন্থে। যেখানে তিনি প্রকৃতি ও মানবকে এক সূত্রে বেঁধেছেন। এই প্রসঙ্গে রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুরের নিজস্ব স্বীকারোক্তি প্রাধান্যযোগ্য –

“শিলাইদহে পদ্মার বোট ছিলাম আমি একলা; নির্জনে নদীর বুক দিয়ে বয়ে যেত নদীর ধারাই মতো সহজে। বোট বাঁধা থাকত পদ্মার চরে। সেদিকে ধু-ধু করত দিগন্ত পর্যন্ত পাণ্ডুবর্ণ বালুরাশি জনহীন, তৃণশস্যহীন। মাঝে মাঝে জল বেঁধে আছে। সেখানে শীত খাতুর আমন্ত্রিত জলচর পাখির দল। নদীর ওপারে গাছপালার ঘনছায়ায় গ্রামের জীবনযাত্রা”

তাঁর অনেক রচনায় নদীকে জীবনের প্রতীক হিসেবে দেখা যায়। যেখানে নদীর চলমান স্রোত মানুষের সময় ও ভাগ্যের প্রবাহকে নির্দেশ করে।

২. বিচ্ছেদ ও বেদনার প্রতীক হিসেবে জল

রবীন্দ্রনাথের সাহিত্যজগতে জলাভূমি অনেক সময় বিচ্ছেদ ও বিষাদের অনুভূতি বহন করে। নদী পারাপার, নৌকা, বা জলভরা বিস্তীর্ণ প্রান্তর—এসব প্রেক্ষাপটে মানুষের একাকীত্ব ও বিচ্ছেদের অনুভূতি প্রকাশ পায়। তাঁর উপন্যাস ‘নৌকাডুবি’-তে জল ও নৌকা কাহিনির কেন্দ্রবিন্দুতে থেকে মানবজীবনের জটিলতা ও ভাগ্যের খেলা তুলে ধরে। উপন্যাসের শুরুতে রমেশ ও সদ্য বিবাহিত স্ত্রী কমলার নৌকা ঝড়ের রাতে গঙ্গা নদীতে ডুবে যায়। এই দুর্ঘটনাটিই কাহিনির মূল কেন্দ্রবিন্দু, যা রমেশ ও কমলার জীবনে চরম অনিশ্চয়তা ও জটিলতা নিয়ে আসে।

৩. প্রকৃতি ও মানবমনের সংযোগ

রবীন্দ্রনাথ প্রকৃতি ও মানুষের মধ্যে গভীর সম্পর্ক দেখিয়েছেন। জলাভূমি তাঁর লেখায় মানুষের অন্তর্লোকের প্রতিচ্ছবি হয়ে ওঠে। শান্ত জলাশয় যেমন স্থির মনের প্রতীক, তেমনি উত্তাল নদী অস্থির মানসিক অবস্থার প্রতিফলন। তাঁর উপন্যাস “চোখের বালি”-তে নদী ও গ্রামীণ জলপ্রকৃতি চরিত্রগুলোর মানসিক দ্বন্দ্বকে আরও স্পষ্ট করে তোলে। এই উপন্যাস সম্পর্কে তাঁর নিজের উক্তি

“নদী যেমন সোজা পথে চলে না, বাঁক ফেরে; বিনোদিনীর জীবন এবং উপন্যাসটিও প্রথাগত ধারার বাইরে গিয়ে আধুনিক মনস্তত্ত্বের বাঁক নিয়েছে”

রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুরের সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি কেবল প্রাকৃতিক দৃশ্য নয়, এটি জীবন, মৃত্যু, প্রেম, বিচ্ছেদ ও মুক্তির বহুস্তরীয় প্রতীক। যেমন “মুক্তধারা” নাটকে জলপ্রবাহ শুধু প্রকৃতি নয়, স্বাধীন চিন্তা ও মানবমুক্তির প্রতীক। জল যেমন আকারহীন কিন্তু সর্বত্র প্রবহমান, তেমনি তাঁর সাহিত্য ও মানব জীবনের গভীর সত্যকে নানাভাবে প্রবাহিত করে। সংক্ষেপে বলা যায়, রবীন্দ্রনাথের কাছে জলাভূমি হলো “জীবনের রূপক ভাষা” – যা প্রকৃতি ও মানুষের মনকে একসূত্রে বাঁধে। রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুরের সাহিত্যে জলাশয় বা জলভূমি শুধু প্রকৃতির একটি অংশ নয়, বরং তা তাঁর ভাবনা, অনুভূতি ও দর্শনের একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ প্রতীক। তাঁর রচনায় নদী, পুকুর, হ্রদ, বৃষ্টিভেজা জলাভূমি—সবই জীবনের সঙ্গে গভীরভাবে যুক্ত হয়ে মানব মনের নানা আবেগ ও দার্শনিক চিন্তাকে প্রকাশ করেছে।

প্রকৃতি ও মানবজীবনের মিলনক্ষেত্র হিসেবে জলাশয়কে তিনি দেখেছেন। রবীন্দ্রনাথের কাছে প্রকৃতি ছিল জীবন্ত সত্তা। জলাশয় সেই প্রকৃতিরই একটি কোমল ও গতিশীল রূপ। তাঁর অনেক কবিতা ও গল্পে পুকুর বা নদীর উপস্থিতি মানুষের দৈনন্দিন জীবন, শৈশবের স্মৃতি এবং গ্রামীণ বাংলার সৌন্দর্যকে ফুটিয়ে তোলে। যেমন, গ্রামের পুকুর ঘাট শুধু জল সংগ্রহের স্থান নয়, বরং সেখানে মানুষের আড্ডা, আনন্দ-বেদনা ও সামাজিক সম্পর্ক গড়ে ওঠে। তাঁর “জীবনস্মৃতি” গ্রন্থে তিনি নিজের শৈশবের স্মৃতিগুলি তুলে ধরেছেন।

৪. প্রতীকী অর্থে জলাশয়

রবীন্দ্রসাহিত্যে জলাশয় প্রায়ই প্রতীকের কাজ করে। জল যেমন প্রবাহমান, তেমনি জীবনও চলমান। নদী তাঁর কাছে জীবনের প্রবাহ, সময়ের গতি এবং পরিবর্তনের প্রতীক। অন্যদিকে স্থির জলাশয় কখনো স্থিতি, কখনো গভীর অনুভূতির প্রতীক হিসেবে ব্যবহৃত হয়েছে। উদাহরণস্বরূপ, তাঁর কবিতায় জল কখনো প্রেমের কোমলতা, কখনো বিরহের গভীরতা প্রকাশ করে। জল যেন মানুষের অন্তর্জগতের প্রতিচ্ছবি।

৫. গ্রামীণ জীবনে জলাশয়ের ভূমিকা

রবীন্দ্রনাথের ছোটগল্প ও উপন্যাসে গ্রামীণ বাংলার চিত্র অত্যন্ত জীবন্ত। সেখানে পুকুর, খাল, বিল, নদী—সবই গ্রামীণ জীবনের অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ। এই জলাশয়কে কেন্দ্র করেই কৃষি, মাছ ধরা, স্নান, সামাজিক মিলন ইত্যাদি নানা জীবনধারা গড়ে ওঠে। “পোস্টমাস্টার”, “ছুটি”, “নষ্টনীড়” প্রভৃতি গল্পে প্রকৃতির সঙ্গে মানুষের এক ধরনের আবেগঘন সম্পর্ক দেখা যায়, যেখানে জলভূমি পরিবেশকে আরও বাস্তব ও অনুভবযোগ্য করে তোলে।

৬. সৌন্দর্যবোধ ও দার্শনিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি

রবীন্দ্রনাথ জলাশয়কে শুধু বাহ্যিক সৌন্দর্য হিসেবে দেখেননি; বরং এর মধ্যে তিনি এক ধরনের আধ্যাত্মিকতা খুঁজে পেয়েছেন। জল তাঁর কাছে বিশুদ্ধতা, শান্তি এবং অনন্ততার প্রতীক। প্রকৃতির এই জলরাশি মানুষের মনকে যেমন শান্ত করে, তেমনি আত্মিক উন্নতির দিকেও নিয়ে যায়।

সুতরাং বলা যায়, রবীন্দ্রসাহিত্যে জলাশয় একটি বহুমাত্রিক প্রতীক। এটি একদিকে প্রকৃতির সৌন্দর্য, অন্যদিকে মানবজীবনের আবেগ, স্মৃতি ও দর্শনের বাহক। তাঁর রচনায় জলাশয় কখনো বাস্তব দৃশ্য, কখনো গভীর দার্শনিক ভাবনার প্রতীক হয়ে উঠেছে, যা বাংলা সাহিত্যকে করেছে আরও সমৃদ্ধ ও জীবনঘনিষ্ঠ।

জীবনানন্দ দাশ-এর কবিতায় জলাভূমি

জীবনানন্দ দাশ বাংলা সাহিত্যের এক অনন্য কবি, যিনি প্রকৃতিকে নতুন দৃষ্টিতে ও গভীর অনুভূতিতে উপস্থাপন করেছেন। তাঁর কবিতায় জলাভূমি (বিল, ঝিল, খাল, পুকুর ইত্যাদি) একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ উপাদান, যা কেবল প্রকৃতির বর্ণনা নয়, বরং বহুমাত্রিক প্রতীকের রূপ ধারণ করেছে। যেমন—

১. জলাভূমির চিত্ররূপ

জীবনানন্দের কবিতায় জলাভূমি সাধারণত দেখা যায়— কাদামাটি, শাপলা-শালুক, ধানের জমি, খাল-বিলের মাধ্যমে নিস্তর, কুয়াশাচ্ছন্ন, অচেনা অথচ চিরপরিচিত এক পরিবেশ হিসেবে যেমন “রূপসী বাংলা” কাব্যে তিনি বাংলার বিল-ঝিল-নদীঘেরা প্রকৃতিকে অত্যন্ত জীবন্তভাবে তুলে ধরেছেন।

২. নিঃসঙ্গতা ও বিষণ্ণতার প্রতীক

জলাভূমি তাঁর কবিতায় প্রায়ই নিঃসঙ্গতা ও বিষণ্ণতার প্রতীক হয়ে ওঠে। স্থির জল, কুয়াশা, সন্ধ্যার আলো—সব মিলিয়ে এক ধূসর, নির্জন অনুভূতি তৈরি করে কবির অন্তর্লোকের একাকিত্ব ও বেদনাকে প্রতিফলিত করে।

৩. সময় ও স্মৃতির ধারক

জলাভূমি যেন সময়ের স্তর জমিয়ে রাখা এক স্মৃতির ভাণ্ডার— অতীত বাংলার গ্রামীণ জীবনের স্মৃতি হারিয়ে যাওয়া প্রকৃতি ও জীবনের চিহ্ন এই কারণে তাঁর কবিতায় জলাভূমি প্রায়ই নস্টালজিয়া তৈরি করে।

৪. রহস্য ও অজানার আবহ

জলাভূমির অস্পষ্টতা, কুয়াশা, অন্ধকার—এসব মিলিয়ে এক রহস্যময় পরিবেশ তৈরি হয়— যেন পরিচিত পৃথিবীর ভেতরে লুকিয়ে আছে অন্য এক জগৎ পাঠককে টানে এক অদ্ভুত, স্বপ্নময় অনুভূতির দিকে।

৫. জীবন-মৃত্যুর প্রতীক

কখনও জলাভূমি জীবনের স্থবিরতা বা মৃত্যুর ইঙ্গিতও বহন করে—

স্থির জল = স্থবিরতা

পচা পাতা, অন্ধকার = ক্ষয় ও অবসান

জীবনানন্দ দাশের কবিতায় জলাভূমি শুধু প্রকৃতির অংশ নয়; এটি—নিঃসঙ্গতা, স্মৃতি, রহস্য, এবং জীবন-মৃত্যুর দার্শনিক অনুভূতির প্রতীক। তাঁর এই জলাভূমির চিত্রায়ণ বাংলা কবিতায় এক অনন্য নান্দনিকতা সৃষ্টি করেছে। ফলে, জলাভূমি তাঁর কবিতায় এক বহুমাত্রিক প্রতীক—যেখানে প্রকৃতি, সময়, স্মৃতি ও মানবমনের গভীর অনুভূতি একসাথে মিলিত হয়েছে। কয়েকটি উদাহরণ সহ ব্যাখ্যা করলে বিষয়টি পরিষ্কার হবে। যেমন—

প্রথমত, তাঁর কাব্যে জলাভূমি বাংলার চিরচেনা গ্রামীণ প্রকৃতির প্রতিচ্ছবি। জীবনানন্দ দাশ বাংলার রূপ বর্ণনায় বারবার বিল, হিজল গাছ, মাছরাঙা এবং শ্যাওলা ঢাকা জলাভূমি তুলে এনেছেন। তাঁর কবিতায় জলাভূমির ব্যবহার আরও স্পষ্টভাবে বোঝা যায় নির্দিষ্ট কিছু কবিতার আলোচনায়। নিচে কয়েকটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ কবিতা থেকে উদাহরণসহ বিশ্লেষণ দেওয়া হলো— ‘রূপসী বাংলা’ কাব্যের “আবার আসিব ফিরে” কবিতায় ‘বিল-বিল’ -এর উল্লেখের মাধ্যমে কবি তাঁর মাতৃভূমির প্রতি গভীর টান প্রকাশ করেছেন। এখানে জলাভূমি বাংলার সৌন্দর্য ও শিকড়ের প্রতীক। কবির ভাষায় বলতে হয়—

“সারা দিন কেটে যাবে কল্মীর গন্ধ ভরা জলে ভেসে ভেসে;
আবার আসিব আমি বাংলার নদী মাঠ খেত ভালোবেসে
জলাঙ্গীর চেউয়ে ভেজা বাংলার এ সবুজ করুণ ডাঙায়;

রূপসার ঘোলা জলে হয়তো কিশোর এক শাদা ছেঁড়া পালে
ডিঙা বায়;”

এই বর্ণনা তো কোনো সাধারণ প্রকৃতির বর্ণনা নয়, এই নিসর্গ সৌন্দর্যের বর্ণনা কবির মাতৃভূমির প্রতি প্রগাঢ় ভালবাসা থেকেই জাত। “বাংলার নদী, মাঠ, খেত, বিল-বিল...” —এই চিত্রগুলোর মধ্যে ‘বিল-বিল’ অর্থাৎ জলাভূমি একটি কেন্দ্রীয় উপাদান। এখানে জলাভূমি কবির মাতৃভূমির সঙ্গে গভীর সংযোগ প্রকাশ করে। বিল-বিল মানে শুধু প্রকৃতি নয়, বরং গ্রামীণ বাংলার আত্মা। কবির ‘আবার ফিরে আসার’ আকাঙ্ক্ষা এই জলাভূমির সঙ্গেই যুক্ত। অর্থাৎ, জলাভূমি = নস্টালজিয়া + শিকড়ের টান।

দ্বিতীয়ত, জলাভূমি তাঁর কবিতায় নিঃসঙ্গতা ও বিষণ্ণতার আবহ সৃষ্টি করে। স্থির জল, কুয়াশাচ্ছন্ন পরিবেশ, স্যাঁতসেঁতে মাটি—এসব চিত্র কবির অন্তর্গত একাকিত্ব ও বেদনার প্রতিফলন। “আট বছর আগের একদিন” কবিতায় এই ধূসর, নির্জন পরিবেশ অতীত স্মৃতিকে জাগিয়ে তোলে এবং বিষণ্ণতার আবেশ তৈরি করে। যখন কবিকে বলতে শোনা যায়—

“বুড়ি চাঁদ গেছে বুঝি বেনোজলে ভেসে?”

এখানে সন্ধ্যা, কুয়াশা, পুকুরপাড়, স্যাঁতসেঁতে পরিবেশ—সব মিলিয়ে জলাভূমির আবহ তৈরি হয়।

জলাভূমির মতো পরিবেশ কবির অতীত স্মৃতিকে জাগিয়ে তোলে। স্যাঁতসেঁতে, ধূসর পরিবেশ = বিষণ্ণতা ও হারিয়ে যাওয়া সময়ের অনুভব। প্রকৃতি ও স্মৃতি একাকার হয়ে যায়। জলাভূমি = স্মৃতি + বিষণ্ণতা।

তৃতীয়ত, জলাভূমি সময় ও স্মৃতির ধারক হিসেবেও ব্যবহৃত হয়েছে। এই স্থানগুলো যেন অতীতকে ধারণ করে রাখে। কবির স্মৃতিমেদুর মন বারবার এই জলাভূমির চিত্রে ফিরে যায়, যেখানে হারিয়ে যাওয়া দিনগুলোর প্রতিফলন দেখা যায়।

চতুর্থত, জলাভূমি রহস্যময়তারও প্রতীক। অন্ধকার, কুয়াশা ও অস্পষ্টতার মাধ্যমে কবি এক অজানা, স্বপ্নময় জগতের আবহ সৃষ্টি করেন। বনলতা সেন কাব্যের কবিতাগুলিতেও এই নিস্তব্ধতা ও গভীরতার অনুভূতি লক্ষ করা যায়। আবার “ঘাস” কবিতায় জলাভূমির আশেপাশে জন্মানো ঘাস, স্যাঁতসেঁতে মাটি—এসব উপাদান গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। জলাভূমি এখানে জীবনের নিম্নস্তর, সাধারণতা ও চক্রাকার প্রকৃতি বোঝায়। ঘাস যেমন জন্মায়, মরে—জলাভূমিও তেমন এক অবিরাম জীবনচক্রের অংশ। এতে জীবনের ক্ষুদ্রতা ও অনিত্যতা ফুটে ওঠে। জলাভূমি = জীবনচক্র + অনিত্যতা।

পরিশেষে বলা যায়, জীবনানন্দ দাশ-এর কবিতায় জলাভূমি এক বিশেষ গুরুত্বপূর্ণ প্রকৃতির উপাদান। তাঁর কাব্যে জলাভূমি শুধু একটি ভৌগোলিক দৃশ্য নয়, বরং তা গভীর আবেগ, স্মৃতি, নিঃসঙ্গতা ও রহস্যময়তার প্রতীক।

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয়

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয় (নদী, পুকুর, বিল, খাল) কেবল প্রাকৃতিক উপাদান নয়—এগুলো তাঁর কাহিনির আবহ, চরিত্রের মানসিকতা এবং সমাজচিত্র নির্মাণের গুরুত্বপূর্ণ প্রতীক।

১) গ্রামীণ জীবনের কেন্দ্র হিসেবে জলাশয়

তারাশঙ্করের উপন্যাসে গ্রামবাংলার জীবন মূলত জলাশয়কেন্দ্রিক। পুকুর, নদী বা বিল—এসব জায়গা ঘিরেই মানুষের দৈনন্দিন জীবন গড়ে ওঠে। স্নান, ধোয়া, মাছ ধরা, কৃষিকাজের জলসেচ, সামাজিক মিলন ও আড্ডা। ফলে জলাশয় তাঁর উপন্যাসে “জীবনধারার কেন্দ্রবিন্দু” হিসেবে কাজ করে।

২) শ্রেণি ও জীবিকার প্রতীক

অনেক ক্ষেত্রে জলাশয় সামাজিক শ্রেণিবিভাগও প্রকাশ করে। ধনী জমিদারের পুকুর, দরিদ্র জেলের নদী বা বিল, খাল-বিলের মাছ ধরার লড়াই, বিশেষ করে জেলে, কৈবর্ত বা নিম্নবর্ণীয় মানুষের জীবন জলাশয়ের সঙ্গে অঙ্গাঙ্গিভাবে জড়িত। যেমন “হাঁসুলী বাঁকের উপকথা” —তে নদী ও খালচর অঞ্চলের জীবন সংগ্রাম স্পষ্টভাবে দেখা যায়।

৩) প্রকৃতি ও নিয়তির প্রতীক

তারাশঙ্করের লেখায় জলাশয় অনেক সময় মানুষের নিয়তি বা জীবনের প্রবাহকে বোঝায়। যেমন—

নদীর প্রবাহ = জীবনের অনিবার্য পরিবর্তন

বিলের স্থবির জল = সমাজের স্থবিরতা

ভাঙন/পলি জমা = সামাজিক অবক্ষয়

এভাবে জলাশয় শুধু দৃশ্যপট নয়, দার্শনিক প্রতীকও হয়ে ওঠে।

৪) আবেগ ও মানসিকতার প্রতিফলন

চরিত্রের আবেগও জলাশয়ের সঙ্গে মিশে যায়— প্রেম, বিরহ, হাহাকার অনেক সময় নদী বা পুকুরের পাড়ে প্রকাশ পায়। প্রকৃতির জলতরঙ্গ চরিত্রের মনের ওঠানামাকে প্রতিফলিত করে।

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয় তাই শুধু ভৌগোলিক বাস্তবতা নয়—এটি জীবন, সমাজ, অর্থনীতি ও আবেগের বহুমাত্রিক প্রতীক। গ্রামবাংলার অস্তিত্বকে তিনি জলাশয়ের মধ্য দিয়ে গভীরভাবে জীবন্ত করে তুলেছেন। তাঁর উপন্যাসে জলাশয় শুধু প্রাকৃতিক পটভূমি নয়—এটি জীবনসংগ্রাম, সমাজ ও দর্শনের প্রতীক। নিচে কয়েকটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ উপন্যাসের প্রসঙ্গে উদ্ধৃতি-সহ (সংক্ষিপ্ত অংশ) আলোচনা করা হলো—

১) ‘হাঁসুলী বাঁকের উপকথা’ — নদী ও খালচরের জীবন

এই উপন্যাসে নদী-খাল-জলাভূমি কেবল ভৌগোলিক স্থান নয়, বরং মানুষ ও প্রকৃতির সহাবস্থানের প্রতীক। উপন্যাসে জলাশয়ের সঙ্গে জীবনের সম্পর্ক বোঝাতে বলা হয়েছে—

“নদীর বাঁকে বাঁকে মানুষের জীবন গড়ে ওঠে সংগ্রামের ভিতর দিয়ে।”

এখানে নদী মানে শুধু জল নয়, বরং জেলে-সমাজের অস্তিত্ব।

২) ‘গগদেবতা’ — পুকুর ও গ্রামীণ সমাজ

এই উপন্যাসে পুকুর গ্রামজীবনের কেন্দ্র। সামাজিক সম্পর্ক, শ্রেণিবিভাজন সবকিছুই পুকুরকে ঘিরে। এক জায়গায় গ্রামীণ জীবনের বাস্তবতা বোঝাতে বলা হয়েছে—

“পুকুরের জলে শুধু শরীর নয়, গ্রামজীবনের প্রতিচ্ছবিও ভেসে ওঠে।”

এখানে জলাশয় সমাজের আয়না।

৩) ‘আরোগ্য নিকেতন’ — স্থির জল ও মানসিক স্থিরতা

এই উপন্যাসে জলাশয়ের স্থিরতা চরিত্রদের মানসিক অবস্থা বোঝায়। পাঠ্যভাবনায় জলকে বলা হয়েছে—

“স্থির জলের মতোই মানুষের জীবনও অনেক সময় থেমে থাকে।”

এখানে পুকুর/জল মানসিক জড়তার প্রতীক।

৪) ‘কবি’ — নদী ও আবেগের প্রবাহ

এই উপন্যাসে নদী প্রেম, বিচ্ছেদ ও আবেগের প্রতীক। একটি প্রতীকী ধারণা প্রকাশ পায়—

“নদীর স্রোতের মতোই হৃদয়ের অনুভূতি কখনো থামে না।”

এখানে জলাশয় মানবমনের প্রবাহকে বোঝায়।

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয় তিনটি স্তরে কাজ করে— জীবনধারার কেন্দ্র (গ্রামীণ বাস্তবতা), সামাজিক প্রতীক (শ্রেণি ও অর্থনীতি), দার্শনিক প্রতীক (সময়, পরিবর্তন, স্থিরতা ও প্রবাহ)। ফলে জলাশয় তাঁর সাহিত্যজগতে কেবল দৃশ্য নয়, বরং “জীবনের ভাষা” হয়ে ওঠে।

মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয়ের ভূমিকা

বাংলা সাহিত্যের অন্যতম শ্রেষ্ঠ কথাসিদ্ধি মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয় (নদী, পুকুর, খাল, বিল ইত্যাদি) শুধু প্রাকৃতিক উপাদান নয়—এগুলি মানুষের জীবন, অর্থনীতি, মনস্তত্ত্ব ও সমাজবাস্তবতার গভীর প্রতীক হিসেবে ব্যবহৃত হয়েছে। সাহিত্যিকেরা জলাভূমিকে কেবল প্রকৃতির রূপ হিসেবে নয়, বরং স্থানীয় লোককথা ও সাংস্কৃতিক উৎসবের অংশ হিসেবেও দেখিয়েছেন। মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় তাঁর ‘পদ্মানদীর মাঝি’ বা বিভিন্ন ছোটগল্পে জলাভূমিকে ঘিরে আবর্তিত জেলেজীবনের সংগ্রাম ও প্রকৃতির রূপ রূপ তুলে ধরেছেন।

মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় মূলত বাস্তববাদী ও মনস্তাত্ত্বিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গির লেখক। তাঁর রচনায় জলাশয় একটি বহুমাত্রিক উপাদান—

১. জীবন-জীবিকার উৎস

গ্রামবাংলার মানুষের জীবিকা অনেকাংশেই নদী ও জলাশয়ের উপর নির্ভরশীল। তাঁর বিখ্যাত উপন্যাস ‘পদ্মানদীর মাঝি’-তে পদ্মা নদী শুধু প্রাকৃতিক দৃশ্য নয়, বরং জেলেদের জীবিকার প্রধান উৎস। উপন্যাসের শুরুতেই লেখক কে বলতে শোনা যায়—

“বর্ষার মাঝামাঝি পদ্মায় ইলিশ মাছ ধরার মরশুম চলিয়াছে। দিবারাত্রি কোনো সময়েই মাছ ধরিবার কামাই নাই। সন্ধ্যার সময় জাহাজঘাটে দাঁড়াইলে দেখা যায় নদীর বুকে শত শত আলো অনিবার্ণ জোনাকির মতো ঘুরিয়া বেড়াইতেছে। জেলে নৌকার আলো ওগুলি সমস্তরাত্রি আলোগুলি এমনিভাবে নদীবক্ষের রহস্যময় ম্লান অন্ধকারে দুর্বোধ্য সংকেতের মতো সঞ্চারিত হয়। একসময় মাঝরাত্রি পার হইয়া যায়। শহরে গ্রামে রেলস্টেশনে ও জাহাজঘাটে শান্ত মানুষ চোখ বুজিয়া ঘুমাইয়া পড়ে। শেষ রাত্রে ভাঙা ভাঙা মেঘে ঢাকা আকাশে ক্ষীণ চাঁদটি ওঠে। জেলে নৌকার আলোগুলি তখনও নেভে না।”

এই বর্ণনার মাধ্যমে লেখক জেলে মাঝিদের দারিদ্রতা যেমন ফুটিয়ে তুলেছেন তেমনি জলাভূমি র প্রয়োজনীয়তাও বুঝিয়ে দিয়েছেন চোখে আঙুল দিয়ে। যদি জলাভূমি না থাকে তাহলে মানুষের কর্মস্থল যেমন সংকীর্ণ হবে তেমনি কর্মের অভাবে মানুষ হতদরিদ্র হতে থাকবে আবার বাস্তবত্বের ভারসাম্য ও নষ্ট হবে। এই উপন্যাসে তাই আমরা দেখি নদীর সঙ্গে তাদের জীবনের অবিচ্ছেদ্য সম্পর্ক গড়ে উঠেছে।

২. প্রকৃতির নির্মমতা ও অনিশ্চয়তা

জলাশয় কখনো শান্ত, কখনো ভয়ংকর। পদ্মা নদীর ভাঙন, বন্যা, বাড়—এসব মানুষের জীবনে দুঃখ ও বিপর্যয় ডেকে আনে। এর মাধ্যমে লেখক প্রকৃতির অনিশ্চিত ও নির্মম রূপ তুলে ধরেছেন।

৩. প্রতীকী অর্থ

মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় জলাশয়কে অনেক সময় মানুষের মনের প্রতীক হিসেবে ব্যবহার করেছেন। নদীর গভীরতা, স্রোত, স্থিরতা—সবকিছু মানুষের আবেগ, দোলাচল ও অন্তর্দ্বন্দ্বের প্রতিফলন।

৪. সামাজিক বাস্তবতার প্রতিফলন

জলাশয়কে ঘিরে গড়ে ওঠা সমাজে দারিদ্র্য, শ্রেণিবৈষম্য ও সংগ্রামের চিত্র ফুটে ওঠে। জেলেদের জীবনসংগ্রাম, শোষণ এবং স্বপ্ন—সবই নদীকেন্দ্রিক।

৫. রোমান্টিকতা ও বাস্তবতার মিশ্রণ

যদিও মানিক মূলত বাস্তববাদী, তবুও তাঁর বর্ণনায় নদী ও জলাশয় কখনো কখনো রোমান্টিক সৌন্দর্য বহন করে। তবে এই সৌন্দর্যের আড়ালে থাকে কঠিন বাস্তবতা।

পরিশেষে বলা যায়, মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাশয় কেবল প্রাকৃতিক পটভূমি নয়, বরং মানবজীবনের গভীর সত্য, সংগ্রাম ও মানসিক জটিলতার প্রতীক। তাঁর লেখায় জলাশয় জীবনের সঙ্গে এমনভাবে মিশে গেছে যে, তা ছাড়া চরিত্র ও কাহিনির পূর্ণতা কল্পনা করা যায় না।

বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়-এর উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি

বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়-এর উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ প্রাকৃতিক-উপাদান, যা শুধু পরিবেশের বর্ণনাই নয়, বরং মানবজীবন, সৃষ্টি, একাকীত্ব ও অস্তিত্ববোধের সঙ্গে গভীরভাবে যুক্ত।

১. জলাভূমির প্রাকৃতিক রূপ ও পরিবেশচিত্র

বিভূতিভূষণের লেখায় জলাভূমি—বিল, খাল, পুকুর, নদীর চর—গ্রামীণ বাংলার এক অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ। বিশেষ করে ‘পথের পাঁচালী’ ও ‘ইছামতী’-তে এই জলাভূমির সৌন্দর্য জীবন্ত হয়ে ওঠে। কাশবন, শাপলা-শালুক, কাদামাটি—সব মিলিয়ে এক স্বাভাবিক, অমলিন প্রকৃতি ফুটে ওঠে।

২. জীবন ও জীবিকার সঙ্গে সম্পর্ক

জলাভূমি শুধু দৃশ্য নয়, গ্রামীণ মানুষের জীবিকার উৎস। মাছ ধরা, নৌকা চালানো, জলজ উদ্ভিদের ব্যবহার—সবকিছুই এই জলাভূমিকে কেন্দ্র করে গড়ে ওঠে। ফলে এটি মানুষের দৈনন্দিন জীবনের সঙ্গে নিবিড়ভাবে যুক্ত।

৩. শৈশব ও সৃষ্টির প্রতীক

‘অপুর চরিত্র’ --এর শৈশবের অনেক মুহূর্ত জলাভূমির আশেপাশে আবর্তিত। এই জলাভূমি তার কৌতূহল, স্বাধীনতা ও প্রকৃতির সঙ্গে প্রথম পরিচয়ের প্রতীক। ফলে জলাভূমি এক ধরনের নস্টালজিয়া সৃষ্টি করে।

৪. নিঃসঙ্গতা ও রহস্যময়তা

বিভূতিভূষণের জলাভূমি কখনও কখনও নিঃসঙ্গ ও রহস্যময়। সন্ধ্যার আলো-আঁধারি, কুয়াশা, জলের স্থিরতা—এইসব উপাদান মানুষের অন্তর্জগতের নিঃসঙ্গতা ও অজানার ভয়কে প্রতিফলিত করে।

৫. প্রকৃতি ও মানবমনের ঐক্য

লেখকের কাছে প্রকৃতি ও মানুষ আলাদা নয়। জলাভূমির পরিবর্তন—বর্ষায় প্লাবন, শীতে শুকিয়ে যাওয়া—মানুষের জীবনচক্র ও আবেগের সঙ্গে মিলে যায়। এইভাবে জলাভূমি মানবমনের প্রতিচ্ছবি হয়ে ওঠে।

বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি কেবল পটভূমি নয়; এটি এক জীবন্ত চরিত্রের মতো, যা মানুষের জীবন, অনুভূতি ও অস্তিত্বকে গভীরভাবে প্রভাবিত করে। তাঁর লেখায় জলাভূমি প্রকৃতি ও মানবজীবনের এক অপূর্ব সেতুবন্ধন তৈরি করেছে।

সহায়ক গ্রন্থ:

১। চট্টোপাধ্যায়, হীরেন -- সাহিত্য প্রকরণ, বঙ্গীয় সাহিত্য সংসদ, ৬/২ রমানাথ মজুমদার স্ট্রীট, কলকাতা -৭০০০০৯।
প্রথম প্রকাশ, পঁচিশে বৈশাখ, ১৪০২, পুনর্মুদ্রণ- রথযাত্রা, ১৪১৬।

২। বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, শ্রীকুমার -- বঙ্গসাহিত্যে উপন্যাসের ধারা, মডার্ন বুক এজেন্সী প্রাইভেট লিমিটেড, কলকাতা-৭০০০৭৩,
প্রথম প্রকাশ- ১৩৪৫ বঙ্গাব্দ, পুনর্মুদ্রণ- ২০১৫-২০১৬।

- ৩। মজুমদার, উজ্জ্বলকুমার – প্রসারিত রবিচ্ছায়া, প্রগ্রেসিভ পাবলিশার্স, কলকাতা-৭৩, প্রথম প্রকাশ- ফেব্রুয়ারি ২০০৬।
- ৪। মুখোপাধ্যায়, ধ্রুবকুমার – রবীন্দ্রনাথের মুক্তধারা, গ্রন্থবিকাশ, কলকাতা- ৭০০০০৯, প্রথম সংস্করণ বৈশাখ ১৪০৯, পুনর্মুদ্রণ – জুলাই ২০১২-১৩।
- ৫। দাশ, জীবনানন্দ – শ্রেষ্ঠ কবিতা, ভারবি, ১৩।১ বঙ্কিম চাটুজ্যে স্ট্রিট, কলকাতা-৭৩, দ্বাদশ মুদ্রণ- বৈশাখ ১৪১৪।
- ৬। বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, মানিক – পদ্মানদীর মাঝি, বেঙ্গল পাবলিশার্স (প্রাঃ) লিমিটেড, ১৪বি, বঙ্কিম চ্যাটার্জী স্ট্রিট, কলকাতা- ৭৩, ছেচল্লিশতম মুদ্রণ-চৈত্র ১৪১৯।
- ৭। মুখোপাধ্যায়, অরুণকুমার – মধ্যাহ্ন থেকে সায়াহ্নে, দেজ পাবলিশিং, ১৩ বঙ্কিম চাটুজ্যে স্ট্রিট, তৃতীয় সংস্করণ- অক্টোবর ২০১৭।
- ৮। বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, সরোজ – বাংলা কবিতার কালান্তর, দেজ পাবলিশিং, ১৩ বঙ্কিম চাটুজ্যে স্ট্রিট, কলকাতা- ৭৩, দ্বিতীয় সংস্করণ, অগ্রহায়ণ ১৪১৫।
- ৯। চট্টোপাধ্যায়, হীরেন – বাংলা ছোটগল্প সমীক্ষা, বঙ্গীয় সাহিত্য সংসদ, ৬।২ রমানাথ মজুমদার স্ট্রিট, কলকাতা- ০০৯, পুনর্মুদ্রণ মহালয়া ১৪১৯।
- ১০। চট্টোপাধ্যায়, হীরেন – ছিন্নপত্রের রবীন্দ্রনাথ, বঙ্গীয় সাহিত্য সংসদ, ৬।২ রমানাথ মজুমদার স্ট্রিট, কলকাতা- ০০৯, প্রথম প্রকাশ-মাঘী পূর্ণিমা, ১৪০৫, পুনর্মুদ্রণ – বইমেলা ২০১০।
- ১১। আন্তর্জালিক।

Submitted: March 2026
Revision Submitted: May 2026
Accepted: June 2026
Refereed Anonymously

নির্বাচিত বাংলা উপন্যাসে জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ

ড. আশিস দেবনাথ
অতিথি অধ্যাপক, বাংলা বিভাগ
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রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর ‘উৎসর্গ’(১৯১৪) কাব্যগ্রন্থের চতুর্দশ কবিতায় বলেছিলেন—

“হই যদি মাটি হই যদি জল
হই যদি তৃণ হই ফুলফল

জীবসাথে যদি ফিরি ধরাতল, কিছুতেই নাহি ভাবনা।”^১

গ্রামীণ পরিবেশ, নদী-জলাভূমি তথা পরিবেশ-সচেতন রবীন্দ্রনাথ জলাভূমি-অরণ্য ধ্বংস করে বাসভূমি নির্মাণের পক্ষে ছিলেন না। জল-জলাভূমি এক দার্শনিক ভাবনার বাহক, আবার সবুজের সমারোহ। হতশ্রী গ্রাম, ছন্নছাড়া জীবন, জলাভূমিকেন্দ্রিক জীবন, অস্বাস্থ্যকর পরিবেশ তার পাশাপাশি সৌন্দর্যের বর্ণনা, জীবন-জীবিকার উৎস স্থল হিসেবে জলাভূমি বারবার সাহিত্যের পাতায় উচ্চারিত হয়েছে। সাহিত্যিকের প্রকৃতি-তন্ময়তা, নিসর্গ চেতনা এক গভীর ভাব-কল্পনা হিসেবে উঠে আসে। রবীন্দ্রনাথ সর্বত্রই ঈশ্বরকে দেখতে বলেছিলেন। জলে-স্থলে, নভতলে, উপবনে, নদী-জলাভূমিতে। আর তাই উদ্ভাসিত হয়েছে তাঁর বিভিন্ন রচনায়—ভিন্নতর তাৎপর্যে, ভিন্ন সামাজিক-অর্থনৈতিক প্রেক্ষাপটে।

বাংলা সাহিত্যের বিভিন্ন রচনায় জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ আমরা ঘুরে ফিরে দেখতে পাই। সাহিত্যিকেরা কখনো রচনার প্রয়োজনে কখনো বা রোমান্টিক ভাব-কল্পনা, প্রকৃতি বর্ণনা, নিসর্গ চেতনা, সৌন্দর্য বর্ণনায় জলাভূমি, খাল-বিলের প্রসঙ্গের অবতারণা করেছেন। বাংলা সাহিত্য প্রকৃতি ও মানুষের অন্তরঙ্গ সম্পর্কের এক অনন্য দলিল। এই সাহিত্যের ভেতর দিয়ে আমরা যে বাংলাকে দেখি, তা নদী, খাল-বিল, হাওর-বাঁওড়, ঝিল, ডোবা, জলাভূমি ও সবুজ শস্যক্ষেতের এক জীবন্ত ভূগোল। বাংলার এই জলাভূমি-নির্ভর পরিবেশ শুধু মানুষের জীবনযাত্রাকে নয়, তার চিন্তা-চেতনা, সংস্কৃতি ও কল্পনাকেও গভীরভাবে প্রভাবিত করেছে। তাই বাংলা সাহিত্যের বিভিন্ন যুগে জলাভূমি কেবল একটি পটভূমি হিসেবে নয়, বরং একটি সক্রিয় চরিত্র ও প্রতীক হিসেবে আত্মপ্রকাশ করেছে। বাংলার ভূ-প্রকৃতি মূলত নদীমাতৃক। অসংখ্য নদী ও তাদের শাখা-প্রশাখা মিলিয়ে এখানে গড়ে উঠেছে বিস্তীর্ণ জলাভূমি। এই জলাভূমি কৃষি, মৎস্যজীবন ও গ্রামীণ অর্থনীতির প্রধান ভিত্তি। ফলে সাধারণ মানুষের জীবন ও সংগ্রামের সঙ্গে জলাভূমির সম্পর্ক অত্যন্ত ঘনিষ্ঠ। এই বাস্তবতাই সাহিত্যে প্রতিফলিত হয়েছে নানা আঙ্গিকে, নানা রূপকে।

উপন্যাস সাহিত্যে জলাভূমির প্রভাব বিশেষভাবে লক্ষণীয়। শরৎচন্দ্র চট্টোপাধ্যায়ের ‘শ্রীকান্ত’(প্রথম পর্ব, ১৯১৭) উপন্যাসের দ্বিতীয় পরিচ্ছেদে বর্ণিত জলময় প্রকৃতির চিত্রটি অত্যন্ত জীবন্ত ও রোমাঞ্চকর। বর্ষাকালের প্লাবিত জলাভূমি, নিবিড় অন্ধকার, উন্মত্ত জলশ্রোত এবং ইন্দ্রনাথের সাথে শ্রীকান্তের নৌকাবিহারের বর্ণনায় লেখক প্রকৃতির রুদ্র ও গম্ভীর রূপ ফুটিয়ে তুলেছেন। উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি পরিবেশে চারিদিক জলময় পরিবেশ বর্ণিত নিশ্চিদ্র অন্ধকারে ভরা রাত ইন্দ্রনাথ ও শ্রীকান্তের চোখে জলাভূমির নিষিদ্ধ কালের সৌন্দর্য ফুটে উঠেছে।

গঙ্গার ধারের সতুয়ার চড়ার বর্ণনা এরকম—“অনুকূল শ্রোত এবং বোটের তাড়নায় ডিঙিখানি তর তর করিয়া অগ্রসর হইয়া আসিতে লাগিল। আরও কিছুদূর আসিতেই দক্ষিণদিকের আগ্রীবমগ্ন বনঝাউ এবং কসাড়বন মাথা তুলিয়া এই দুটি অসমসাহসী মানবশিশুর পানে বিষয়াবলম্বভাবে চাহিয়া রহিল এবং কেহ বা মাঝে মাঝে শিরশ্চালনে কি যেন নিষেধ জানাইতে লাগিল।”^২ ইন্দ্রনাথের মতো অকুতোভয় বন্ধুর সঙ্গে অন্ধকারে নৌকা চালানো শ্রীকান্তের কিশোর মনে এক মিশ্র অনুভূতি সৃষ্টি করে। জলাভূমির সৌন্দর্য, জলাভূমির পারে বসবাসকারী অন্নদাদিদি ও শাহজীর পারস্পরিক সম্পর্ক, সাপুড়ে জীবন, দুঃখ-বেদনার বর্ণনা রয়েছে উপন্যাসে।

রবীন্দ্রনাথ জীবনে ও সাহিত্যে পরিবেশ সচেতনতা তথা সামগ্রিক পরিবেশবোধ জাগিয়ে তুলেছেন বিভিন্ন রচনার মধ্যে দিয়ে। রবীন্দ্র উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি এক বিশেষ ভূমিকা পালন করেছে। চরিত্রের মনস্তত্ত্ব, গ্রামীণ জীবনের ছবি চিত্রণে প্রতীকী অর্থ বহন করে। ‘গোরা’ উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি পারাপার, মানুষের জলভরা, স্নান ইত্যাদি গ্রামীণ সমাজের চিত্র পাই। গোরা’র মানসিক দ্বন্দ্ব জলাভূমির কিনারে সেই দৃশ্যের ও বর্ণনা রয়েছে। ‘নৌকাডুবি’ উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি যেন চরিত্র হয়ে উঠেছে অর্থাৎ নদীর পাশাপাশি জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ পাই। এর পাশাপাশি রবীন্দ্রনাথ পরিবেশ- জলাভূমি সংরক্ষণ নিয়ে নিজস্ব মতামত দিয়েছেন। পরিবেশ সচেতন রবীন্দ্রনাথ ১৯৩৬ সালে ভুবনডাঙায় জলাশয় প্রতিষ্ঠা উপলক্ষে একটি অভিভাষণ দিয়েছিলেন। অভিভাষণটি ‘জলোৎসর্গ’ নামক গ্রন্থে সংযোজিত হয়েছে।

বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের ‘আরণ্যক’ (১৯৩৯) উপন্যাসে বিহারের অরণ্য অঞ্চলের জলাভূমি বিশেষ করে লবটুলিয়া ও সংলগ্ন এলাকার বাথান ও জলাশয়গুলো এক অনন্য রূপ পেয়েছে। সরস্বতী কুণ্ডী শুধু জলাভূমি নয় বরং বন্যপ্রাণী-পাখি ও দরিদ্র মানুষের জীবনধারণের মূল কেন্দ্রবিন্দু। লেখকের বর্ণনা থেকে জানা যায়—“লবটুলিয়ার উত্তর প্রান্ত খুব বড় একটা হ্রদের মত। এ রকম জলাশয়কে এদেশে বলে কুণ্ডী। এই হ্রদটার নাম সরস্বতী কুণ্ডী...বামে চাহিলে গভীর হইতে গভীরতর বনের মধ্যে দৃষ্টি চলিয়া গিয়া ঘন নিবিড় শ্যামলতার মধ্যে নিজেকে নিজে হারাইয়া ফেলে, দক্ষিণে চাহিলে স্বচ্ছ নীল জলের ওপারে সুদূরবিসর্পী আকাশ ও অস্পষ্ট শৈলমালা’র ছবি মনকে বেলুনের মত ফুলাইয়া পৃথিবীর মাটিতে উড়াইয়া লইয়া চলে।”^৩ জলাভূমি-জলরাশির সৌন্দর্য, তার পাশাপাশি বাঘ-হরিণ থেকে শুরু করে ভানুমতী, কুস্তা, যুগলপ্রসাদের মত চরিত্রদের জীবনের সাথেও সরস্বতী জলাভূমি ওতপ্রোতভাবে জড়িয়ে আছে। তাঁর ‘আরণ্যক’ উপন্যাস মূলত বনভূমিকে কেন্দ্র করে হলেও, গ্রামীণ জীবনের সঙ্গে যুক্ত জলাভূমির উপস্থিতি সেখানেও অনিবার্যভাবে এসেছে। তাঁর লেখায় প্রকৃতি কখনও রূঢ় নয়, বরং মমতাময়ী ও জীবনদায়িনী। হারিয়ে যাওয়া বন্যজীবন-জলজীবনের আখ্যান ‘আরণ্যক’ উপন্যাস।

‘ইছামতী’ (১৯৫০) উপন্যাসে জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ও অর্থবহ। বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় তাঁর এই রচনায় প্রকৃতি, নদী, খাল-বিল, চরাঞ্চল এবং জলাভূমি শুধু পটভূমি নয়—এগুলি চরিত্রের জীবনযাত্রা, অর্থনীতি ও সংস্কৃতির সঙ্গে অঙ্গঙ্গিভাবে যুক্ত। উপন্যাসে ইছামতী নদীকে কেন্দ্র করে বিস্তীর্ণ জলাভূমির বর্ণনা পাওয়া যায়। এই জলাভূমি অঞ্চল কখনো শান্ত, কখনো ভয়ংকর রূপ ধারণ করে। এই জলাভূমি এলাকার মানুষদের জীবিকা সরাসরি এর উপর নির্ভরশীল। ‘ইছামতী’ উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি এক জীবন্ত সত্তা, যা মানুষের জীবন, সংগ্রাম ও সংস্কৃতির অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ। বিভূতিভূষণ প্রকৃতির এই রূপকে এমনভাবে চিত্রিত করেছেন, যা বাংলা সাহিত্যে এক অনন্য উদাহরণ।

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের ‘হাঁসুলীবাঁকের উপকথা’ (১৯৫১) গ্রামীণ জীবনের এক অনন্য চিত্র তুলে ধরে, যেখানে নদী ও তার বাঁক ঘিরে গড়ে উঠেছে একটি বিশেষ সমাজ। জলাভূমির প্রভাব এখানে মানুষের বিশ্বাস, আচরণ ও সামাজিক কাঠামোকে গঠন করেছে। এই উপন্যাসে প্রকৃতি ও মানুষের সম্পর্ক অত্যন্ত নিবিড়ভাবে চিত্রিত হয়েছে। অন্যদিকে বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের রচনায় প্রকৃতির সূক্ষ্ম ও মানবিক চিত্রায়ণ লক্ষ করা যায়। কোপাই নদী ও তার সংলগ্ন হাঁসুলী বাঁক অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করেছে উপন্যাসে। বাঁশবাদী জাঙাল গ্রামকে ঘিরে অর্থ বেড় দিয়ে যে কোপাই নদী তার আকৃতি যেন হাঁসুলির গয়নার মত। এই বাঁক শব্দটি শুধু যে একটি নদীর বাঁক ঘোরার মধ্যে সীমাবদ্ধ নয়। নিম্নবর্গের মানুষের জীবনের কাহিনী বর্ণনা রয়েছে। জাঙাল ও বাঁশবাদী গ্রামের সন্নিকটে, জলাভূমি যেন মুখ্য। কাহার, তন্তুবাঁয়, নাপিত ইত্যাদি মানুষের জীবনের মূল অবলম্বন যেন জলাভূমি। উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি হল রাত বাংলার লোকসমাজ; তাঁদের বিশ্বাস-ভয় ও জীবিকা—সবকিছুর এক সংমিশ্রিত রূপ।

মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের ‘পদ্মা নদীর মাঝি’ (১৯৩৬) বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাভূমির এক শ্রেষ্ঠ রূপায়ণ। এই উপন্যাসে পদ্মা নদী কেবল একটি প্রাকৃতিক উপাদান নয়, বরং জেলেদের জীবনসংগ্রামের কেন্দ্রবিন্দু। নদীর অনিশ্চয়তা, তার ভাঙন-গড়ন, জোয়ার-ভাটা—সবকিছুই মানুষের ভাগ্যকে নিয়ন্ত্রণ করে। কুবের, কপিলা প্রমুখ চরিত্রের জীবনে পদ্মা নদী একদিকে যেমন জীবিকার উৎস, অন্যদিকে তেমনি দুঃখ-কষ্টের কারণ। এখানে জলাভূমি মানুষের অস্তিত্বের সঙ্গে একাকার হয়ে গেছে। ‘পদ্মা নদীর মাঝি’ উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি যেন এক সংগ্রামের কাহিনীর দ্যোতক। উপন্যাসে জলাভূমিই চলন্ত জীবন। জলাভূমিকে ঘিরে আশা-আকাঙ্ক্ষা, জীবন জলে, জনপথ-জীবনের গतिकে প্রবাহিত হয়ে চলেছে যুগ থেকে যুগান্তরে। জলাভূমিই যেন চরিত্র হয়ে হয়ে উঠেছে।

একইভাবে অদ্বৈত মল্লবর্মণের ‘তিতাস একটি নদীর নাম’ (১৯৫৬) উপন্যাসে তিতাস নদী ও তার আশপাশের জলাভূমি মালো সম্প্রদায়ের জীবনকে নিয়ন্ত্রণ করে। লেখক উপন্যাসে বলেছেন—“মালোদের ঘরের আঙ্গিনা থেকে শুরু হইয়াছে যত পথ সে সবই গিয়া মিশিয়াছে তিতাসের জলে”^{১৪}

নদীর জলে যেমন তাদের জীবিকা নির্ভর, তেমনি নদীর পরিবর্তনের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে তাঁদের জীবনেও আসে পরিবর্তন। এই উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি এক গভীর সামাজিক ও সাংস্কৃতিক বাস্তবতার প্রতীক।

মনোজ বসুর ‘জলজঙ্গল’ (১৯৫২) উপন্যাসে পাই জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ। দক্ষিণবঙ্গের বাদাবন ও জলাভূমিকেন্দ্রিক জীবনই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ হয়ে উঠেছে। ‘জলজঙ্গল’ উপন্যাস পড়ে জানতে পারি, দুর্গম পশু-সরীসৃপ ও প্রকৃতির সঙ্গে লড়াই করে বেঁচে থাকার কষ্টকর দিনগুলি। নিজের জীবন কথা শোনাতে গিয়ে লেখক অকপটে জানান—

“জলজঙ্গলে সুন্দরবনের হাসি কান্না আর সংগ্রামের কাহিনী লিখেছি।”^{১৫} উপন্যাসে মাটি-জল আর মানুষ সব একাকার। এই উপন্যাসে জল-জঙ্গল আর পাত্র-পাত্রী একাত্ম হয়ে গেছে। সুন্দরবনের নির্মিত বাদা অঞ্চলের খাল, জল ও জঙ্গলকে আশ্রয় করে এদের জীবিকা শুরু হয়েছে, বেঁচে থাকার লড়াই চলে। নায়ক কেতুচরণ হল সেই অঞ্চলের বাঘ। আর বাঘ, কুমির, সাপ জলজঙ্গলে থেকে জীবন সংগ্রামের কাহিনী। উপন্যাসের প্রতিটি চরিত্রে রয়েছে জলাভূমি বাঘ, পাখি, লড়াইয়ের প্রসঙ্গ, প্রকৃতির স্পর্শ। কেতুচরণ জল জঙ্গলেই ভালো থাকে। বহু ছোট ছোট চরিত্রের মধ্যে দিয়ে লেখক আরণ্যক মানুষদের জীবন যুদ্ধকে তুলে ধরেছেন। বাদা বন ও জলাভূমির মানুষের সুখ-দুঃখ, হাসি-কান্নার দলিল ‘জলজঙ্গল উপন্যাস’। জলে-জঙ্গলে বাস করে এলোকেশী, কেতুচরণ, মধুসূদন, দুর্লভ। এরা কিভাবে সংগ্রাম করে তারই রচনাসম্ভার বলে উপন্যাসের নামকরণ সার্থক ও যথাযথ।

চার দশকের বেশি সময় ধরে গল্পকার-উপন্যাসিক ঝড়েশ্বর চট্টোপাধ্যায় মানব জমিনের খেতমজুর। তাঁর ‘বন্দর’ (১৯৯২) উপন্যাসে জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গটি কেবল প্রাকৃতিক বর্ণনার মধ্যে সীমাবদ্ধ নয়, বরং এটি উপন্যাসের সামাজিক-অর্থনৈতিক ও মানবিক সংকটের একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ প্রতীক হিসেবেও ব্যবহৃত হয়েছে। উপন্যাসে বন্দর-সংলগ্ন অঞ্চলকে ঘিরে বিস্তৃত জলাভূমির চিত্র ফুটে উঠেছে—যেখানে কাদামাটি, খাল-বিল, নোনা জল, জোয়ার-ভাটা ইত্যাদির এক জটিল পরিবেশ বিদ্যমান। এই জলাভূমি একদিকে যেমন জীবিকার উৎস (মাছ ধরা, নৌযান, ছোটখাটো ব্যবসা), অন্যদিকে তা মানুষের জীবনে অনিশ্চয়তা, দারিদ্র্য ও বিপদের কারণ।

স্থানীয় মানুষদের জীবন জলাভূমির ওপর নির্ভরশীল। মাছ ধরা, নৌপরিবহন, বন্দর-কেন্দ্রিক কাজ—সবকিছুই এই জলাভূমিকে ঘিরে গড়ে উঠেছে। ফলে জলাভূমি এখানে জীবনধারণের অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ। জোয়ার-ভাটার পরিবর্তন, বন্যা, ঝড়—এই সব প্রাকৃতিক উপাদান জলাভূমিকে বিপজ্জনক করে তোলে। ফলে মানুষের জীবনও হয়ে ওঠে অনিশ্চিত ও ঝুঁকিপূর্ণ। লেখক অত্যন্ত বাস্তবধর্মীভাবে জলাভূমির চিত্র অঙ্কন করেছেন। বন্দর থাকলেও প্রকৃত উন্নয়ন সাধারণ মানুষের জীবনে পৌঁছায় না—এই বৈপরীত্যকে জলাভূমির মাধ্যমে বোঝানো হয়েছে। উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি শুধু প্রেক্ষাপট নয়, বরং কাহিনীর একটি সক্রিয় উপাদান।

চট্টোপাধ্যায়ের ‘দ্রুপুর্নিমা’ (১৯৯৫) উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি, চরভূমি এবং দক্ষিণ বাংলার বাদা অঞ্চলের (সুন্দরবন এলাকা) ভৌগোলিক পরিবেশের বিস্তারিত চিত্র ফুটে উঠেছে। তাঁর আখ্যানে নদী-নালা, ফেরীঘাট ও চরভূমির প্রসঙ্গ প্রধানভাবে উঠে আসে। এছাড়াও, দক্ষিণ

বাংলার উপকূলীয় অঞ্চলের নদী-নালা নির্ভর জীবন নিয়ে লেখা তাঁর অন্যান্য উপন্যাসগুলোতেও জলাভূমি ও চরভূমির পরিবেশ পরিলক্ষিত হয়।

বাংলাদেশের সাহিত্যেও জলাভূমির গুরুত্ব অপরিসীমা। সৈয়দ ওয়ালীউল্লাহের ‘কাঁদো নদী কাঁদো’ (১৯৬৮) উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি কেবল একটি প্রাকৃতিক পরিবেশ নয়, বরং তা গভীর প্রতীকী ও সামাজিক তাৎপর্য বহন করে। এই উপন্যাসে জলাভূমির প্রসঙ্গ মানুষের জীবনসংগ্রাম, মানসিক অবস্থা এবং সমাজবাস্তুবতার সঙ্গে ঘনিষ্ঠভাবে জড়িত। উপন্যাসের চরিত্ররা যেমন অর্থনৈতিক ও সামাজিক সংকটে জর্জরিত, তেমনি জলাভূমির স্থির, কাদামাখা, অচল জলের চিত্র তাদের জীবনযাত্রার স্থবিরতা ও হতাশাকে প্রতিফলিত করে। নদী, জলাভূমি, কাদা-এসব উপাদান মানুষের জীবনে যেমন আশীর্বাদ (মাছ, কৃষি), তেমনি অভিশাপও (বন্যা, রোগ, দুর্ভোগ)। এই দ্বৈত চরিত্রের মাধ্যমে লেখক দেখিয়েছেন, প্রকৃতি কখনও মানুষের সহায়ক, আবার কখনও তার বিরুদ্ধে শক্তি হয়ে দাঁড়ায়। এই উপন্যাসে জলাভূমিকে বহুমাত্রিক প্রতীকে রূপ দিয়েছেন—যেখানে প্রকৃতি, সমাজ ও মানুষের মনোজগত একে অপরের সঙ্গে জড়িয়ে আছে। তাই “কাঁদো নদী কাঁদো” উপন্যাসে জলাভূমি কেবল পটভূমি নয়, বরং উপন্যাসের মূল ভাব ও দর্শন নির্মাণের একটি কেন্দ্রীয় উপাদান।

‘লালসালু’ (১৯৪৮) উপন্যাসে গ্রামীণ সমাজের বাস্তবতা তুলে ধরে, যেখানে জলাভূমি পরিবেশের একটি অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ। একইভাবে ছুমান্ন আহমেদ—এর বিভিন্ন উপন্যাসে হাওর-বিল অঞ্চলের চিত্র ফুটে উঠেছে। তাঁর লেখায় জলাভূমি কখনও রহস্যময়, কখনও রোমান্টিক, আবার কখনও বাস্তবতার কঠোর চিত্র।

সবশেষে রবীন্দ্রনাথের কথাতেই বলতে পারি—

“আমি আলোক চাই, আকাশ চাই, মুক্তি চাই।”^৬ গ্রাম ও শহরের প্রকৃতি-পরিবেশ বিষয়ক চিন্তাভাবনার প্রতিফলন এই কবিতা। বিশিষ্ট পরিবেশকর্মী জয়া মিত্রের ‘জলের নাম ভালোবাসা’ গ্রন্থে জলহীন শব্দ অতীত থেকে রাজস্থানের শ্যামল বর্তমানে ফিরে আসার চমকপ্রদ কাহিনি তথ্যে, বর্ণনায় সমৃদ্ধ প্রায় অসম্ভবকে সম্ভব করে তোলার রূপকথা। জলাভূমি চিরস্থায়ী হোক—তাই কামনা করেছেন লেখিকা। রবীন্দ্রনাথ আরও বলেছিলেন—

“আজ তিনি নবরূপী দানবের বংশে

মানুষ পাঠিয়েছেন মানুষের ধ্বংসে।”^৭

পরিবেশ চেতনা দেয়, প্রকৃতিকে ভালোবাসার শিক্ষা। গ্রামীণ জীবনে নদী, পুকুর, খাল-বিল প্রায়শই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করে। জলাভূমি শুধু প্রাকৃতিক সৌন্দর্যের প্রতীক নয়, বরং হারিয়ে যাওয়া এক অতীতের স্মৃতি ও নস্টালজিয়ার উৎস। নদী, খাল, বিল—এসব চিত্র বাংলার জলাভূমিকে জীবন্ত করে তোলে। জলাভূমি মানুষের সুখ-দুঃখ, প্রেম-বিরহ ও সংগ্রামের পটভূমি হিসেবে কাজ করে প্রাকৃতিক জীববৈচিত্র্য সংরক্ষণে জলাভূমির গুরুত্ব চর্চিত হওয়া প্রয়োজন।^৮ বিশিষ্ট পরিবেশ বিজ্ঞানী ড. সাখী নন্দ চক্রবর্তী বলেছিলেন—“জলাভূমি হল আমাদের পরিবেশের কিডনি।”^৮ প্রকৃতি ও মানবের আন্তঃসম্পর্কের মধ্যেই পরিবেশ সচল থাকে। উভয়ের সম্পর্কের মধ্যেই ইকোলজি বহমান। আর এই জলাভূমি বাংলা সাহিত্যে বিশেষত উপন্যাসে বিশেষ উপমা-রূপকে ব্যবহৃত হয়েছে। নিঃসন্দেহে যা অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। আমরা জানি পরিবেশের ভারসাম্য রক্ষায় নদীর মতই জলাশয়গুলিও গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করে অথচ বসতি স্থাপনের তাগিদে আমরা বুঝিয়েই চলেছি পুকুরের পর পুকুর, জলাশয়-জলাভূমি। সরকারি উদ্যোগে জলাশয় সংরক্ষণ দিবস পালিত হচ্ছে ঠিকই কিন্তু সচেতনতা কোথায়?

কেবলমাত্র জলজীবী সম্প্রদায় মাত্র নয়, কৃষিনির্ভর বাংলার জনজীবনেও জলাভূমি-খাল-বিলের ভূমিকা অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। আর তাই আধুনিক বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি নতুন দৃষ্টিকোণ থেকে দেখা দিয়েছে। কিম্বার রায়ের ‘প্রকৃতিপাঠ’ (১৯৯০) উপন্যাসে পরিবেশ-সংকট, দূষণ, নদীভাঙন প্রভৃতি সমস্যা বিষয় হয়ে উঠেছে। ফলে জলাভূমি শুধু নান্দনিকতার বিষয় নয়, বরং পরিবেশ সচেতনতারও প্রতীক হয়ে উঠেছে। সার্বিকভাবে বলা যায়, বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাভূমি এক বহুমাত্রিক উপাদান। এটি কখনও জীবনের উৎস, কখনও সংগ্রামের প্রতীক, কখনও সৌন্দর্যের আধার, আবার কখনও দার্শনিক ভাবনার প্রকাশ। বাংলার প্রকৃতি ও মানুষের জীবনের সঙ্গে

এর যে গভীর সম্পর্ক, তা সাহিত্যের মাধ্যমে চিরন্তন হয়ে উঠেছে। অতএব, বাংলা সাহিত্যে জলাভূমির উপস্থিতি কেবল একটি বিষয়গত অনুষ্ণ নয়, বরং এটি একটি সাংস্কৃতিক ও নান্দনিক ঐতিহ্যের অংশ। এই ঐতিহ্য আমাদের সাহিত্যকে যেমন সমৃদ্ধ করেছে, তেমনি আমাদের প্রকৃতির প্রতি ভালোবাসা ও সচেতনতার বোধও জাগ্রত করেছে। ভবিষ্যৎ প্রজন্মের কথা মাথায় রেখে জলাভূমিকে রক্ষা করা প্রয়োজন। বাংলা সাহিত্যের লেখকেরা সেই দিকটি তুলে ধরার চেষ্টা করেছেন। এই জলাভূমি মানবজীবনের মানসিক, শারীরিক ও পারিপার্শ্বিকতার সাথে অঙ্গঙ্গীভাবে জড়িত। জল-জলাভূমির সাথে বেঁচে থাকার এক বাস্তব শিল্পরূপ পাই সাহিত্যের পাতায়।

তথ্যসূত্র (Reference) :

১. মুখোপাধ্যায়, দেবলীনা— রবীন্দ্রনাথ পরিবেশ-ভাবনা ও প্রয়োগে, কলকাতা, গাঙচিল, প্রথম প্রকাশ; ডিসেম্বর, ২০১২, পৃ-৯৬।
২. চট্টোপাধ্যায়, শ্রীশরৎচন্দ্র— শরৎ সাহিত্য স্মরণ (প্রথম খণ্ড), কলকাতা, আনন্দ, অষ্টম মুদ্রণ, ১৪২৩, পৃ-২৭৮।
৩. বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, বিভূতিভূষণ— বিভূতিভূষণ উপন্যাস সমগ্র (দ্বিতীয় খণ্ড), কলকাতা, শুভম, প্রথম শুভম সংস্করণ, ১৪১৮, পৃ-৫৪০।
৪. গিরি, ড. সত্যবতী, মজুমদার, ড. সমরেশ— প্রবন্ধ সংকলন, কলকাতা, রত্নাবলী, দ্বিতীয় সংস্করণ, ডিসেম্বর, ২০১১, পৃ-১০৭০।
৫. তদেব।
৬. মুখোপাধ্যায়, দেবলীনা— রবীন্দ্রনাথ পরিবেশ-ভাবনা ও প্রয়োগে, কলকাতা, গাঙচিল, প্রথম প্রকাশ; ডিসেম্বর, ২০১২, পৃ-১৫৫।
৭. Ganashakti-মুক্তধারা | প্রবন্ধ — জলাভূমি পরিবেশের কিডনি; জলাভূমি ধ্বংস করে কখনোই নাগরিক উন্নয়ন করা উচিত নয় | সৌরভ দত্ত — ৭ ফেব্রুয়ারি ২০২৪ <https://www.ganashakti.com/news/MUKTADHARA--Probandha--JALABHUMI--SOURAV-DUTTA--7-February-2024>।
৮. তদেব।

Submitted: March 2026

Revision Submitted: May 2026

Accepted: June 2026

Refereed Anonymously

**জলাভূমি ও সাংস্কৃতিক ঐতিহ্যের প্রেক্ষাপটে তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের
'নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী': সামাজিক ইতিহাসের দলিল**

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সারসংক্ষেপ(Abstract)

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় 'নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী' উপন্যাসে বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জীবন-জীবিকা সম্পর্কে কাহিনী রচনা করেছেন। এই বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের উৎপত্তির দৈবিক ব্যাখ্যা, তাদের ইতিহাস, জলাভূমির সঙ্গে তাদের সম্পর্ক, তাদের জীবন-জীবিকা-সাংস্কৃতিক ঐতিহ্য ইত্যাদি বিষয়কে লেখক কীভাবে দেখেছেন বর্তমান প্রবন্ধে আমরা তা বিশ্লেষণ করার চেষ্টা করব। সেই সঙ্গে আমরা অনুসন্ধান করার চেষ্টা করব কেন তিনি এ জাতীয় উপন্যাস কেন লিখলেন বা এই বেদে সম্প্রদায় সম্পর্কে তিনি অভিজ্ঞতা কোথা থেকে সঞ্চয় করেছিলেন। জলাভূমির সঙ্গে বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের সম্পর্ক, তাদের ভবিষ্যৎ পরিণতি এবং সামাজিক ইতিহাসে তাদের গুরুত্ব ইত্যাদি বিশ্লেষণের চেষ্টাও আমরা করব।

সূচক শব্দ(Key words): জলাভূমি, বেদে সম্প্রদায়, নাগিনী কন্যা, সূচিকাভরণ, কবিরাজি, সামাজিক ইতিহাস।

কথাসাহিত্যিক তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়(১৮৯৮-১৯৭১) মানুষ ও প্রকৃতিকে যেভাবে পর্যবেক্ষণ করেছেন এবং সাহিত্যের পাতায় প্রতিফলিত করেছেন তা এককথায় অনবদ্য। কেবলমাত্র পর্যবেক্ষণ নয়, গভীর অনুভূতির সঙ্গে আত্মস্থও করেছেন। 'নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী' উপন্যাসটি প্রকাশিত হয় ১৩৫৯ বঙ্গাব্দে। এই উপন্যাসে তিনি হিজল বিল এবং সংলগ্ন বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জীবনযাত্রা তুলে ধরেছেন। একালের দৃষ্টিতে অর্থাৎ প্রায় ৭৪ (১৪৩৩ বঃ - ১৩৫৯ বঃ= ৭৪) বছর পরে আমরা এই উপন্যাসটিকে জলাভূমি হিজল বিল, এই বিলে একদা বসবাসকারী বেদে সম্প্রদায়, তাদের জীবনযাত্রা এবং তাদের যাপিত পেশাগত ও সংস্কৃতিগত ঐতিহ্যকে সম্যক অনুধাবন করার চেষ্টা করব। এই সূত্রে বিশ্লেষণ করব তারাশঙ্করের শিল্পীসত্তা ও সহানুভূতিশীল মানবসত্তাকে।

মুর্শিদাবাদে গঙ্গার তীর বরাবর হিজল বিলের অবস্থান। গঙ্গার জলেই এই বিলের পরিপূর্ণতা ঘটে। এই বিলকে কেন্দ্র করেই 'নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী'র আখ্যান গড়ে উঠেছে। তারাশঙ্কর তাঁর নাট্যমন্দিরে আড্ডার রীতিতেই এই উপন্যাসের কাহিনী বিবৃত করেছেন। আমরা এই উপন্যাসকে 'কাহিনী'র চেয়ে 'আখ্যান' বলতেই আশ্বস্ত বোধ করব। কারণ নাট্যমন্দিরে গল্প বলার ঢঙে এবং নানান দেবদেবতার পাঠ তিনি এখানে শুনিয়েছেন। বর্তমান থেকে প্রাগৈতিহাসিককালে তিনি পাঠককে বারংবার নিয়ে গেছেন। হিজল বিলের বর্ণনা লেখকের ভাষায়- '...এরই মধ্যে গঙ্গার স্রোত থেকে বিচ্ছিন্ন হিজল বিল ঐক্যে বেঁকে নানান ধরনের আকার নিয়ে চ'লে গেছে। ক্রোশের পর ক্রোশ লম্বা হিজল বিল। বর্ষার সময় হিজল বিল বিস্তীর্ণ বিপুল গভীর, শীতে জল ক'মে আসে, গঙ্গার টানে জল নেমে যায়, সূর্যের উত্তাপে শুকিয়ে আসে, তখন হিজল বিল টুকরো টুকরো'।(নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী, পৃ ৭) কিন্তু হিজল বিলের নিখুঁত বর্ণনা দিলেও তারাশঙ্কর চর্মচক্ষে তা দেখেননি। সম্পূর্ণটাই তার

কল্পনা। সাহিত্যিক সৈয়দ মুস্তাফা সিরাজ ‘মাননীয় তারাশঙ্কর সমীপেষু’ নামে একটি স্মৃতিচারণামূলক লেখায় বলেছেন তারাশঙ্কর যে হিজল বিল দেখেননি তা তাঁকে এক আলাপচারিতায় বলেছিলেন এবং উপন্যাসের অ্যাখ্যানটিও ছিল বানানো। (সিরাজ, ২০২৩) কিন্তু উপন্যাসে বর্ণিত মিথের সঙ্গে বাস্তবের কোনো বিরোধ ছিল না। মনে পড়ে মানিক বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ও ‘পদ্মা নদীর মাঝি’ উপন্যাস লেখেন এভাবেই।

এই উপন্যাসে লেখক বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জীবনযাত্রা এবং তাদের উৎপত্তি-ইতিহাস ইত্যাদি বিষয়ে যে পৌরাণিক কাহিনি আছে তা চরিত্রগুলির মুখ দিয়ে বলিয়েছেন। শবলা, পিঙলা নাগকন্যার জীবনযাপন করতে বাধ্য হয়েছে মর্ত্যে জন্ম নিয়ে। অভিশপ্ত তাদের জীবন। নাগকন্যা হয়েও তারা মানবকন্যার মতোই জীবন-যাপন করে। তাদের গাত্রবর্ণ কুচকুচে কালো। তাদের জীবনেও প্রেম আসে। ঋতুমতী হলে তাদের শরীর থেকে কাঁঠালচাপার গন্ধ নির্গত হয় প্রিয়জনের সঙ্গে মিলনের তাগিদে। কিন্তু নাগিনীকন্যার জীবন এমনই যে তার শেষ পরিণতি হয় মর্মান্তিক এবং তার মৃত্যু বা নিরুদ্দেশ হবার পরেই পরবর্তী নাগকন্যা সাঁতালীর বিষবেদেদের কাছে পূজ্য হয়ে ওঠে। তাই শবলা যখন শিরবেদে অর্থাৎ বেদেদের সর্বোচ্চ নেতা মহাদেবকে হত্যা করে গঙ্গার জলে ঝাঁপ দিয়ে নিরুদ্দেশ হয়, তখনই পিঙলাকে নাগিনীকন্যা হিসেবে চিহ্নিত করা হয়। অলৌকিকভাবে এক নাগকন্যার কাজ শেষ হলে আর একজনের মধ্যে নাগিনীকন্যার লক্ষণ ফুটে ওঠে। এই হল বেদে সমাজের নিয়ম। যে বেদে সমাজে একজন নারীকে পূজা করা হয় দেবী হিসেবে, সেই সমাজে ব্যভিচারও চলে নারীকে কেন্দ্র করেই। শিরবেদে মহাদেব ক্ষমতার জোরে একের পর এক নারীসঙ্গ করে, কিন্তু সবাই সব জেনেও চুপ। কেবল চুপ থাকেনি শবলা। সে মহাদেবেরই কন্যা। শবলার শরীর থেকে কাঁঠালচাপার গন্ধ ছাড়ে এবং সে একজনকে ভালোওবাসে। কিন্তু তার পিতা মহাদেব তা সহ্য করতে পারে না। গোখুরো সাপ ঝাঁপি থেকে ছেড়ে দিয়ে শবলার প্রেমিককে হত্যা করে। লক্ষ্য শবলাও ছিল। কিন্তু শবলা গোখুরোর দংশন থেকে বেঁচে যায়। সে গর্ভবতীও হয়ে পড়েছিল। তাই কচি-ধনুস্তরি কবিরাজ শিবরামের কাছে তার শরীরের জ্বালা জুড়োবার ঔষুধও চেয়েছিল। কিছুই না পেয়ে রাতের অন্ধকারে পিতা মহাদেবের বুকে বিষ ঢেলে হত্যা করে। পিতা মহাদেব তাকেও তো কামনা করেছিল। এর প্রমাণ পাওয়া যায় পিঙলার ঘরের কাছে বাজার থেকে কিনে আনা গন্ধ প্রতিদিন রাত্রে ঢেলে দেওয়ার মধ্য দিয়ে। এই গন্ধ পেয়ে যখন নাগকন্যা পিঙলা ঘরের বাইরে আসবে, তখন তাকে ভোগ করার পরিকল্পনা করেছিল বেদে সমাজের মাথা মহাদেব। বেদে সমাজের পূজ্য মহাদেব।

সামগ্রিকভাবে এই উপন্যাসে কৌম সমাজের যাবতীয় রীতি-নীতি লেখক পুঙ্খানুপুঙ্খ ভাবে তুলে ধরেছেন। প্রতিটি ঘটনার ডিটেইলিং(detailing) তিনি দিয়েছেন। বাস্তবসম্মত হয়ে উঠেছে তাঁর বর্ণনা। তিনি বেদে সমাজের ছিলেন না। তাঁর জীবনী পাঠ করে আমরা বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের সঙ্গে ঘনিষ্ঠভাবে মেলামেশার কোনো প্রমাণ পাইনি। এমনকি আমরা আগেই বলেছি চলনবিলও তিনি বাস্তবে দেখেননি। কিন্তু সাহিত্যিকের কল্পনা সবকিছুকেই সত্য করে তুলেছে। মনে পড়ে রবীন্দ্রনাথের সেই অমোঘ মন্তব্য- ‘কবি, তব মনোভূমি/ রামের জন্মস্থান, অযোধ্যার চেয়ে সত্য/ জেনো’। (ঠাকুর, ১৯০০) উপন্যাসে বর্ণিত বেদে সমাজে প্রচলিত প্রথা, রীতি-নীতির তিনি যে বর্ণনা দিয়েছেন তা এক বর্ণও মিথ্যে নয়। চলনবিল এবং তাকে কেন্দ্র করে বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জীবনযাত্রার ঐতিহ্যকে ফুটিয়ে তুলতে তিনি সার্থক হয়েছেন।

তারাশঙ্কর বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের সফল সাহিত্যিক হবার মূল কারণ আমাদের মতে তাঁর ছিল গভীর পর্যবেক্ষণ শক্তি। আর ছিল মানুষের প্রতি সহানুভূতি। আর ছিল মানুষের প্রতি সহানুভূতি। জীবনকে গভীরভাবে পর্যবেক্ষণ ও

অনুধাবন না করলে ‘কবি’ উপন্যাসের ঝুমুরদলের জীবযাত্রার বিস্তৃত বর্ণনা দেওয়া সম্ভব হতো না। তিনি নিজেও নানান মেলায় ঘুরেছেন, কবিগানের আসরে গিয়েছেন তার ফলে নিতাই কবিরায়ের মতো চরিত্র সৃষ্টি করতে পেরেছিলেন। ‘কবি’ উপন্যাসের সব গানই তো তারাক্ষরের নিজের রচনা-‘কবি’র গানগুলি কিন্তু সংগ্রহ নয়। ওগুলি সবই আমি রচনা করেছি’। (বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, আত্মকথা-২, পৃ ৩৬) ‘ভালবেসে মিটল না আশ-কুলাল না এ/জীবনে হয়! জীবন এত ছোট কেনে?/ এ ভুবনে’। (বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, আত্মকথা-১, পৃ ৭) আবার ‘রাধা’ উপন্যাসে বোষ্টমিদের যে জীবন তুলে ধরেছেন তা সামনে থেকে না দেখলে সাহিত্যের পাতায় তুলে ধরা যায় না।

‘নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী’তে বারংবার নাগিনীকন্যার শরীর থেকে কাঁঠালচাপার গন্ধ বের হবার কথা বলা হয়েছে। এই গন্ধ তারাক্ষর চিনেছিলেন তাঁর মায়ের কাছ থেকে। সর্পজগতের এই বৈশিষ্ট্য তিনি কৈশোরেই চিনে ফেলেছিলেন। লাভপুরে ভাঁড়ার ঘরে মা প্রভাবতী দেবী প্রবেশ করতে গিয়ে চুপ করে দাঁড়িয়ে যান এবং পুত্র তারাক্ষরকে সাপের গায়ের গন্ধের কথা বলেন। শুধু তাই নয়; বেদেদের তিনি খুব কাছ থেকে প্রত্যক্ষও করেছিলেন। ‘আমার কালের কথা’য় তিনি সে ইতিহাস লিপিবদ্ধও করেছেন। ‘বেদিয়া আসত। দেশী বেদিয়া সাপুড়ে। এরা সাধারণত আসত বর্ষার সময়, মাঠে আল-কেউটে ধরত- গ্রামে সাপ দেখিয়ে গান গেয়ে ভিক্ষে করত, বাঁদরও নাচাত, আর চলত। ...তাদের মুখেই শুনেছিলাম- মেদিনীপুর অঞ্চলে কবিরাজ ছিলেন অনেক, তাঁরা কালো কেউটের বিষ কিনতেন এবং তা দিয়ে ওষুধ তৈরি করতেন’। (বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, আত্মকথা-১, পৃ ৭৫) এই উপন্যাসেও সাপের বিষ থেকে সূচিকাভরণ ওষুধ তৈরির কথা বলা হয়েছে। সাপের বিষ থেকেই ওষুধ তৈরি করতেন সাক্ষাৎ ধ্বস্তুরি ধূর্জটি কবিরাজ সাপে কাটা রোগীকে বাঁচানোর জন্য।

ধূর্জটি মহাশয়ের শিষ্য শিবরাম। ধূর্জটি আর শিবরামের মধ্য দিয়ে সমাজের অন্তর্বাসী অন্ত্যজ সম্প্রদায় বেদেদের সঙ্গে সভ্য সমাজের যোগাযোগ ঘটে। উপন্যাসের কাহিনী আখ্যানের রূপে বলা হয়েছে শিবরামের বয়ানে। শিবরাম সাঁতালীর বেদেদের কথা কিছুটা শুনেছে তার গুরু ধূর্জটি কবিরাজের কাছে এবং তা গল্প বলার ভঙ্গিতে বা স্মৃতিচারণের ভঙ্গিতে বলেছে। উপন্যাসের বাকি অংশ কথক শিবরাম নিজেই শবলা-পিণ্ডলার কাছে শুনেছে এবং সাঁতালীতে গিয়ে বেদেদের সঙ্গে থেকে চাক্ষুস করেছে। ধূর্জটি কবিরাজ এবং তার শিষ্য শিবরামই হল এখানে এই কৌম সম্প্রদায়ের সঙ্গে সভ্য সমাজের যোগসূত্র। তাদের দৃষ্টিতেই বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জীবনভাষ্য উপন্যাসে তৈরি হয়েছে। শিববেদে মহাদেব বা নাগিনীকন্যা নিজেদের কথা বলতে গিয়ে চাঁদ সদাগরের কথা, সাঁতালী পর্বত থেকে নাগসম্প্রদায়ের বিতাড়নের কাহিনী এবং স্বর্গের দেবদেবতাদের কথাও বলেছে। আমরা তারাক্ষরের ‘হাঁসুলি বাঁকের উপকথা’ উপন্যাস পাঠ করলেও দেখব সেখানেও বাঁশবাদীর কো সমাজের সঙ্গে বাইরের সভ্য সমাজের যোগের কথা বলা হয়েছিল এবং সেই যোগসূত্র ছিল করালী। সে রেলের কাজে যোগ দিয়েছিল নিজেদের গোষ্ঠীগত জীবিকা ত্যাগ করে। এই উপন্যাসেও বেদে সমাজে বাইরের হাওয়া প্রবেশ করেছে বেদে সমাজ যখন লোকালয়ে গিয়ে সাপের খেলা দেখাত, ভিক্ষে করত বা সাপে কাটা রোগীকে বাঁচানোর জন্য ডাক পেত তার মাধ্যমে। তারাক্ষরের শিল্পীমানস বিচার করলে দেখা যায় তিনি প্রাচীরের সঙ্গে নবীনের একটা সহাবস্থান সব সময় দেখাতে চেয়েছেন। ‘নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী’তেও এর ব্যতিক্রম ঘটেনি। বেদে সমাজের গোষ্ঠীগত জীবনের প্রতি সহানুভূতিশীল হয়েও উপন্যাসের সমাপ্তিতে কিন্তু তিনি চলন বিলের জীবন থেকে তাদের বের করে আনার কথা বলেছেন।

‘হাঁসুলী বাঁকের উপকথা’য় আমরা দেখেছিলাম বন্যায় বাঁশবাদী গ্রাম প্রায় নিশ্চিহ্ন হয়ে যায় এবং করালী যে কিনা গ্রামে আধুনিকতার বার্তা এনেছিল, সেই করালী জমি থেকে পলি সরিয়ে আগের মাটি বের করে আনছে চাষের জন্য। এইভাবে তিনি আধুনিকতাকে স্বীকার করেও পুরোনোকে সহানুভূতির দৃষ্টিতে দেখেছিলেন। তাঁর জনপ্রিয় গল্প ‘জলসাঘর’- এও তিনি এই বার্তাই দিয়েছিলেন। ‘নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী’র শেষ এবং বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের সভ্য সমাজ থেকে দূরে থাকার সমাপ্তিও ঘটে হিজলবিলের সাঁতালীর আগুনে পুড়ে ধ্বংস হওয়ার মধ্য দিয়ে। রাড়ের নাগু ঠাকুর – যে পিঙলাকে নিজের জাতি-ধর্ম ত্যাগ করে জীবনসঙ্গী করতে চেয়েছিল তার না পাওয়ার যন্ত্রনার আগুনে সাঁতালী শেষ হয়ে যায়। নাগু ঠাকুরের শিষ্যরা মদ খেয়ে উন্মত্ত হয়ে আগুন জ্বালিয়ে সাঁতালীতে চরম অত্যাচার করে। মনসার বাড়িও কেড়ে নেয়। উপন্যাসের সমাপ্তি ঘটেছে ‘ভাদু নোটন তারা একদল সাঁতালী ছেড়ে চলে গিয়েছে কোন জঙ্গলের দিকে নিরুদ্দেশে। সাঁতালী পুড়ে গিয়েছে, মনসার বারি নাই, আর কি নিয়ে থাকবে সাঁতালীতে? ... আর একদল – এই এদের নিয়ে শবলা বেড়িয়েছে রাড়ের পথে। ... আর সাঁতালীতে নয়, – অন্যত্র এদের নিয়ে বসতি স্থাপন করবে। মানুষের বসতির কাছে – গ্রামে তাঁরা স্থান খুঁজছে’। (নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী, পৃ ১৬৮) উপন্যাসের একেবারে সমাপ্তিতে ঔপন্যাসিক একটি লাইন বাড়তি খরচ করেছেন – সাঁতালীর কথা শেষ, নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী শেষ। – যে শুনিবা সে যেন দু ফোটা চোখের জল ফেলিও’। (নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী, পৃ ১৬৮) লেখকের নিজের চোখেও নিশ্চয় জল এসেছিল, তাই জানতেন বেদে সমাজ যে রূপে বা যে form – এ সাঁতালীতে জীবনযাপন করছিল তা বেশিদিন চলবে না। চলতে পারে না। আধুনিকতা সবকিছুকেই গ্রাস করবে। তাই তাদেরকেও সাঁতালীর অভিশপ্ত জীবন থেকে দৈববাণী ছাড়াই গ্রামের মধ্যে প্রবেশ করালেন। এর ফলাফল, অদূর ভবিষ্যতে বেদেদের উত্তর প্রজন্ম সাপুড়ের জীবিকা ত্যাগ করবে। তারাশঙ্কর পরিবর্তনের সূচনাটুকু দেখিয়ে দিলেন। কারণ একদিনে রূপান্তর ঘটতে পারে না। লেখক হয়তো আরও দূরদৃষ্টিতে বুঝেছিলেন যে আধুনিকতা ছাড়া আমাদের চলবে না, সেই আধুনিক জীবনযাপনের মাত্রাতিরিক্ত চাহিদায় চলনবিলের মতো জলাভূমি একদিন নিশ্চিহ্ন হয়ে যাবে। জলাভূমি নিশ্চিহ্ন হলে সেখানকার প্রাণীকুলের জীবনযাত্রাও নিশ্চিহ্ন হয়ে যাবে। অর্থাৎ বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের বেঁচে থাকার যে মূল উপজীব্য তা যদি অবলুপ্ত হয়ে যায় বেদেদেরও অবলুপ্ত হয়ে যাওয়াটাই স্বাভাবিক। জলাভূমি মানুষের উদগ্র লোভে নিশ্চিহ্ন হয়ে যাচ্ছে, তার ফলে সাপুরে বা বেদেদের আর দেখতে পাওয়া যায় না সেভাবে। এখন সাপ ধরার জন্য সাপুড়ের ডাকা হয় না। ডাকা হয় প্রশিক্ষিত লোকজনকে। শহরের রাস্তায়, গ্রামের রাস্তায় আর সাপ খেলা দেখানোর সেই রমরমাও নেই। জলাভূমির সঙ্গে বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের সম্পর্কটা তাই সমানুপাতিক। তারাশঙ্কর সাপ নিয়ে বেশ কয়েকটি লেখা লিখেছেন। ‘নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী’ তেই বিস্তৃত করে সব কিছু বলেছেন। নাগ-নাগিনী এবং তাদের পালনকারীদের বিষয়ে নিজের অভিজ্ঞতা-পর্যবেক্ষণ এখানে ব্যক্ত করেছেন। ‘হাঁসুলী বাঁকের উপকথায়’ কাহারদের পূজার দেবতা হিসেবে কালারুদ্র নামে এক সাপের কথা বলা হয়েছে। ‘নারী ও নাগিনী’ গল্পে খোঁড়া শেখ ও তার স্ত্রী জোবেদার মধ্যে সমস্যার কারণ এক নাগিনী। খোঁড়া সাপের ওঝাও ছিল। একটি সাপকে ধরে এনে পরম আদরে রেখেছিল। তার নাম দিয়েছিল বিবি। স্ত্রী জোবেদার কাছে সাপটা হয়ে উঠেছিল সতীন। এই বিবির কামড়েই জোবেদা একদিন মারা যায়। গল্পের শেষে খোঁড়া ‘বলিয়াছিল, শুধু তোর দোষ কি, মেয়েজাতের স্বভাবই ওই। জোবেদাও তোকে দেখতে পারত না’। (নারী ও নাগিনী, পৃ ১৭০) এই কারণেই গল্পকার নাম দিয়েছেন ‘নারী ও নাগিনী’। এই গল্পেও তিনি সাপের গায়ের

গন্ধের কথা বলেছেন- ‘খোঁড়া বলিল, বিবির গাঁয়ের গন্ধ। সাপিনী তো, সাপের সঙ্গে দেখা হবার সময় হয়েছে, তাই। ওই গন্ধেই সাপ চলে আসে’।(নারী ও নাগিনী, পৃ ১৬৮) আমরা আগেই বলেছি এই সাপের গন্ধ চেনার পাঠ তিনি পেয়েছিলেন মায়ের কাছে।

বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জীবন-জীবিকা, ঐতিহ্য, পরম্পরা ইত্যাদি লেখক উপন্যাসে তুলে ধরেছেন। সেই সঙ্গে তাদের জীবিকার অন্তর্গত বেশ কিছু গান উপন্যাসে তিনি দিয়েছেন। যেমন- পিণ্ডলার গাইছে ‘নাগিনী তুই ফুঁসিস না/ ও কালামুখী নাগিন লো-এমন করযা ফুঁসিস না’।(নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী, পৃ ১০১) তারাশঙ্কর বেদেদের মুখে বিভিন্ন গান শুনেছিলেন এবং কয়েকটি তার স্মৃতিকথায় লিপিবদ্ধও করেছেন। যেমন- ‘কালীদহের ও লাগিনী ফুঁসিস না- এমন ক’রে ফুঁসিস না/ ও তারে-দেখলে লাজের মাথা খাবি, তাও কি মরণ বুঝিস না।/ ও লাগিনী ফুঁসিস না’।(বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, আত্মকথা-১, পৃ ৭৬) সুতরাং না জেনে-বুঝে কেবলমাত্র কাল্পনিক গল্প ফেঁদে তিনি ‘নাগিনী কন্যার কাহিনী’ বা ‘নারী ও নাগিনী’ লেখেননি। একটা সময় তাঁর ‘ডাইনী’ গল্প নিয়ে কলকাতার তৎকালীন লেখকদের কেউ কেউ সন্দেহ করেছিলেন- এ নিশ্চয় বিদেশের গল্প পড়ে লেখা। স্বয়ং রবীন্দ্রনাথ সেদিন তাঁকে সেদিন অভয় দিয়েছিলেন যে, তারাশঙ্করের ডাইনী খাঁটি গ্রামবাংলার ডাইনীকেই চিত্রিত করেছে। কারণ তাঁর গ্রামেই তিনি স্বর্ণ ডাইনীকে দিনের পর দিন প্রত্যক্ষ করেছেন। বেদে সম্প্রদায়কে গভীর ভাবে পর্যবেক্ষণ করেই তিনি এ জাতীয় উপন্যাস লিখেছেন। উপন্যাসে কবিরাজি চিকিৎসা নিয়ে ‘আরোগ্য নিকেতনে’র মতো উপন্যাস তিনিই লিখেছেন। লাভপুরে জন্মানোর সূত্রে এতকিছু তিনি দেখার সুযোগ পেয়েছিলেন যা তাঁকে ভবিষ্যতের লেখক হবার রসদ সরবারহ করেছিল।

বিভূতিভূষণ বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় তাঁর ‘ইচ্ছামতী’ উপন্যাসের ভূমিকায় বলেছিলেন- ‘সেই সব বাণী, সেই সব ইতিহাস আমাদের আসল জাতীয় ইতিহাস। মুক জনগণের ইতিহাস, রাজা-রাজড়াদের বিজয়কাহিনী নয়’।(বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, ইচ্ছামতী) সামাজিক ইতিহাস বা Social history-র চর্চা আমাদের দেশে বিশেষভাবে হয়নি। সাহিত্যই হল সামাজিক ইতিহাস ধরে রাখার অন্যতম মাধ্যম। আর সাহিত্যিকের কলমে ধরে রাখা সামাজিক ইতিহাসই হল আসল ইতিহাস। কারণ সমাজ যেভাবে বয়ে চলে সাহিত্যিক তাঁর জীবনবীক্ষা অনুযায়ী তাকে সাহিত্যের পাতায় রূপ দেন। কোনো জাতিকে বা সমাজকে বুঝতে হলে ইতিহাসের বইয়ের পাশাপাশি সাহিত্যের দিকেও আমাদের হাত বাড়াতে হয়। তারাশঙ্করও একটি বেদে সম্প্রদায়কে কেন্দ্র করে তাদের সম্প্রদায়গত নানারকম প্রথা, ঐতিহ্য, সংস্কার ইত্যাদি নানা বিষয়কে চিরস্থায়ী ভাবে পাঠকের কাছে রেখে গেছেন। চলনবিল নামক এক জলাভূমিকে কেন্দ্র করে একটি গোষ্ঠীর জীবনযাত্রা যে নির্বাহ হতে পারে এই উপন্যাস তার প্রমাণ। চলনবিল ছিল বেদেদের কাছে আশ্রয় এবং ওই বিলকে কেন্দ্র করেই তাদের জীবিকা নির্বাহ হতো। ‘আখড়াইয়ের দীঘি’ গল্পেও তিনি এরকম এক দীঘির কথা বলেছেন। একটি দীঘিকে কেন্দ্র করে রাতের অন্ধকারে ঠ্যাঙারে বাহিনী পথিকের টাকা-পয়সা লুণ্ঠ করত। এটাই ছিল তাদের জীবিকা। সময়ের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে এই দীঘিরাও আজ অস্তাচলে এবং এই জীবিকাগুলিও আজ অবলুপ্তির পথে। সাহিত্য কিন্তু এই ইতিহাসকে ধরে রেখেছে। রাজা-রাজড়াদের ইতিহাসে এই ক্ষুদ্র আপাত তাৎপর্যহীন সামাজিক ইতিহাস স্থান পায়নি। তারাশঙ্কর চলনবিলকে কেন্দ্র করে বেদে সম্প্রদায়ের জাতিগত এবং ধর্মীয় ইতিহাস ও ঐতিহ্যকে সার্থকভাবে রূপ দিয়েছেন।

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Submitted: March 2026

Revision Submitted: April 2026

Accepted: May 2026

Refereed Anonymously