

## Development, Prosperity and Sustainability: Ecological Considerations in Select Malayalam Novels

**Tessa Jose**  
Ph.D Scholar  
Institute of English  
University of Kerala

### Abstract

This paper does not intend to propose that developments and associated welfare projects are unscrupulous ventures. This paper in fact advocates developments, in the true sense of the term and argues for prosperity as an essential outcome without which developments remain spiritless thus by transforming into disasters. By undertaking an analysis of two remarkable Malayalam novels in translation, *Gift in Green (Aathi)* by Sarah Joseph and *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale (Enmakaje)* by Ambigasuthan Mangad, the paper attempts to prove the same. The novels that portray real life incidents in Kerala pungently criticise modern day developments and its derivatives. In the universe that the texts presents, on one side positions a “civilised” society which craves to satisfy its selfish needs for profits and benefits in the disguise of “development” and on the other indigenous communities who turn out to be victims of the same. This paper intends to revisit some of the popular terms often taken for granted, to review many of the flawed conceptions and to reiterate what has already been said, but nevertheless needs to be heard again.

**Keywords:** Development, Maldevelopment, Prosperity, Nature, Culture, Sustainability

### Introduction

A discussion pertaining to developmental projects, principles of sustainability and ethical concerns requires an in-depth analysis of the mentioned terms as the pre-requisite. “Development” is a term most often misinterpreted to suit many persons’ personal comforts and profits. Though the term carries positive connotations, when it comes to practical usages, it often turns out to be of contrasting effect. For example, most often the terms like “science” and “technology” are closely associated with the concept of “progress” and “development”. Efforts and initiatives to promote quality education, advance living conditions, create employment opportunities and boost skills in younger generations to craft a better world are good motives in themselves. These are developments in their true sense. However meeting these ends at the cost of many fundamental factors, like air, water, trees, nature, non-humans as well as humans, does not qualify these initiatives as “developments”, in spite of how promising they may appear. There cannot be, or rather should not be any justifications for “developments” that create victims. “Development” and “victims” form a pair of contrasting terms and creation of victims as a result of “developments” is never acceptable. Nevermore they are developments, but rather disasters. Vandana Siva, one among the leading Indian environmentalists, uses the term “maldevelopment” which she defines as “a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle.” (4) She points out, “I want

to argue that what is currently called development is essentially maldevelopment, based on the introduction or accentuation of the domination of man over nature and women.” (5) The paper employs the term development (without any quotation marks) to indicate its true positive connotations and the same term with its manipulated meaning within the quotation marks (“development”) for a more effective reading.

### (Re)Considering Popular Notions

Development could be considered as the sum total of sustainability, ethics, and prosperity. All that which negates even any one of the elements, negates the spirit of the concept of development. Development which should not be a rat race embraces concepts of sanity and spirituality and a neglect of these makes developments bereft of a soul. Limiting the definition of development to the frame of monetary profits and loss, meddles with the inviolability circling the concept. Since humans often nurture a tendency to categorise all that which appear ideal under a utopian frame, this too might fall into the same category. This has knowingly or unknowingly put people to a complacent state from which they are reluctant to wake up. The plundering of natural resources often lead to violence and abuse against many classes since many refuse to believe in the possibility of this “utopia”. But at the same time there have been many who have fought relentlessly for the same. Those ones who considered indifference in this context to be a crime, fought primarily to shake people off from their complacent attitudes. Literature has played a major role in performing the same. *Gift in Green (Aathi)* by Sarah Joseph and *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale (Enmakaje)* by Ambigasuthan Mangad gains significance in this context.

Considering Kerala experiences through an analysis of the above works, the paper looks into the means through which the writers voice a need for reviewing “development” and related concepts, and also how they throw insights into the same. Prosperity as observed in the universe of the select texts is not to be considered merely as accumulation of wealth, but as that which equals abundance and diversity. Here the term is not limited to its affiliations to the idea of financial flourishing. Prosperity not just points to growth, but to healthy growth. This is one among the most desired end results of development which is often found missing in the day to day “developmental” projects. This is where *Gift in Green* and *Swarga* offer counter narratives to the most often misinterpreted notions of development and related terms.

Indigenous traditions are often considered antonyms of “civilisation”. “Civilisation” is a term frequently substituted for development. While the modern man considers those societies that are “advanced” as civilised societies and the inhabitants of the same as civilised humans, there is a need to address the question of what is the “advancement” that the modern man hungers for. Civilisation in its original sense of meaning indicates a society, a culture, and a way of life of a particular area. While the notion of “advancements” enters the scene, indigenous societies, their traditions and knowledge systems are placed outside the casing of “civilised” or rather “developed” societies, but as ones that are to be “civilised”, or in dire need of “development”. Here when “development” occurs, they often lead to disasters and conditions of distraught. Vandana Shiva condemns “. . . a development which destroys life and threatens survival.” (xii) The select novels could be read as rendering a paradoxical situation, a paradox of rescinding the prosperous conditions of indigenous settings so as to

force “civilised” man’s definition of prosperity on to the place through various “developments”. This paradox is studied in detail in the paper. The paper makes use of the concept of maldevelopment proposed by Vandana Siva, to substantiate the arguments.

‘Development’ was to have been a post-colonial project, a choice for accepting a model of progress in which the entire world remade itself on the model of the colonising modern west, without having to undergo the subjugation and exploitation that colonialism entailed. . . . Development, as the improved well-being of all, was thus equated with the westernisation of economic categories - of needs, of Productivity, of growth. Concepts and categories about economic development and natural resource utilisation that had emerged in the specific context of industrialisation and capitalist growth in a centre of colonial power, were raised to the level of universal assumptions and applicability in the entirely different context of basic needs satisfaction for the people of the newly independent Third World countries. . . . 'Development' as capital accumulation and the commercialisation of the economy for the generation of 'surplus' and profits thus involved the reproduction not merely-of a particular form of creation of wealth, but also of the associated creation of poverty and dispossession. A replication of economic development based on commercialisation of resource use for commodity production in the newly independent countries created the internal colonies. Development was thus reduced to a continuation of the process of colonisation; it became an extension of the project of wealth creation in modern western patriarchy's economic vision, which was based on the exploitation or exclusion of women (of the west and non-west), on the exploitation and degradation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures (Shiva 1-2).

In *Gift in Green* and *Swarga*, people are seen to cherish their good old days, those days prior to “developments” entering the place. Both the places contained rich variety of flora and fauna which was sacrificed in the name of “development”. A way of living was destroyed in order to force changes onto a place and the people residing there. More than material wealth and prospects, the people of the place valued their beliefs and knowledge systems which included close communion with nature and various spiritual practices. Neelakandan, the central character in *Swarga* reaches certain deep understandings once he explores Enmakaje. He comprehends from the narratives of Panji, that Enmakaje is the land of truth. He also recognises the place as the land of mountains, of caverns and of tigers. But he reaches the ultimate conclusion that these were the definitions that suited the place before “developments” by Plantation Corporation entered the scene. He realises that all those definitions have given way to a new title that of Enmakaje as “the land of people with strange illnesses.” This was the “development” that cashew nut plantations gifted to the place and the people.

Prosperity does not equal profit. Aathi and Enmakaje existed in prosperous conditions, with its abundant natural resources, sundry flora and fauna and diverse legends and myths. “Developments” create conflict and confusion in the place, between man and Nature and also between fellow human beings. Even when “developments” turn out to be disasters filling the land with victims of the same, representatives of the “civilised society”, who through their actions prove to be intruders of the place justify those disasters as indications of upcoming prosperity. This idea of fortunes and material prospects at the cost of

an entire culture and its way of living is overthrown by the writers through their fictional accounts. Hence in spite of the mass destructions, disasters and exploitations that the place encounters, the legends, myths, story-telling sessions and belief systems of the people and the place are shown to remain alive. That is why when *Gift in Green* ends, one sees a new “Thampuram” floating over the river and towards the end of *Swarga*, the “Nagaraja” makes an appearance to save the natives.

When prospects and prosperity are measured in terms of monetary profit and loss, the very spirit of development is destroyed which eventually leads to incomplete and stunted growths. Prosperity definitely ensures an enhanced quality of life. But narrowing down the definitions of this “quality of life” poses concerns. Apart from monetary benefits, it is about happiness and peace of mind, betterment of living conditions without disturbing the state of equilibrium, evading the creation of victims or chances of fatalities, recognising and promoting distinctive geographies and appreciating abundance and diversity. The latter connect more to the spirit and the soul and hence entitle a spiritual dimension to the notions on prosperity. Prosperity hence becomes a spiritual outcome of development without which the latter would turn soulless.

### ***Gift in Green: Death by/of water***

In a conversation with Rev. Dr. Valson Thampu, translator of *Aathi*, Sarah Joseph states, “the vision for development in vogue today favours the rich and the powerful, jeopardizing the very survival of the lesser mortals and the eco-system as a whole. . . . Development must be measured not by statistical abstractions, but by the extent to which the least among us are empowered. Why don’t we begin to talk about per capita happiness or per capita peace?” (*Gift in Green*, “Speaking of Aathi”) She boldly sketches in her work how prosperous conditions of Aathi are disturbed and swapped for “prosperity” through “developments” by Kumaran and other intruders of the place. Once “developments” enter the place, life exits Aathi. Many fall victims to Kumaran’s “development prospects” to transform Aathi (which is a haven) to a “civilised” habitation. The construction of bridges, roads, and other infrastructures, usage of deadly poisonous DDTs etc. sacrifice the diverse water life of the place by creating an ecological disaster. It also thereby disturbs the sanctity that the inhabitants of the place attribute to water and water life. It leaves people bereft of a life and a rift is thus created between them and their surroundings. Vandana Shiva states that ecological cycles get affected once “The forest is separated from the river, the field is separated from the forest, the animals are separated from the crops. Each is then separately developed, and the delicate balance which ensures sustainability and equity is destroyed.”(44) Kumaran’s scheme of “developing” the place includes creation of a paradise “by landfilling and levelling four hundred acres of backwaters. . . . The water that bred fish for the local people and the roots of the mangrove trees among which the prawns spawned were non-issues in comparison.” (142) People of the place are devoid of a life when the crystal clear water of Aathi which was their soul companion transmutes to a muddy, smelly existence. Similarly, garbage from the cities disposed in Aathi under the name of landfilling leads to many contagious diseases. Typhoid looms over the place leading to the death of many, including children and adults. Shiva argues that the destructions caused by maldevelopmental projects include not just the death of nature but erasure of people living in close connection to it. They become means of “capital accumulation and the commercialisation of the economy for the generation of ‘surplus’ and profits thus involved the reproduction not merely— of a particular

form of creation of wealth, but also of the associated creation of poverty and dispossession.”(1) Creation of victims is often considered as inevitable in the face of “development” and often validations are made to substantiate the same to aid selfish interests of a section. This tendency is sharply criticised by the novelist. Neglecting adoption of proper safety measures, rejecting compensations and rehabilitations, creating vast spread destructions etc. do not count as developments and hence violence perpetrated in the disguise of development are to be resisted and combated.

Remember Kumaran abandoned Aathi. . . . Do you think he remembers any longer what this earth means to all of us? For him, Aathi no longer means rice, grain or fish. It means only money, money, money!. . . . For us the land means a great deal more than this calculation of profit and loss. The land is warmth of our heart! We know the land with our hearts, not with our heads (205).

These lines remind one of the speech made by Chief Seattle in response to American Government’s land treaty. Reading along the same lines, people of Aathi fear the consequences of “development” and its devastating impact on the ecosystem. Shiva clearly points out the erroneous notion of considering all the works that do not yield profits or capital as unproductive and she condemns this attitude which positions as one among the founding principles of “developments”. Kumaran is a stereotypical representation of a “civilised”, “cultured” man who leaves Aathi believing the indigenous traditions of the place to be regressive and hence in dire need of “development”. He returns stating that he would rescue the people of the place “from the mud and marsh of Aathi.” (43) Many of the youngsters are initially lured by the prospects Kumaran offers them and they decide to lend him a chance to bring transformations to Aathi as he promised. But soon they regret the decision since the “developments” Kumaran brings to the place and the life of the people in the name of progress turns their life topsy-turvy. Holistic lifestyle which the people of Aathi led before Kumaran’s re-entry to the place undergoes a serious shift, most of the people suffering physically and psychologically from the aftermaths of “development”.

The entire ecosystem falls victim to the “developmental projects” of Kumaran. Aathi is portrayed as “an island dotted with waterbodies, marshland and slush. Surrounded by backwaters, it lay secluded from the rest of the world.” (43) The place contained a whole different ecosystem which demanded unique treatment and management in order to maintain the abundance and diversity of the place. It is this equilibrium that Kumaran disturbs. The world beyond the ferry of Aathi is a representation of “civilised” societies. “The way of life there was marked by big houses, broad roads, busy traffic, schools, hospitals, markets, the hustle and bustle of people- a culture of affluence altogether alien to the people of Aathi.” (43) But it is to be noted that it is from this world that Gitanjali, a mother and her seven year old daughter named Kayal reaches Aathi in search of remedies from the ails of modern life. This tears apart the false pretensions of “civilisation” and upholds the sanctity of many of the indigenous practices. Close affinity to nature which stands as the fundamental principle to these traditions is often found lacking in “civilised” societies. The Nature/Culture distinction, one among a series of classic logocentric oppositions in Western thought, hence turns out to be one among the major grounds on which destructive “developmental” paradigm root their principles. The idea stems from a concept characterised by Descarte’s most famous quote: “cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am). The capacity to think hence was considered a superior trait centred on which both the concepts were separated. Both were assumed to be



two distinct water tight compartments in stark contrast to each other. Humans considered themselves constituting the latter category, that of “Culture” and hence attributing the same of a superior status. Nature was considered to represent all that was non-human and hence of an inferior position. Hence to value Nature and its principles to ensure a sustainable development was considered a waste of time. But *Aathi* strikes back against those erroneous notions. “Developments” neglecting Nature and its resources are portrayed as void and lifeless. Prosperity is not ensured in such situations since oppressions and victimisations as the result lead to accumulation of wealth in the hands of only a small section while the rest are tormented and left to suffer.

### **Swarga: The Land of Strange Illnesses**

*Swarga* unveils endosulphan tragedies which sowed immense destructions to the place and people of Enmakaje at Kasargod district in Kerala. In the novel, one witnesses “developments” in the name of progress causing disturbances in the balance of nature, transmuting the heavenly place into a wasteland. The pesticide which is aerially sprayed in the cashew plantations adversely affects the water bodies and the soil of Enmakaje destroying diverse species unique to the place. The village is inhabited by people with physical as well as mental deformities, with misshapen body parts and creeping illnesses. Children with long protruding tongues, bulging eyes, fading eyesight, disproportionate heads, aging hair, affected skin, weird behaviours and various mental disabilities turn out to be the “posterity” of Enmakaje, but with an exception that none of them succeeds in witnessing a future. Children die at an earlier age thus wiping out the possibilities of a future generation of the people of Enmakaje. The possibilities of the constituents of endosulphan to remain in the cells of the people and pass them on to several generations (if there remains any) comes as a by-product of the “developments” that enter the place. Kerala Plantation Corporation with its ‘development’ paradigm attempts to overpower the indigenous knowledge practices of Enmakaje and the cashew nut plantations which come up as a result promising progress and prosperity in fact homogenise the diversity of the place devoiding the land of its initial prosperous conditions. The author hints at a total annihilation of an indigenous culture from the place in the name of development. Nevermore birds fly over the place, fishes stride in the waters or animals thrive in the place. “In this vast expanse, he could not sense the presence of a single living creature. Not even a lizard or a chameleon or a frog or snake or mongoose ... but the thought that not even a cockroach was to be seen was truly scary.” (22) The lives of the village people centred on Nature thus get severely affected. The authorities and the officials do not pay heed to the pleas of the local people to ban the use of Endosulfan, instead labelling it as a medicine which has the potential to reap great profits in the market and in addition assert how great a progress it would bring to the place and the people since higher profits would ensure better living conditions and facilities. Jayarajan, a journalist in the novel comments:

In Swarga- in Pedre village- alone ther’ are mor’ tha’ a thousan’ surangas! ... Thi’ abundance of water which’ made this place heaven is wha’s makin’ it hell now . . . Twenty-five yea’s, the poison’s been sprayed on those waterbodies! If it wer’ a well, you could cover it. Bu’ the poison tha’ falls on the hill, it gets int’ the surangas an’ reaches you’ home. Isn’ tha’ why this place is full of sick peopl’ (126–7).

The author of *Enmakaje* in an article titled “*Neethikedinte Thadavarakal*” (Prisons of Injustice), published in Mathrubhumi weekly states:

The shocking physical deformities of children born with strange bodies are not created by the media through ‘morphing’. Instead, they are lives that got shattered when the poison was sprayed from the helicopters over the innocent people of Kasaragod, for long twenty five years, by the PCK with the vile support of changing governments. Not only PCK, but also the manufacturers of the strong venom and the agricultural scientists who suggested pouring it over the people are the culprits (qtd. in Krishnan 42).

By destroying the diversity of the place by substituting diverse species of the place with monoculture plantations, “civilisations” encroach upon indigenous ways of living, leaving them very little options of survival. More than six hundred hectares is destroyed in such a manner. And they justify these violent actions from their part as “developments”

It is assumed that ‘production’ takes place only when mediated by technologies for commodity production, even when such technologies destroy life. A stable and clean river is not a productive resource in this view: it needs to be ‘developed’ with dams in order to become so....Natural forests remain unproductive till they are developed into monoculture plantations of commercial species. Development thus, is equivalent to maldevelopment....which sees all work that does not produce profits and capital as non or unproductive work (Shiva 3-4).

Indigenous people who live in harmony with nature hence become marginalised lot. The capitalist, consumerist man who plunders the resources of nature and robs traditional and indigenous knowledge systems for commodification of the same sows severe havoc on nature and its dependents. The Man and the Woman, two central characters in the novel are major symbols through which the writer offers alternatives to the issues of maldevelopment. However, retreating to the green, discarding human company or any trace of humanity is not the solution that the writer offers. He puts forth in his novel that fleeing from the problems instigated by “civilised” man believing no permanent solutions for the same exist, is not the remedy. Rather, the writer interestingly portrays how Nature itself communicates to man on the need and importance of an unlearning-relearning process. Nature moves from being a passive silent listener, to an active, speaking agent in *Enmakaje*. By breaking the silence that so long it maintained, Nature commands man and man obediently carries out its orders. The shift in positions dismantles the Nature-Culture binary in which men were the only speaking agents. The novel which concludes with Nature welcoming human to live a life in harmony with it and other species, is a harbinger towards a sustainable future which may be attained only when man discards the decayed outer covering of a “cultured” “civilised” man and becomes one with Nature. Hence sustainable development which thus takes the place of maldevelopment is offered as a way out. That is why one witnesses a Noah’s ark inside the cave which provides shelter to all the species that were not anymore seen in *Enmakaje* due to the interventions of “civilised” man. The man and woman discard their clothes (symbols of culture) and enter naked into the cave where they become just one among the diverse species resting inside.

## Conclusion

This paper attempts to throw a glimpse into what developments actually are and what they are not through an analysis of two real-life environmental movements turned into art. When *Gift in Green* laments on the polluted water bodies of Aathi, destroyed ecosystem and

affected community, *Swarga* cries its heart out over the endosulphan tragedies which doomed an entire place and its people. The paper scrutinises certain misconceptions that often cause “developments” to end up as disasters. The paper attempts a revisiting and reframing of different notions concerning development through an analysis of the select texts. Considering prosperity as an essential outcome of development, the paper examines how the lack of the former indicates a flawed developmental paradigm. The laments of people of Aathi and Enmakaje hence turn out to be a call for revisions on many of the misconceived notions prompted by consumerist capitalist societies.

These two texts though seem to be a lot researched on do provide ample scope for research and further studies. Endosulphan victims of Enmakaje till date of this paper’s completion have not been granted justice. Hence it becomes immensely relevant to continue discussions on the concerns that the novels have put forth, so that more number of people get to know about the current situations and are made aware of the need for changes- in thoughts and deeds. At a time when climate changes as a result of anthropocentric activities have taken a toll on the entire population, when many projects in the name of “development” are causing immense struggles and tribulations, when in spite of the current devastating conditions further fatal destructions are proceeded, this paper gains significance.

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