

Book Review: Arati Kumar-Rao's *Marginlands* (2023)**Shagun Choudhary**

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Imagine a civilisation comprising thousands of people living in a long, winding band of land with steep drops on either side. The air is barely breathable. Most importantly, all the members of this society are completely blind and they navigate, socialise, search for food and look after their young using a highly advanced system of sound. Now, imagine that a continuous swarm of low-flying drones invades this area. The loud noise from the machines overwhelms the subtle sounds that are necessary for survival. Since they can no longer communicate or hunt, the civilisation gradually and inevitably starves and breaks apart.

This dystopian allegory is not the premise of a speculative sci-fi novel; it is the lived reality of the endangered Gangetic river dolphin, as rendered in Arati Kumar-Rao's devastating and vital work of environmental non-fiction, *Marginlands: Indian Landscapes on the Brink* (Picador India, 2023). The drones are the dredgers and cargo ships mandated by India's National Waterways project; the blind citizens are the apex predators of the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin. Through this haunting acoustic metaphor, Kumar-Rao captures the overarching thesis of her book: we have become culturally and institutionally deaf to the nuanced languages of the natural world, substituting the hyper-local wisdom of ecosystems with the homogenising, destructive noise of modern 'development'.

Marginlands presents an account of the ecological deterioration taking place in the peripheral regions of the Indian subcontinent. After giving up her successful career in market research, Kumar-Rao spent more than ten years walking around the environmental margins of her own country. Beginning in the arid areas of the Thar Desert and proceeding to the shifting islands of silt in Bengal and moving on from the eroding coastline of Kerala to the retreating glaciers of Ladakh and the well-kept lawns of Bangalore, her account tells what the scholar Rob Nixon famously called 'slow violence'—that is, the gradual and frequently invisible environmental destruction which mainly affects the vulnerable. Yet what Kumar-Rao has achieved is not simply to record the ruin, but rather to carefully preserve the generational knowledge of those people who still know how to read the land.

The book's structural excellence is based on its division of the subject matter into five separate theatres of ecological crisis. In the first part of the book, the story takes us to the Thar Desert, a region which bureaucratic cartographers have regarded as a 'wasteland' suitable for exploitation. It is here that Kumar-Rao presents us with Chhattar Singh, an artisanal geographer and shepherd who has a remarkable vocabulary when it comes to describing his surroundings. While someone outside would only see bare sand, Singh can identify *teetar pankhi* (cirrocumulus clouds that look like a partridge's wing) and knows exactly where to dig a *beri* (a percolation well) at the foot of a dune by detecting the underlying gypsum layer which holds in sweet rainwater.

Kumar-Rao launches a vigorous critique of state intervention through Singh. The Indian government's effort to 'de-desertify' the area by means of the Indira Gandhi Canal brought about intensive irrigation in a region completely unsuitable for it, leading to severe

waterlogging, the destruction of the native *sevan* grass and the appearance of mosquitoes that carry malaria. The tragedy described here is as much an epistemological one as it is an ecological one; the state, when looking at the desert through the lens of extraction (such as limestone mining) or through the lens of misguided agricultural expansion, wipes out the ancient and sustainable hydro-engineering practices of the Paliwal Brahmins—who obtained moisture using *khadeens* without taking a single drop of groundwater. Kumar-Rao shows that once the native terminology of a landscape disappears, the landscape is soon paved over.

The contrast between practical knowledge and top-down engineering is even more marked in Part 2, as it deals with the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin; it is in these chapters that the book attains its greatest socio-political significance. Kumar-Rao looks at the disastrous aftermath of the Farakka Barrage, a dam built in 1971 with the aim of draining silt into the Hooghly River. By disregarding the tidal conditions of the estuary, the barrage had the effect only of trapping the sediment, raising the riverbed and causing the Ganga to meander wildly, thereby eating away the fertile land in Malda.

The human toll of this deliberately caused catastrophe is devastating. There are so-called ‘nowhere people’ who live on transient *chars* (silt islands), such as Palash Gachhi—an area that is claimed by the state of Jharkhand but whose Bengali-speaking inhabitants are denied citizenship rights and receive no infrastructure from either of the neighbouring states. These environmental migrants, who have been subjected to forced moves as many as seventeen times in twenty years, illustrate the spatial separation that is a feature of climate crises. Rather than treating these people just as statistics, Kumar-Rao describes the various systemic pitfalls they find themselves in, for example, the way women are driven into exploitative labour—rolling *beedis* (tobacco leaves)—for less than a dollar a day in order to make up for the loss of their agricultural livelihoods. Her writing shows a careful and compassionate insight, examining how human-caused interventions transform the river’s natural, life-giving monsoon surge (*barshakal*) into an apocalyptic flood (*bonya*).

When the narrative reaches the coastlines in Part 3, Kumar-Rao broadens her investigation to look at the combined horrors of human-animal conflict and infrastructural overreach. In the Sundarbans, the narrative follows Sunanda, a ‘tiger widow’ whose husband was taken by a Bengal tiger while he was fishing in the mangrove maze. Since she did not receive government compensation, the attack having taken place in arbitrarily enlarged ‘core’ forest areas, she is compelled to go back into the swamps which were the cause of her husband’s death and search for mud crabs in water that reaches up to her waist in dangerous, muddy marshes. The examination of coastal Kerala is just as damning. Kumar-Rao shows the imprudence of building straight seawalls to stop erosion; by interfering with the natural ‘longshore drift’ of sediment, these concrete barriers end up depriving the northern beaches of sand, worsening the erosion they were meant to stop and destroying the areas needed for traditional *kambavala* (shore seine) fishing.

Even though there is a great deal of ecological grief, *Marginlands* firmly avoids falling into pure fatalism. In Part 4, which is set in the stunning high-altitude desert of Ladakh, the book provides a thorough demonstration of adaptive resilience. Because of increasing winter temperatures and the retreat of the glaciers, Ladakh is experiencing a severe agricultural crisis. Sonam Wangchuk, the engineer and educator, invented ‘ice stupas’—conical structures made from winter meltwater that freeze and then gradually release water during the dry spring planting season. Wangchuk’s belief—that education should enable students to deal with real-world crises rather than just prepare them for exams—offers a much-needed intellectual contrast to the bureaucratic narrowness criticised in the earlier chapters.

Nevertheless, even in Ladakh, Kumar-Rao does not avoid the complexities of the Anthropocene. She records the frightening increase in feral Tibetan mastiffs, fed on the wet waste from military camps, that now hunt in packs, engage in kleptoparasitism by taking the kills of the endangered Tibetan wolf and destroy the ground-nesting black-necked cranes.

In the fifth part, Kumar-Rao brings the issue of the environment directly to the door of the urban reader, thus completing the connection between the wild outskirts and the modern metropolis. Moving from the remote frontiers to the well-tended, gated areas of Bangalore, she looks at the small-scale ecology of urban environments. She records her own defiance of the sterile, pesticide-filled lawns by growing native ‘weeds’ such as *Calotropis gigantea* (milkweed) and turns her terrace into a habitat for the solitary carpenter bee (*Xylocopa*). This section is quietly powerful in that it shows how the loss of nesting sites for cavity-nesting urban pollinators reflects the wider, large-scale disappearance of habitats described in the earlier chapters. It is also in this part that Kumar-Rao fully develops her metaphor of blind civilisation; she compares the deafening, traumatic noise of motorways and urban expansion with the acoustic pollution that impairs the Gangetic dolphins, highlighting our deep sensory disconnection. She argues convincingly that urbanisation has not only covered up our wetlands but also diminished our ability to hear and engage with the non-human world.

What makes *Marginlands* so successful is Kumar-Rao’s unique authorial voice, a combination of the careful attention typical of a scientist and the poetic rhythm of a poet. Her prose is highly sensory: she doesn’t just say that an area is polluted; she enables us to hear the “hellish din” of a cement factory and smell the “ghastly mix of rotting leather” from the swollen Sutlej River. The way she describes the wildlife is astonishing in its accuracy—from the changing iridescence of the emerald and sapphire carpenter bee to the ghostly, fleeting appearance of the Indus river dolphin that you barely catch a glimpse of. By including local folklore—such as the tale of the forest goddess Bonbibi in the Sundarbans or the legendary origins of the Paliwal Brahmins—she shows that landscapes are not simply physical spaces but cultural archives deeply marked by human memory.

The book has one drawback, which is its essentially episodic structure. Since it is based on a decade’s worth of dispatches from the field, the shifts between the five different biomes can at times seem sudden, making it necessary for the reader to constantly readjust both their geographical and emotional perspective. Moreover, the intense amount of despair recorded—the continuous stream of displaced people, amputated limbs, homes that have been drowned and animals that have suffocated—may lead the reader to experience empathetic exhaustion. Yet it might be said that this exact kind of overwhelming effect is in fact the purpose of the work. The fragmented nature of the narrative corresponds to the fragmentation of the habitats it portrays. The author is asking us to endure the discomfort and to reject the simple comfort of a well-ordered, optimistic ending.

With regard to its position in today’s literature, *Marginlands* stands beside the environmental reporting of Amitav Ghosh and the immersive slow journalism of Paul Salopek (who, as Kumar-Rao notably does, travels through Punjab). The book will have a deep impact on ecologists, as well as on policymakers and academics concerned with the environmental history of South Asia. Nevertheless, because of its accessible and narrative style it is also important for the general reader. It changes the way we understand ‘wildlife’, directing our attention away from the fetishised large animals found in protected tiger reserves and towards the complex and delicate ecosystems in our immediate surroundings—from the intertidal rock pools in Mumbai to the vanishing silt islands of the Brahmaputra.

Marginlands is essentially a deep reflection on the importance of paying attention. In her epilogue, Kumar-Rao recalls looking down at a river from a commercial aeroplane at 37,000 feet; from that clean, insulated position the river appears no more than a pretty blue strip and the complexities of the communities living along its banks disappear out of sight. Her journey amounts to a call for us to go down from both our metaphorical and actual heights, to walk at a normal human speed and to acknowledge that the term 'climate change' is too bland an all-encompassing phrase to cover the particular, local suffering caused by dams, dredgers, seawalls and canals.

Kumar-Rao leaves us with a clear understanding that the tragedy of the Anthropocene consists not only in the fact that the land is disappearing but also in the fact that the language needed to grasp it is being suppressed. Since the auditory environment of the natural world is becoming more and more dominated by the mechanical noise of extraction, *Marginlands* represents a vital and beautifully executed form of acoustic resistance. It calls on us to halt, to pull our feet out of the concrete and finally to learn how to listen before the silence becomes permanent.