

Island Ecology in the Anthropocene, State of Indigenous Medicine and Ecomedia: An Ecocritical Study of the TV Series 'Kaala Paani'

Somnath Mahato

Junior Research Fellow

S.K.B. University, Purulia (WB)

Abstract

In this age of Anthropocene and social media the films, Tv series and Web Shows are remarkable platforms of expressing the message and consciousness with innumerable active audiences. This planet is the habitat of thousands of species but it is ruled by the humans. The anthropogenic activities have disturbed its ecosystem and the islands are not the exception. We have always destroyed the harmony of the island ecology in the name of development and greed. It is the result of human intervention that several species may it be animal or plant became extinct. This research article intends to examine the environmental concerns towards the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the survival drama series Kaala Pani (2023) directed by Sameer Saxena and Amit Golani. It depicts the human-nature relationship, impacts of Anthropocene, history of indigenous tribe and their survival from epidemic disease through their medicinal plant collected from these islands. Ecocriticism studies the representation of environment in literature. This research has an interdisciplinary approach to explore the environmental issues and concerns depicted in this tv series and aims to bring the consciousness towards the environment and ecology especially to the islands. It also intends to make the world aware about the need to change our thoughts, attitudes and actions to avoid the negative impacts of environmental degradation and to preserve it.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Ecomedia, Ecofiction, Medical Humanities, Film Studies

Introduction

“Anthropocene is a way of thinking with deep time”. (Davies, 12)

Islands have emerged as a significant space for work in the context of Anthropocene. Working with islands have become productive in the development of many of the core conceptual frameworks for Anthropocene thinking (qtd. in Pugh & Chandler). Islands provide distinct potentials, affordances and capacities in contrast to modern, mainland life. Pugh and Chandler provide a set of concepts namely ‘relational entanglements’, ‘relational awareness’ and ‘feedbacks’ to analyze the current trend of working with islands. Islands illustrate the interrelated entanglement and interdependence of all species under the Anthropocene. The islands were frequently perceived as isolated, remote, liminal and inhabited by savage peoples under earlier European and modern thinking in contrast to mainland or continental reasoning. In addition, with these earlier narratives of western and modern fantasies of control islands often depicted as a state of helplessness, disposability or requiring rescue by others in the discussion about climate change. Islanders are ‘often portrayed as passive victims waiting to be saved from their sinking islands’ (qtd in Pugh & Chandler). This article will examine how the island is significant in the development of new alternative approaches of thinking distinct from modern mainland thought. This research work will scrutinize the ecological state of the islands of Andaman and Nicobar in the context of Anthropocene as depicted in the 2023 survival drama series *Kaala Paani* directed by Sameer Saxena and Amit Golani. Set in 2027 this Netflix series follows the story of a group of people tourists and local residents who find themselves stranded on a floating landmass during the sudden outbreak of mysterious, deadly and contagious virus. It causes the immediate death of the effected person within few days and left no cure. The experts named it Leptospiral Haemorrhage Fever 27 (LHF 27). This research work delves into the underlying details of the ecological concerns, medicinal importance of the plants of islands and the indigenous knowledge related to it and overall, this series as a medium to bring all those concerns to limelight.

Anthropocene Context

In this context this series delves into the concept of ecological resilience, relational entanglements and reveals the ecological degradation of the islands which effects the lives of

the inhabitants. Through its multidimensional narrative this island which is isolated from mainland becomes a space for limitless potential for some and a domain of confinement for others. In ecology 'resilience' is referred to the ecosystem's capacity to withstand disturbances, recovering from them, and adapt to evolving conditions while preserving its fundamental mechanisms. Resilience seeks to capture the art of adaptation or of adaptive change in relation to changing circumstances (qtd in Pugh& Chandler). Dr. J. Premkumar in his article 'Ecological Resilience: A Case Study of Netflix Series *Kaala Paani* and its Environmental Narrative in Trauma Studies' points out that the series effectively establishes an immersive experience, encouraging viewers to ponder on the interrelated connections between human activities and environmental resilience. Island standpoints on resilience have grown in prominence in non-modern or postmodern frameworks of governance as a response to the linearity of thinking about sustainability and progress in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is characterized by several disruptions resulting from human activity, such as pollution, resource over-exploitation, destruction of habitats and climate change. The Netflix series *Kaala Paani* offers an engaging investigation of ecological resilience in the Anthropocene, highlighting the contemporary issues navigating ecosystems through its environmental narrative. In the beginning of each episode during the character casting we can see an image of huge water pipe of penetrating the forests which comes under the Jenkins Project of ATOM. In the opening nocturnal scene of it the Orakas are trying to sabotage the water pipe in the forest. This activity is a kind of foretelling of the catastrophic threat that is going to occur. The series is portrayed from the perspective of non-indigenous communities of the islands including settlers, tourists, industrialists, bureaucrats, politicians while the indigenous Orakas depicted marginally though they have a greater role in the islands. The island versus mainland dynamics has an important role in this case. Because of its isolation from the mainland this place often marginalized in the national consciousness and sometimes recognized solely as a tourist destination. As a result, it becomes an opportunity for the capitalist corporation like ATOM. To promote their company project, they are planning to host a tourism festival namely 'Swaraj Mahotsav' and to fulfil the target the permission of the Chief Medical Officer Dr. Soudamini Singh (character portrayed by Mona Singh). But she denied to give the permission because she is suspicious about the mysterious disease which is spreading among the inhabitants of Andaman. ATOM is solely responsible for this epidemic because their water pipeline project distributed the virus from Jenkins Lake. The Attavus

project dug out the LHF 27 bacteria from the Orakas' burial ground which situates beside the lake. Ketan Kamat (played by Amey Wagh), a corrupt police officer who works for ATOM to get out from his punishment transfer in Andaman presents a news article to Saurabh Wani (played by Rajesh Khattar), the in charge of the project that reveals how they have destructed the place and gave a new life to the LHF bacteria. When Ketan asks that why they have occupied the land which belongs to the environmental buffer zone. In reply Wani said that they could do it and they did it. Human being always presents themselves as superior to other species. Wani's dialogue is a reflection of speciesism in the context of Anthropocene. As he says,

We could do it and we did it. Every second day you get to hear that the plastic in the ocean is killing so many dolphins, so many turtles. What do you think that those who throw plastic on the beach want to kill those creatures? No! They do it because they can do it. That's it! (Forefathers, 12:50 – 13:05)

As a response to Ketan's remark on destroying the environmental buffer zone he says,

And what environmental buffer zone are you talking about, Ketan Sahib? The place you're standing in now was a dense jungle some years ago. Every major city of the world was built by chopping forests and they were built by people like us. (Forefathers, 13:10 -13:25)

The interrelations of ecology and human activities effects the island which is a microcosm of the world and the planet in a greater extent. Wani says,

I could blame this whole damn thing on you too, Ketan Sahib. Had you not proved Dr. Singh wrong, then this disease would never have reached our homes. But, no, you worked in your best interest like we did. And none of that makes us evil, it just makes us human! (Forefathers, 13:27 -13:40)

Not only these things the outsiders also involve with poaching of turtle eggs, animals and exploiting the indigenous Orakas. In the first episode 'Nature Wins' in a particular scene we can see that Chiranjeevi's (Sukant Goel) friend Pundi (Mahadev Singh Lakhawat) met the poachers to take a box full of turtle eggs to deliver it to the customer (Nature Wins, 37:18) It reminds us Pankaj Sekhsaria's comment when he mentioned in his writings about the green leatherback sea turtles which is a key species of Andaman Nicobar Island. Apart from these

the settlers destroyed several plant lives as example the Andamani Echinacea which is a cure to LHF 27 is completely vanished from the Jenkins Bio Park, a place of ecological conservation due to ATOM's project. Due to these so-called development project the harmony of the island ecology has been disturbed. From the conversation among Chiru and the tourist family we came to that there is scarcity of drinking water in the islands. Apart from these there are characters like Vinayak (Priyansh Jora) who has concerns to save the islands and the indigenous Orakas. He leads a protest against the destructive activities of ATOM. The conservation is important because the indigenous knowledge of Orakas is the basis of survival in the islands. But there are always dualities in the human characteristics, besides neocolonialism the outsiders from mainland always think themselves superior from the indigenous people. The irony is to survive in those unknown islands the outsiders are dependent to them. The Darwinian theory of survival of the fittest reflects in this series. In the last episode 'Darwins Bay' when the situation becomes threatening to the population of the common islanders and the tourists L G Qadri (Ashutosh Gowariker) who has always soft corner for the Orakas takes a dreadful decision to risk the lives of entire population of the tribe. He says,

So that thousands of people could survive, their leader had to evolve. Because evolution is the price paid by every species to survive. ...mass extinction events wiped out even the biggest of creatures. But our ancestors persisted even in such circumstances. Had they given up, humans would have been extinct today. (50:21 – 51:19)

Here is the difference between the settlers and the indigenous people, after destroying the plant species Andamani Echinacea which is a natural cure of LHF 27 they are going to risk the entire tribe's lives to extract the peptide from their body as an antidote. Dr. Singh always said look for simplest explanation because simplest explanation is the right explanation. But here they lost that chance due to their modern developmental activities.

State of Indigenous Medicine

This phrase 'state of indigenous medicine' has twofold meaning, one is the current state or situation of the plant lives of the islands which have the medicinal values and the other is the islands as a treasure place for indigenous knowledge of medicine and several species. The first episode 'Nature Wins' begins with a description of it. Faraway from

mainland India, there is a mini-India called Andaman Nicobar. Here you will find such species of flora, fauna and even humans that you would not find anywhere in the world. Nature's treasures are in plenty in here (00:38 – 00:55). Through domestication, urbanisation and industrialisation, humans have effectively adjusted to nature while simultaneously altering it meet their societal needs. Karmakar and Pal in their research work 'Grievable/Disposable lives in the Antropocene culture: Ecoprecarity, indigeneity and ecological wisdom in *Kaala Paani*' (2024) shows that how the series successfully exposes viewers about the negative impacts of developmentalism pushed by capitalism and the illicit exploitation of the environmental buffer zone by its emphasis on depicting environmental pollutants and the strength of indigenous and tribal wisdom in combating them. In the case of defeating LHF 27 bacteria Orakans are the pathfinder to the rest. They have consumed the Andamani Echnecia as a remedy from generations they achieved the capacity to defeat it completely. While doctors, officers and other people belived that the plant is now extinct so they have to use the Oraka body as the cure, it becomes a threat to the existence of the tribe. But they are the chosen ones 'Eraba Reta Mono', the survivors in the process of natural selection during previous outbreak of the disease. The last recorded data of the outbreak of the disease during the second world war. The journal of the Japanese doctor is the proof of it. It describes that a few peoples are immune to this disease. Basu uncle (Veerendra Saxena) explains that all the creatures living on this Earth, from trees to the birds, and from fish to humans, there is one thing common. They all are survivors. Some surviving by inflicting poison, some suck blood, some of them build nest, and some make rules, the Natural Selection (Saxena & Golani, 2023). This disease LHF 27 had a very long association with these islands. The Orakas have been in these islands for thousands of years and they had learned to fight this disease centuries ago. It is not the only thing that the Orakas are greater in ecological knowledge and wisdom than the others. The series gives the refernce of 2004 Tsunami. Amma says the tsunami wreaked so much havoc on the Andamans, but a single Oraka got even a scratch. Because just a few days before the tsunami the entire left the forest and gone to a safe place. It seems that they knew everything much before something bad happens to them. The chief of the clan said it is the 'Tinnotu'. Amma said that there is no precise translation of this word. It means the deep understanding of something that even its slightest thing can be felt completely (the Switch). Orakas indegneity is so deep that their totem (the image of Andamani Echinacea) was the solution of that mysterious LHF 27. It was

the antidote which the doctors have been looking for, which they believed to be extinct and was last seen at September 1991. But in the last scene of this series we can see that Jyotsna was growing this plant in her backyards. It seems that sometimes we destroyed and also saved some important living being unknowingly which plays an important role to maintain the ecological balance in the era of Anthropocene.

Through the Screen: Kaala Paani as a tool of Ecomedia

In the development of environmental consciousness and educating the common people about the prominent threats posed by ecoprecarity, the traditional media as well as the contemporary platforms of digital communication both have been played a crucial role. The impact of the Anthropocene and the significance of human-centered survival models have been demonstrated through visual references such as ecocinema, documentaries, short films and television/web series. There is a parallelity between ecocinema and ecomedia. According to some practitioners ‘ecocinema’ refers to those films which bears an environmental perspective such as documentary or feature film showing the ecological problems, and the ‘environmentalist’ films belongs to the Popular Culture created with a purpose of entertaining. Ecomedia studies seek to bridge bridge the epistemological divide between, “technology and nature, human and non-human, material and immaterial, suggesting such categories are relationally defined and materially intertwined” (qtd in Lopez, pp.10). The visual references portrayed in the series Kaala Paani plays a crucial role fostering a sense of ethical accountability towards the socio-ecological practices and its impacts of the human actions on the natural environment. Basu and Tripathi in their research article ‘Philosophy and morality in practice through media texts: review of the web series Kaala Paani’ (2023) describes the use of media in the series on the basis of the theoretical thread of “philosophy through films”. The series illustrates how people experiencing the environmental injustice and ecoprecarity confronting the inevitable situation of crossing the actual guard wall of the islands to escape from the upcoming calamity. By emphasizing the idea that only the resilient can survive, the series skillfully highlights both the illegal exploitation of the environmental buffer zone and the significant lessons that nature provides to us. The huge ocean (Kaala Paani) serves as a significant natural barrier, ultimately demonstrating nature’s superiority over human’s irresponsibility. The Kaala Paani series, as a media text exposes the

complexities of using media to reveal the truth. When pandemic outbreaks the administration of the islands wants to evacuate the tourists without informing the mainland about the disease. But Dr. Ritu Gagra (Radhika Mehrotra) informs her supervisor because she believes that people should know the truth, why they have locked down in the islands and why there is several medical tests is going on which reminds us the real-life incident of COVID 19. But things go on differently, the mainland politics is distinct from the islands, as they came to know about severity of the disease the evacuation plane return to the mainland without landing in Port Blair to avoid the contamination. The depiction of various ecological concerns like the impacts of anthropogenic activities on the islands, man animal conflict, relational entanglements, indigenous ecological wisdom, conservation of the islands makes this series a significant tool of Ecomedia. Ecomedia names the interrelationship and materiality of media with the physical environment inhabited by humans and non-humans alike (Lopez, pp. 10). This makes the series a form of 'implicit' form of ecomedia as it provides the ecological concerns while being 'materially embedded in the environment and global economic system' (Lopez, 11).

Conclusion

With an emphasis on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a microcosm of ecological concerns, this study attempts to demonstrate the interaction between human activities and the ecosystems. This research work investigates the intricate details of ecological resilience, interrelated entanglements, indigeneity, correlation of humans with other species, island-mainland dynamics, and above of all those things the series *Kaala Paani* as a medium of highlighting environmental concerns to the modern world. This professionally produced web series skillfully blends different timeframes and actions to weave a simple but multifaceted story that effectively enlightens viewers on the difficulty of making the right choices amid the catastrophe. With 8/10 IMDb rating and millions of views in its streaming, the series received positive reviews and feedbacks both from audience and critics. The appreciable star cast along with its wonderful cinematography and storytelling technique makes this web series a masterpiece. Despite its limitations, the series offers insightful observations and a realistic depiction of a world in crisis which makes an impression on the viewers and motivates them to think about how they help to shape the ecological resilience and other environmental concerns.

Work Cited

- Basu, Argha, and Priyanka Tripathi. "Philosophy and morality in practice through media texts: review of the web series Kaala Paani." *Media Asia* (2023): 1-7.
- Karmakar, Goutam, and Payel Pal. "Grievable/Disposable lives in the Anthropocene culture: Ecoprecarity, indigeneity and ecological wisdom in Kaala Paani." *International Social Science Journal* (2024).
- López, Antonio. *Ecomedia literacy: Integrating ecology into media education*. Routledge, 2020.
- Pugh, Jonathan, and David Chandler. *Anthropocene islands: Entangled worlds*. University of Westminster Press, 2021.
- Premkumar, J. "Ecological Resilience in the Anthropocene: A Case Study Of Netflix Series Kaala Paani and Its Environmental Narrative in Trauma Studies." Shanlax International Journal of English, vol. 12, no. S1, 2024, pp. 87-89.
- Sumithra, V. M., and Dhanya, P. "Countering slow Violence: Exploring Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Sustainability in Netflix India Series *Kaala Paani*." Consortium, An International Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies, vol. 4, no. 1, June, 2024.
- Saxena, S., & Golani, A. (Directors). (2023). *Kaala Paani [Web Series]*. Posham Pa Pictures; Netflix.