

DALIT ON EARTH: RIVER TITASH, MALO COMMONS AND CULTURAL AFFIRMATION

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Abstract: India's 'nature writing' has traditionally encompassed ecology, geography and sacrality, but it has often bypassed Dalit eco-literary traditions. This article discusses the eco-literary, by focusing on Dalits and their relationship to the earth. It perceives the earth as an important locus of Dalit individuation, carving them as a free, working community, prior to the bearing of burdens of caste, and thus revealing irreducible instances of rights and claims. Placing archives of Dalits and ecocriticism, novel and river, caste and commons in tandem with each other, the article reads a literary text, *A River Called Titash*, deeply, and delves into the layers of making of Dalit environments. Written by Adwaita Mallabarman, a poor Malo Dalit, and autobiographic in a wider sense, the novel weaves a complex narrative of nature, place, time and community at the turn of the twentieth century. It shows how Dalit environments comprise a unique set of analytic, where earth, commons, culture and place-attachment-and-movement strings build their traction towards nature.

Keywords: Dalit, Malo, Titash river, ecology, earth, literature, nature.

INTRODUCTION

A river has its philosophic aspect, not only an artistic aspect. Like time, it flows on endlessly. Time in its ceaseless course is witness to events as they take place and subside, and to human demise. So many lives have ended in horrible deaths – from starvation, suicide, or another's evil deed. And then, again, so many lives are born through time, unmindful of the hundreds of deaths around. Titash, too, flowing along its course, has heard many cries of grief at the death of dear ones and has felt the tears of the grieving mingle with its waters (Mallabarman: 1993: 21).¹

Adwaita Mallabarman was a poor Malo, a Dalit, born in 1914 at Gokanghat village, beside the river Titash, near Brahmanbaria town in Comilla district of present-day Bangladesh (it was East Bengal in undivided India until 1947, then East Pakistan until 1970). He lost his parents at an early age and lived with his uncle in the village until his teenage years. Malo community raised subscriptions to support him and he was the first child in the village and the nearby area to finish school. Mallabarman could not continue with college education because of financial problems and migrated to Calcutta (now Kolkata), in search of work. In 1950, he completed *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* in the Bengali language, and after a few months, he died from tuberculosis in 1951 at the young age of thirty-seven. *Titash* was published in Kolkata five years after his death, and became a highly acclaimed novel of Bengali literature. It was also made into a film and a play by

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Ritwik Ghatak and Utpal Dutta, preeminent Indian film and playwright-directors.

Titash has been richly referred to and reviewed: as individual and collective journeys of Malo youth, women, children and old -- in their quest for social awakening, belonging, knowledge and education -- which were crushed by natural catastrophe, modernisation and sectarian conflicts (Bardhan, 1993); as the slow and painful deterioration of places, communities and personal relationships, where even the mighty Titash river began to behave strangely, as if in response to the general disintegration of all things (Martin, 2013); as Dalits being reduced to a 'surplus population' by the larger forces, pushed to the periphery and the outside, where the subjectivity of 'broken men' is determined by the spatial acts of displacement and deracination (Bargi, 2016); and as a new literary genre conditioned by the uncertainties of colonialism (Biswas, 2011). However, it has never been read from a Dalit ecological lens, in which different components of earth appear as subject, self, person, life, death and consciousness, in the everyday life of ex-untouchables. It is generally thought that Dalits, alienated from nature and deprived of access to natural resources, cannot be immersed in their environment. India's 'nature writing' has traditionally encompassed ecology, geography and sacrality, but it has often missed out Dalit literary traditions. I have elsewhere raised the question of why there has been no recognition of ecological underpinnings in the writings of subordinate castes by the wider canon of environmental literary sphere (Sharma, 2019). Yet, Mallabarman, in the midst of water passages, reflects on the magnificence of the river:

Dawn comes on the river with the most exquisite beauty. The sun is not yet out and the transparent sky, taking on a hint of blue, spreads bluish creamy white light throughout. The sweet tones and soft serenity of this open expanse make all the pores of the heart sing with joy. The unobstructed gentle air rouses the delicate clapping of hundreds of millions of baby waves (Mallabarman: 1993: 45).

Mallabarman journeys through river and water, banks and *ghats*, land and people, fishing and farming, rain, storm and flood, community, caste and conflict, songs and festivals. Autobiographic in a wider sense, the Malo writer weaves a complex narrative of nature, space, place, time and community at the turn of the century. Along with a human narrative, another memory lives in the novel, a passionate and unquiet one: it is the memory of Earth itself and what is inscribed upon her in time. Introducing the novel, Bardhan has remarked:

Vivid water, sky, and landscapes of seasons and human rituals mingle and converse happily or sadly. Images change and moods shift, but so deftly blended with the face nature presents, with the intricacies of festivity or crisis, and with the nuances of antecedent events that even the mundane and the magical, the gruesome and the enchanting all become natural (Bardhan:

1993: 3).

Titash is not about the nature of the natural world or of living things. However, it contributes immensely to the understanding of the natural world and peoples' lived experiences in environment. Through an eco-literary reading of the novel, this article underscores that in Dalit narratives, the earth can be perceived as a bearer of the 'worlded' worlds, as a reservoir of traits, and as a locus of individualisation, which also gets scripted as community, gender and caste consciousness. Drawing from the discipline of ecocriticism (Buell, 2005) – an environmentally oriented study of literature and arts – the article brings out the profound caesura experienced by Dalits with nature. It contemplates on what brings people together and what pulls them apart in their 'traction' towards nature, and how culture, gender and caste acquire an affirmative role through their varied moves in nature. The article, however, does not deal with the political and economic history of Titash and the region in which the river is located.

THE JOURNEY OF *TITASH*

Even more than other regions, Bengal witnessed significant social, cultural, economic and political changes in early twentieth century colonial context. The introduction of a new land tenure system, advent of early industrialisation, emergence of new urban centres, rise of Bengali educated middle classes, and the incipient beginnings of nationalist movements, were also intertwined with nature and environment, with implications for villages and rivers (Prayer, 2015). Alongside these tumultuous developments, there were also incipient beginning of Dalit identities. Historians have highlighted the emergence of layered movements among 'low-caste' groups such as the *Rajbansis* and the *Namasudras* in northern and eastern districts of Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, 2009). *Titash* frames itself amidst such developments.

The novel, divided into four parts, with two chapters in each, begins with images and narratives of the river Titash as a living being. The river, inscribed in the history of time and geography, is perceived as eternal and infinite. Malo community lives with Titash's waters, waves, banks, boats and fishes, and their joys and sorrows are blended with the changing course of the river. The beauty of a flowing river, the exciting water journey of a young fisherman Kishore, the labour and love of catching fishes in a boat, and Kishore's marriage – are all suddenly shattered during his return travel, when robbers take away his wife. In deep pain and shock, Kishore becomes mad.

In the second part, a young woman – Kishore's wife, referred to as Ananta's mother – ventures out to search for her lost mate and father of her child. In her new life, she forges bonds with a new place and people, especially Basanti, and dips into folk cultures and festivals. However, the flow of life gets disrupted by the painful

deaths of Kishore and Ananta's mother in strange situations. Ananta becomes an orphan. The third part is about Ananta's quest and search for the meaning of his life through education and knowledge. Rainbow characters and episodes - anchored in water and land, fishing and farming, boating and labouring -- have a river-like flow, where Ananta tries to carve out a space for himself, amidst a criss-cross of religion, caste, class and culture. The fourth part witnesses the emergence of a rebel woman Basanti, and her spirited struggles to reclaim her dignity and pride even in the wake of severe adversities. *Titash* ends with changes and disharmony in the river, appearance of alluvial land and land conflicts, ruin of river and community, and ruthless march of an urban culture.

Moving along interlinked levels, the novel portrays the long life and culture of a river and the Malos. The river remains the lifeline of the community and their livelihood, until the time the river water is alive and running. At one level, along with river and land, youth and women forge their bonding, begin to reorganise their physical and social worlds, and try to carve a future for individuals and community. At yet another, social groups reflect a set of economic, social, cultural and religious views. At a different level, within the lifetime of a few generations, the earth appears barren and thousands of bonds linking humans with nature disappear. It appears in the end that the world of Malo, having gone through the anguish of the world of nature, can never be the same again. In the following sections, I take four features of the novel to analyse the depth and breadth of Dalit life in nature. This brings us closer to an understanding of how Dalits live and perceive their lives on earth, and their relationship with nature.

EARTH AND LIFE

Titash is a river. Rivers can be geological wonders and offspring of a natural past. In a complex, dynamic ecosystem, a river becomes central to the environment of a region. Its lineage is deeply intertwined with the life and times of humans and non-humans (Saikia, 2019). Rivers have been visible and major symbols of nature-human relationships, displaying a complex web of independence and dependence. However, Titash presents a deeper and wider cognisance of unity and continuity between earth, nature and environment. In Dalit imagination, river encompasses the earth and flows without any rigidity of boundaries between different elements of nature. The ever-running river crosses over subject/object, mind/nature and human/nature dualism, with limitless creativity, agency and autonomy. There is a discovery of earth in river, river in human, nature as a site of culture and religion, and environment as everyday experience.

I draw my theoretical framework in this section from the cultural historian Thomas Berry, and African American environmental author Carl Anthony, who weave a new story about who human beings are, in relationship to the story of the earth. In his book *The Dream of the Earth* (2016), Berry notes that one of the

remarkable achievements of twentieth century is its ability to tell the story of the universe from empirical observation, with amazing insights into the sequence of transformations that have brought into being the earth, the living world and the human community together. According to him, the earth consists of a 'communion of subjects not a collection of objects'. The earth and its inherent powers bring forth a marvellous display of beauty in an unending profusion, which gets overwhelmingly transmitted to human existence and consciousness. Visualising the future of earth-human relations, he says that 'our own dreams of a more viable mode of being for ourselves and for the planet Earth can only be distant expressions of this primordial source of the universe itself in its fullest extent in space and in the long sequence of its transformations in time' (Berry: 2016: 42).

Reflecting on African American environmental history, and its relationship to the earth, Anthony (2006) states that the knowledge of the earth and the place of human beings in it gives a sense of identity and belonging to the black people. He narrates:

The earth is the ground we walk on, the sea and air, the soil that nourishes us, the sphere of mortal life, the third planet in order from the sun, near the center of Milky Way galaxy. Everything that we do, or aim to do, is governed by our relationship with the earth – to its inspiration and resources, to our consciousness of its relationship to the cosmos, to our affinity with human and other-than-human life. Our knowledge and affinity with the earth, in all of its richness of life and diversity, stretches from the tiniest particles, waves and cells, to its plant forms and ecosystems, its rivers, mountains, and seas, to the majesty of our solar system, galaxies, and outer edges of the universe (Anthony: 2006: 202-3).

Titash begins with brimming water, its surface 'alive with ripples', its 'heart exuberant', as she has been for hundreds and thousands of years. The origin of the river, the history of its evolution, even the etymological source of its name never come into question. River is a beautiful evolution, figuratively and systematically. Its presence in space, its creation of boats, fishing, fishers, people, waves, winds, strokes and storms, its relationship with weather, sun, moon, water, fish and bank – all are living testimony to the river's abundant existence and freedom in her journey on earth. Even the feverishly hot mother earth remains cool under the water of Titash. However, the river's evolution is complicated. The links within the river system, different elements of nature and environment living within the riverine as inter-dependent units of the earth's biosphere, human and non-human – everything demonstrates the immense plurality of individual beings in nature, while also showing their intricate interconnectedness. In *Titash*, different narratives about the river recognise her complex diversity on earth:

The course of the river Titash curves here like a bow.

From one season to another the waterscape changes colors and shapes. Now, at the start of rainy season, its misty soft colors resemble a rainbow. Green villages line the two sides of the whitish water. Rain falls continuously from the soft grey sky above and rainwater mixes with farmland soil to run in hundreds of brown streams into the white flow of Titash. Together, they create an atmosphere of enchantment, of sweet spiritual rapture, like the world inside a rainbow (Mallabarman: 1993: 137).

Titash is an open space. She is flowing and vibrating in an earthy environment. She is riding on the land of the earth, nurturing earthly food, making earthly beings survive on her water, absorbing earth's atmospheric twists and turns. Her body functions in tandem with others on earth. The human and non-human take a piece of the riverscape and support their life through it:

Titash is so gentle. Even on nights of rain and wind, with their men out in Titash, the women do not really feel afraid. The wives can sleep, imagining their husbands nestled in their arms. The mothers can rest, imagining their sons in their boats on the gently rocking Titash, peacefully gathering up the nets filled with fish (Mallabarman: 1993: 16).

In *Titash*, every subject is equal and important. All organic and inorganic substances long for their natural life. Different substances manifest themselves at different places, but proceed and culminate according to their natural origins of river, water, life, flow and freedom. All along the course of the river are *ghats* that 'slope gently to the water' and are alive with pictures of life. The banks appear vivid, 'imprinted with stories of a mother's affection, a brother's love, the caring of a wife, a sister, and a daughter'. The water of the river is 'unruffled and transparent'. The constant sound – *jha-jhajhim-jhim* – of rain comes on the river's surface. The wind is a 'wanderer' like water. The rainbow in the sky is immense: 'Spanning two far corners of the sky, it arches high above with its seven colours, each so distinctly defined from the next with no blurring' (Mallabarman: 1993: 145)! The moving fishing boat is like 'a water snake heading home at dusk'. The fish dances freely and the beauty of the first fish catch is as fresh-looking as the dawn of early spring. The village is shaded by the growth of green plants and trees. 'True' are the people who live along the river banks. Villagers have not only nets but also ploughs. The presiding deity of their life is 'Adamsurat, the half-made, half-female guardian of the sky, pointing two fingers in different directions, one to the brimming river and the other to the smiling fields' (Mallabarman: 1993: 44-5).

However, such animate subjects also start moving far and further away from the riverscape, of whose components they are made of. Eventually they cease to exist naturally. The moment water, people and community leave their river-found nature, they enter a new stage of their existence. For this reason, who can tell what might

happen to the river itself, from which everything on earth is so vibrantly created, after prolonged exposure to non-river and non-earth conditions. What new qualities she might acquire and what qualities known to her might get lost. It is a seized river now. On the whole, river and river lives, despite their efforts to adapt to alien environments, find themselves in a paradoxical situation. Even when the river gives away her space to land, agriculture and conflicts, there is no escape from death:

Stuck out on dry ground under the sun, the fishing boats crack; too little water in the river to keep them afloat. The Malos still do not give up fishing. With the triangular pushnet on one shoulder and a narrow-neck fish basket on the other, they desperately roam all day from one village to another looking for a pond or a tank. When they spot a clogged pond in some village, they scan it with hawk eyes. Their bodies are skin and bones, their eyes sunken in their sockets (Mallabarman: 1993: 253).

In *Titash*, river is undoubtedly the most complex organism existing on Earth. In different spaces, seasons and journeys, the river continues to live with her native biosphere -- the environment and people of her existence -- and this environment also fences her off from destruction. River and her elements have something in common, like characteristics of freedom and choice, subjectivity and creativity, which also create the Dalit environmental persona. River and human beings drift apart from Earth's natural environment, and its biosphere, which has given birth to them and reared them. Earth nevertheless always remains with Malos, accompanying them on the uncertain routes they have chosen. However, there is no river left by then: 'Titash seems like an enemy; turned hostile and merciless. It has become a total stranger today' (Mallabarman: 1993: 245). In the following section, I deal with Malos, the river people.

MALO AND MALONESS

Titash is about Malo men and women who live besides the river. Malos are organically integrated with the body of the river, her life and health. Their integration manifests in direct and indirect forms – through fishing and farming, and food, water, festivals, songs and recreation on the riverside. Malo is also a settled and territorially organised society, a Dalit community with everyday concerns of environment, labour and livelihood, and a cultural community with a unique blend of *Vaishnava bhakti* (devotional sentiment) and Sufi spiritualism (mystical Islamic belief). It is a complex and collective formation of village, homes, occupational and social groups, animals, plants, floods, migration and mobility. However, in *Titash*, the Malos are first and foremost human beings. They are also not isolated or separated from other subjects. They are always already in the river world, inside spaces and times with which they have identification. In this section, I explain the being of Malo, drawing on some of the formulations put forth by the influential

philosopher Martin Heidegger (1966) in his *Being and Time*.

According to Heidegger, being is time. The being of human being, who lives finitely through a stretch of life and death, is defined by unity of a three-dimensional time: a past, moving through a present, and available for a future of possibilities. Being, as ‘an existential analytic’, is faced with the crucial question of ‘to be or not to be?’ This questioning and thinking about ‘who’ has been shaped by a personal and cultural history of being. ‘Mineness’ - as a matter of oneness, of one’s own experiences, of authenticity that acquires a certain common structure in one’s average everyday existence – is an integral part of being. Being is constituted in a world of things that are useful, meaningful, and humanly significant and valuable. Being is fully immersed in an environment of ‘being-with’ – a common world of things, persons and social practices, which are experienced together with others:

... Da-sein understands itself-and that means also its being-in-the-world-ontologically in terms of those beings and their being which it itself is not, but which it encounters ‘within’ its world (Heidegger: 1966: 55).

Heidegger also analyses the human being through concepts of ‘state of mind’, ‘mood’ and ‘thrownness’. The human being in its being-in-the-world is always caught in the throw of various moods – feelings of calm, peace, fear and anxiety. Anxiety is the ultimate state of being which is of ‘nothing and nowhere’. However, human being, through experience and freedom, has the potential to throw off the thrown condition in a concrete situation. Being has moments of visions and actions. There is a call of conscience that silences the chatter of the world and brings one back to oneself:

Da-sein has a mode of being in which it is brought before itself and it is disclosed to itself in its thrownness. But thrownness is the mode of being of a being which always is itself its possibilities in such a way that it understands itself in them and from them (projects itself upon them)... The average everydayness of Da-sein can thus be determined as entangled-disclosed, thrown-projecting being-in-the-world which is concerned with its own most potentiality in its being together with the ‘world’ and in being-with with the other (Heidegger: 1966: 169-70).

In *Titash*, Malo is present and active everywhere. Yet, Malo is not the one who lives in brick houses with walls around or travels on paths that reach towns and larger villages. Their only road lies in the river’s midstream and boats are their companion. River overlooks their activity and her presence constantly mingles with their daily chores. However, Malos also have a life of their own, individual meanings of their breath-taking being, which acquire significance from the world of things, from the actions and reactions they provoke, and from the manner in which they give expression to cultural and social values. This is a distinct, authentic oneself – Maloness – that comes out from their everydayness.

Maleness is the 'way to be' in the present, reflected through experiences and actions. It comes out intensely in the 'the stories of a mother's affection, a brother's love, the caring of a wife, a sister, and a daughter'; in the bodies of Malo men who have 'the strength of elephants'; in the 'vivid pictures of genuine people of flesh and blood'; in 'accounts of their humanity and their inhumanity'; in 'long fishing trips' beckoned by the mysteries of invisibles and dangers; in 'the memories of the flower woman'; in occasions of birth, death and marriage; in people becoming the wish-tree; in floaters, butterfly and rainbow; and in Kali and Mansa (goddesses) worship. River is the closest and most obvious element of Maleness. Ananta, in the river, is thus portrayed:

All his sensations are absorbed in the river that flows around him. Ceaselessly and as lightly as gossamer, the river draws out all his feelings, all that is the essence of his existence. Forgetting both past and future, he floats in the continuous flow of this freshly awakened, eloquent present. It is as if the real journey of his life starts here (Mallabarman: 1993: 73).

On earth, Malos discover themselves in different states of mind, moods and thrownness. The diverse elements of nature provide the foundational ways in which Malos can be elegantly located. They have, firstly, a there-ness in their world. They are attuned to the natural and physical environments via the vibrations of their bodies, tools and fruits of their labour, and souls of their passion. In there-ness, young Kishore and Subal can float their boat, lower their net into the water, perform the ritual of starting their fishing day by taking a cupped palmful of river water in their mouth, and enjoy the sight of their first catch of small slim silvery fish. In the boat's swaying motion, 'Ananta could step from the boat onto those paths. But those paths lie in water; only fish can travel there.... Ananta's mind becomes a fish and dives into the water' (Mallabarman: 1993: 168).

Malos' world is also thrown into different moods of fear, uncertainty, pain, danger, risk, tragedy and death. Completely immersed in river, water and land, their state of existence and moods become the essential markers for understanding Malos' existence on earth. At times, young Kishore consoles himself and also encourages his fellow fishermen not to be afraid in the river water after hearing the faltering rhythm of the scull: 'Don't be afraid, Subla. Danger's always near the banks, nothing to fear in midstream. Mother Ganga (river) reigns there and protects boatmen from harm' (Mallabarman: 1993: 35). Ananta lives with the anxiety of whether the river's current would take him to distant lands, the waves would rock him and there would be no one else around in the surrounding darkness. There is fear and anxiety of heavy rains, storms and floods, which often bring great loss to the Malos. There is deep sorrow and pain about getting separated from water, which makes Malos gasp like a fish.

Malo being is bound by finite time, often ending in death. In *Titash*, death is a

subject of frequent occurrence among the Malos, which culminates in the death of the river. In the first part of the novel itself, Kishore is shocked at seeing the floating dead body of a female. Malo, in their different states of mind and mood, realise their finitude in death: 'Those who are born must die someday. So each household is bound to be visited by death' (Mallabarman: 1993: 101). Most of the deaths are not anticipated and come suddenly. They are relational and ignite silent reflections about one's life in family, society and nature. Death causes individual and collective pain; it is also a call of conscience. Sibal dies in the river when he jumps in the flooded water to save the boat. Sibal's wife 'no longer grieves for her husband; the pain she felt has subsided. The thought of the terrible death her husband died comes back to her from time to time. She tries to imagine the scene' (Mallabarman: 1993: 120). Death does not liberate the Malo, but it shapes their self. A certain Maloness sees the death coming to them through the death of the river, as close as a son, husband or friend. The relation to death is not only about one's own; it is equally about the grief and demise of one's nature being: 'Those who died are in a way saved. Those who are alive only wonder, how much longer! From the side of Titash, the answer seems to drift in, not much longer' (Mallabarman: 1993: 254)!

Malo lives in a time where the river on earth has a multiple, non-dualist existence. The temporality of human being is not confined to the present, but flows from a past into a future. A distinct Maloness comes out from a distinct river life, and both share some common values -- free, flow, uncertainty, living and dying. However, taking a leaf out of Heraclitus, no Malo ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man. Movement and change are ingrained in Dalit environmental imagination. In the next section, I deal with the riverspaces and places that characterise Malo men and women.

SPACES, PLACES AND COMMONS

Titash has several stories of spaces, places, place imaginations and practices of Malo community. In the beginning, river appears on earth as an unlimited, free space. The riverspace itself is a key marker of earth and time. Malos create places out of riverspaces and give them their distinct look, feel and ambience. These places – villages, hutments, banks – in turn are inseparable from the spaces they have evolved. Malo community as a whole have their space-place attachments and associated practices. Maloness is based on a unity between space, place and society. In the course of their river journeys at different times, Malos' activities and practices also present Dalit imaginations of rivers, commons and community. They also challenge the under cables of environmental and social controls that are laid to work in the river areas through several internal and external mechanisms. At the same time, Malos have a tremendous ability to move into new places and make them of their own. To reflect on spaces, places and Malo commons, I draw on Buell's (2005) work on ecocriticism, and Roane's (2018) scholarship on Black

communities' relation to geography, sexuality and religion.

Discussing the imagination of space and place in environmental criticism, Buell talks about a five-dimensional phenomenology of subjective place-attachment that together makes possible a 'critical grasp of place as subjective horizon'. Place consciousness and bonding evolves from an orientation in space, as well as a temporal orientation. At the spatial level, there is a different mental mapping: traditionally it has been a strong emotional identification with the home base from which most of one's life is led. However, this changes under modernisation, when homes can be spread at different places. Imagining a place can become an important element in place attachment. It also has temporal dimensions. Conversely, place itself changes. It 'is not entitative – as a foundation has to be – but eventmental, something in process' (Buell: 2005: 73).

Roane (2018) examines Black communities of the lower-Chesapeake Bay, a unique meeting of water and land, river and farm, in Tidewater Maryland and Virginia, in the antebellum and post-emancipation periods, and terms their engagements and practices of natural resources as the process of constituting 'Black commons'. He refers to such practices of place and alternative figuration of land and water as 'plot/plotting': 'the various iterations of a cosmological, geographic, and social outlook with material and political manifestations', through which a community claims and creates a set of communal resources (Roane: 2018: 242).

Plot is the centre of a number of distinct and overlapping activities of Blacks, which foster a vision of de-commodified waters, landscapes and resources. Foremost, the plot becomes the site of an elaborate funeral as well as burial of the loved ones. Plots for the dead signal a key method of organising community, 'anchoring the present through the past within the grooves of a landscape' (Roane: 2018: 242). The plot signifies the garden parcel – spaces for land usage organised through use value, and sustainable biological and social existence. The plot also leads to the extension of such use value into the region's forests and waterscapes. Roane concludes:

The plot signifies insurgent cartography whereby enslaved and freed people used the other modes of plotting to articulate geographic identities laden with epistemological possibilities and horizons for the future outside the parameters of white dominance and control and through the ecstatic, beyond the theology of dominion (Roane: 2018: 243).

In *Titash*, Malo fishermen are always on the move and during their long journeys on boats, often anchor themselves at several places, and stay over time with people from their community. However, on the river banks, Malo community as a whole, and women especially, have heart-thumping everyday lives. Malo men and women inhabit villages, where they live, work, play and worship. They migrate to new Malo places. They imagine new places and even when they are slipping away from the

river zone in changing situations, they have a sense of 'no place'.

In the boundless river, Kishore, Tilak and Subal travel for days and halt in a settlement of Malo households where they discover different curves of river and riverbanks, new varieties of larger fish and distinct tastes of cooked fish food, singing of Vaishnava invocations and celebrations of *Dol Purnima* (festival dedicated to Hindu God Krishna), and full moon of the swing: 'singing, playing with color, and feasting, from morning till night' (Mallabarman: 1993: 48). In one of these places, Kishore finds her bride: 'your partner in work and in virtue, your mate in this life and in the life after' (Mallabarman: 1993: 58). After getting free from pirates' captivity, Kishore's wife (named Ananta's mother) finds herself in new places, where she develops close ties with fisherwomen. She works hard at home and outside, filled with solidarity and hope. She enjoys the happiness and colour of feasts and festivals, 'for the realisation of good possibilities'. Ananta finds a new place some day and experiences his world transformed:

Under the star-filled clear sky the river lies motionless. In the distant vault of the sky, stars in innumerable clusters form luminous pathways. How immense must be the beauty of those paths, and the joy of walking along them, treading on the star-flowers, and watching the countless other star-flowers on both sides and overhead (Mallabarman: 1993: 168)!

Titash ends with the loss of place -- the river is shallow, the Malo families have left the village, the Malo neighbourhood is no more and the empty huts are covered with wild growth. They have been pushed away by their situation: 'No space for you, no place for you' (Mallabarman: 1993: 245)! In Malos' everyday life, place-attachment-and-movement creates a scenario where they are in a flux, and are never fixed. The place attachment is not a uniform, linear and infinite series of spatiality.

For Malos, river *Titash*, its tributaries and canals, carry multi-layered and complex social, economic, cultural and natural values. They embody a dynamic interplay between social integration, cultural diversity, and economic usage, and are crucial for social, spatial and economic transformation of society. *Titash* is a fleeting common in a fleeting social world. Every Malo home has fishing boats and nets to harness the river water. Flowing and living by the river, it is their centre of life and livelihood:

The clear water is transparent in the sunlight and the current is gentle. Bands of *katarifish* float up to the surface and play. Other small fish gather under the film of oil from the bodies of father and son; they prick the film with tiny bubbles. The fish come so close that Romu extends his hand to catch one but can't -- they are always too quick (Mallabarman: 1993: 193).

Titash, as Malos' common, is also a space for myriad and vibrant community activities. It is the place of a boat race, when edges of water teem with covered boats, and each is packed with people. The race boats roam all over the wide, open

stretch of the river, their oars swinging unhurriedly with many different melodies of songs. The river banks are also still open spaces for the anchoring of boats, and for the drying and weaving of nets. Sometimes, Malos have bath here, and worship the sun with water, wild flowers and tender blades of grass, chanting: ‘Please, Sun God, take this sacred water I offer; Seven cupped handfuls I carefully measure’ (Mallabarman: 1993: 27). Beyond the active banks and *ghats* are river lands, where common crops, trees and shrubs are stretched far into some distance. Malo fishermen and farmers go about together ploughing the water and the land. Kadir and Banamali, peasant and fisherman, think that ‘peasants and fishermen have a link nobody can cut even by hacking or erase even by scrubbing’ (Mallabarman: 1993: 141). These common activities in the vicinity of the river portray elements of natural environment, but their meaning stretches in Malos’ vision to signify the essence of human society and what it ought to be.

The river common creates a ground to build a lasting human common. Malo people – cutting across age, gender and religion -- forge a deep bonding around their river lives. Young Kishore and Subal, Ananta’s mother and Basanti, Ananta and Banamali, Basanti and Udaitara, live with immense and courageous human solidarities in their common natural and social life. As the translator states: ‘In *Titash*, the scenes between old Kadir Mian and young Banamali, between Baharullah and Ramprasad, between Romu and Ananta, between Jamila and Udaitara are some of the most moving and humane portrayals of affection that transcends religious barriers’ (Mallabarman: 1993: 26).

Malos, in riverspaces and places, show a tremendous human capacity to live their lives in both local and migratory ways. This in a way is a reaffirmation of the river life – moving freely to different places. The life of Malos -- work, landscape and values – is also realised in the making of commons, both as a place of resource use, as well as a life of resourcefulness and solidarity. This is the case, as Roane argues, with Black commons – an extension of new modes of human connection, belonging, and reciprocity, and a different version of earth stewardship. In the next section, I focus on culture, gender and caste, which plays a significant role in creating Malo commons and Maloness.

CULTURE, GENDER, CASTE

In a Malo neighbourhood of Gokanghat, young Mohan contemplates his cultural life, and how his songs, stories and sayings are woven into Malo festivities, religious celebrations, jokes and riddles, which have a distinctive beauty. Songs expressing sweet feelings in beautiful melodies are passed from generation to generation. However, he feels that ‘people other than Malos themselves have no easy access to the heart of that culture to partake of its nectar, because the Malos’ way of lyrical appreciation is unlike that of all the other communities. What the Malos have woven into their hearts, others treat with ridicule’ (Mallabarman: 1993: 233-

4). Along with the river of life, livelihood, place, imagination and social bonding, Malos have a dynamic cultural life: they have their own socio-cultural networks, they organise community events, they love songs, dances, festivals, ceremonies within their community, and have a distinct religious identity. In *Titash*, Malos' cultural actions appear regularly, not always in a fixed frame of traditional annual Hindu festivals, but in a process of river folk life, with every changing weathers and months. The spectrum is created through an interaction of human, cultural and natural processes. Freedom in riverspace strengthens the sense of an autonomous cultural consciousness, as they are participating in a variety of natural and social worlds, without inhibitions and self-containment.

Wonderful, different *baul* songs (folk songs composed by both Hindus and Muslims, and sects of wandering singers known as the bauls) originate every day from the Malo fishermen moving on boats or riversides. There are *shari* (group songs during the harvesting of paddy and the rowing of boats), rowing, love, work and social songs, evoking different moods of life. Their themes are not confined to a specific place and time. They have divine, eternal and spiritual elements within the references of Malos' living world:

In life's immense waters at cosmic play is the pure.

Rocks float away and rafts capsize on dry shore (Mallabarman: 1993: 62)!

A lone boat and the oarsmen rowed and sang in a chorus their *shari* song:

They all have their own ones, but I have none,

Thundering inside me are the waves of the ocean

I came to the river's edge hoping to go across:

An empty boat with no boatman helplessly bobs (Mallabarman: 1993: 219).

Malos live in many villages and have different beliefs, customs and institutions. However, such differences are in dialogue with each other. In spite of the spread-out physical locations of their villages, their cultural practices share some common virtues and ideals, and manners of self-expression and collectivity, which have a distinct pattern. In Shukdebpur village, people gather in a singing session after the evening has settled in, comprising of both Krishna and Shiva (Hindu God) followers. After singing a Vaishnava invocation, Tilak sings a song about the ascetic Shiva, dancing with his horn and taboret in the cremation ground in the company of spirits. This song does not quite appeal to the Krishna devotees. Upon their turn, they sing about the eternal union of Radha and Krishna. They have puffs of *ganja* (hemp) and sweets in between, and all disperse in sometime. Such singing sessions occur in different villages at different times:

O, what a beautiful sight it's now becoming!

Cowherd boys of Brindaban restlessly calling (Mallabarman: 1993: 178).

The annual Kali worship and Holi festival have a natural and physical touch of Malos. For a grand Kali worship, boatload of clay land at the *ghats* besides Titash. Malo boys have to work to soften the clods of earth to pliable clay, by stomping and treading on it, dancing and walking in it. The craftsmen, with the support of Malo women, have to spend days applying the smooth clay layer upon layer to construct the body. After days of work, when the image is ready for worship, women have to fetch water from Titash for the worship. They also pick and arrange flowers, prepare offerings of food, and place them before the image. On the day of Holi, Malo fishermen do minimal fishing, and retrieve their nets early in the morning, because it is a day of singing, to greet the arrival of spring and for the renewal of river. Someone starts with the beat of tom-tom, ‘O Spring, you’ve come with joy, but my *lal*, my red one, has not come’ (Mallabarman: 1993: 130)!

In the cultural and natural sphere of Malos, women have an overarching presence. An integral part of Malo society, they appear independently, as well as with men. They exist as human beings with their distinct spheres of physicality, appearance, labour, love and loss. *Titash* does not portray them as ‘mother earth’, inheriting some essential qualities in relation to nature. Their experiences and practices have a complex relationship with the everyday life of Malo society, where they have their own space, time and agency. In the context of rural African American women, environmental historian Dianne Glave (2006) shows that they developed their relationship with nature by way of gardens they had grown as slaves and then as freed women. They developed their expertise by drawing from community knowledge and their own interpretation of agricultural methods. Women and men often supported one another through complementary roles and strategies designed to support the family unit. She explains:

To plant their flower and vegetable gardens, African American women used their hands – darkly creviced or smoothly freckled; their arm – some wiry, other muscled; and their shoulders and backs – one broad and another thin. They dropped small seeds into the soil with their veined hands. They wrapped their arms around freshly cut flowers to decorate tables in their homes. They bent their shoulders and backs to compost hay, manure, and field stubble, and transplanted plants from the woods into their own yards. These women developed a unique set of perspectives on the environment (Glave: 2006: 37).

Malo women of various ages are thoroughly grounded in multiple activities in the entire river area. They are found in birth, marriage and death, in river and boat, in land and agriculture, in festival and ceremony. In Shukdebpur village, after the songs of Krishna and Shiva followers, women form a dancing circle of Dolmandal, their hands poised, with some playing finger cymbals, and some clapping in rhythm: ‘The cymbals strike out all at once, filling the air with the beat *jha-jhajham-jham* and the sound of innumerable bangled hands clapping. The women set their feet

to dancing together' (Mallabarman: 1993: 54). Like men, Malo women share their life stories amongst themselves. Mother, daughter, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law -- all narrate their intimate home stories by the *ghats* or riverbanks. Outside home, they often have collective working practices. Spinning and reeling all available threads, fine, medium, or thick, for fishermen's nets; cleaning up fishes; identifying and organising them for the market; going to the market; grinding rice from the new harvest -- several such activities are 'Malo' and 'fisherfolk' in nature and have a critical value in the entire chain of fish cultivation and use. At the height of fishing season in the spring, Malo women and men from many different villages gather at Shukdebpur village, for weeks and months together. This is the time when thousands of large fish are caught. Men bring basketfuls of freshly hauled fish and upload them before the women, and women's hands work with the smooth swiftness of machines, gutting and cleaning large fish. This is the process for drying fishes, to sell off to fish traders. These everyday interactions of Malo women with nature are not something 'out there', they are 'in here' -- close to their heart and body.

Nature has its darker side too. Malo emotions are severely shattered under water. Malo women know how treacherous Titash can be in times of floods, storms and heavy rains. They know that this will come one day and will entail risks and vulnerabilities. Women's individual and collective lives bring forth time and again the chaos and disorder in nature. The capriciousness of water, waves and winds are unsettling for them, their homes and families, and their community. Nature is indifferent to human sufferings; humans are not. The rainy season brings the hardest time for Ananta's mother. They have nothing to eat. However, Subla's household is always there for her. An old Malo woman faces the storm's fury in full force -- roofs of huts are damaged, trees are uprooted, boats on river banks are smashed. Each moment is frightening. Still, the old woman, concerned about the village, starts shouting at the storm. However, the storm is unquestionably powerful and unperturbed. Pitching her voice at the highest level, she shouts again at the storm. Ananta is amazed at the power in the woman's voice -- so much force in her command:

Go away, fellow, go to the hills and the mountain tops!

Go and fight on your way out with the big tree tops (Mallabarman: 1993: 156)!

Malo's cultural world is also interwoven with the Hindu caste system, where they are placed at the bottom of the four *varnas*. Malos are Shudras. I have argued elsewhere that Dalits' rich cultural corpus reflects the complex interconnectedness of caste and nature. Dalit experiences and narratives constantly underline their everyday ecological burdens in a marked hierarchal order: 'Living with nature, they are constantly negotiating with, and challenging, caste domination, while simultaneously articulating their environmental imagination' (Sharma: 2017: xiv). Yet, the Malos living around the river Titash, mostly within their own community, actually possess an autonomous cultural domain, which is vibrant enough to mitigate

caste exclusion in their everyday existence. The communitarian river life of Dalit women and men, their cultural memories and religious practices, have historically generated the necessary ingredients to create counter-narratives to caste domination. The nature-driven qualities -- freedom of Titash, equality of different subjects, Malo commons, openness of space and place – have provided the bedrock for a ‘casteless’ culture in their vicinity, even when caste is not eliminated.

Caste is, of course, present in Malos’ memories and they are surrounded by caste realities. However, it is not at the centre of their existence, and their identity is not defined by the Brahmanical social order. Malo women refer to the poverty-stricken state of Shudra people. In their boat journeys, Malo men construct images of Brahmin and Kayastha (high castes) women. They know that communities in other areas do not let Malos enter their homes. They consider them polluted and hold them in contempt. They face Brahmin fish merchants and landlords, who try to capture their produce cheaply. Still, caste does not centrally determine the lives of Malos around Titash.

At the same time, Malos’ caste-cultural narratives are prominent and decisive. They narrate a long story of a Brahmin Buruj, who goes on a long journey. In the parching heat of the sun, and after growing tired from the strain of walking, Buruj is looking for water, but he finds no river or pond anywhere. He finds a nice hut, with marks of sandalwood pasted on the door. He thinks that such a clean and tidy home cannot be of anyone other than a Brahmin. He drinks water there and refreshed, asks the maiden her caste. She replies that they are of the peasant-gardener caste. This also means that the Brahmin Buruj has now lost his caste. He loses his caste in a gardener’s home. Losing his Brahmin-hood, Buruj now lives in the gardener’s home as a gardener (Mallabharman: 1993: 209-10). In another plot, when Ananta’s mother is asked her caste in a new place – if she is the daughter of a Brahmin or a Kayastha family – her answer is that ‘she was a fisherman’s daughter’ (Mallabharman: 1993: 128).

The river is not a segregated space. It is marked by culturally affirming activities of Malo men and women. In closely and critically accessing nature, Dalits produce social and cultural correlation and causation. Such an interrelationship, based on everyday cultural affirmation, has often found expression in colourful celebration and creative communication. Cultural affirmations are not gender and caste exclusive. Rather, the assertive cultural and gender identities of Malos blunt caste and religious boundaries. Malos came out cognitively and socially resilient from such an affirming environment. Malos’ cultural treasures, from *Dol Purnima* to *baul* songs and from Holi to worship of Manasa, bring communities together across lines of difference and ignite Malos to achieve higher levels.

CONCLUSION

Since mid-twentieth century, siltation of the river, and formation and spread of silt-

beds has intensified the transformation of Titash. Vast growth of land coming out of silt-beds, emerging issue of land ownership, and development of agriculture on the one hand, and the opening of river and water for different users, including the emergence of fishermen's associations and fisheries administration on the other, have severely impacted the river areas. Titash is not a 'divine' river. Significant natural changes in the river's character, and its bearing on people, have been seen as the decaying and dying of the river system and the lives and cultures woven around it.

Malo men and women were ordinary fisher people, who always lived in villages and cultivated strong community ties. Individually and collectively, they were doing open, fresh water, small-scale and migratory fishing full time. Only a few of them were engaged in part-time farming. Malos' labour was enormous, skilful, mindful and risky. The identity of Malos was based on their everyday interaction with the river, water, boat and fish. The intermediation between these elements, since one is accomplished only by means of the other, was never ideal. However, they were constantly on the move, to an infinite horizon – an upstream, new tributaries, and long distances. River fish was their livelihood and food, enough to satisfy existing wants. The changing weather, water, rain and flood was always bringing surprises, as well as new fishes into being. Every stage of Malos' life – birth, marriage, death – developed alongside, and in interaction with, nature. However, in the times of drying river, Malos, their neighbourhood and community, seem to be dissipating.

The natural and human development of the region confirms a pattern of characteristically degraded landscape, defined by development, inequality, conflict and hopelessness, imposed over calm ecologies. Yet, Malos, even as vulnerable inhabitants of the river, provide dialectic visions of Dalit environments. Dalits are craving for life on earth. In *Titash*, the river symbolises it, and becomes the locus for ecological-social interactions. In the histories of life on earth, Dalits embrace the interactions of different elements of nature; the evolvment and habitability of ecosystems over the years; the free existence of water, lake, river and land, and their freedom of movement across their surfaces; the wide variety of natural resources and species for survival; and the activities and changes in nature. Earth is a free space for Dalits. However, their 'earthy' existence also makes them realise that earth's biosphere is being significantly altered, that atmosphere has no definite boundaries and that their future is tied with multiple terrains, which vary greatly from place to place.

The idea and practice of a local commons is most enduring for Dalit environments. Commons are not a singular entity; they are complemented by plural characters. Titash was an open common, co-existing with river banks and *ghats* as also commons. Together, they signify resource sharing and use, under an open-access property regime. Such regimes are also subjected to production and exchange values, incomes and losses, but they occur primarily at local scales and are operated by interactive community practices. Commons are accessible to everyone. They

are used by all, owned by none. This gives Dalits a place, security and confidence on earth. Dalits cherish, celebrate and deepen the sense of commons – with nature commons and human commons often bonding together.

In Dalit environments, culture, women and caste generate a rich repertoire of songs and music, gods and goddesses, myths and stories. They comprise a unique and different set of analytic, and the value system of Dalit environments can only be understood through them. They play an affirmative everyday role, and signify a memory, a metaphor and a movement. In Malos, Dalit environment often appears in a familiar terrain, underlining space and place attachment. And yet, they also have ‘place-attachment-and-movement tracts’, where they move dynamically to newer places. Freedom on earth, nature, space and place keeps them moving. As they say: ‘The past we can smile about, cry over, arrange our dreams around, but never get back. The present we want to hold in our hands. The future makes us string our hearts with hope. What is there to gain by dwelling on what happened in some long departed past’ (Mallabarman: 1993: 101)!

Notes

1. The Bengali novel *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* by the Dalit writer Adwaita Mallabarman was first published in Calcutta in 1956. It was translated and published in English in 1993, with an introduction, afterword, and notes by Kalpana Bardhan. I have used the English translation throughout the article.

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