

## Environmental Emergencies in India's marginalised Landscapes: A Critical study of Arati Kumar Rao's *Marginlands: Indian Landscapes on the Brink*

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**Abstract:** The present era of anthropocentrism positions human being as the centre of the creation and universe, disregarding the essential coexistence of nature and its diverse entities-both flora and fauna. This anthropocentric worldview disrupts the ecological balance, threatening not only non-human species and landscapes and the environment but also humanity itself. The landscapes of margins that are the significant habitats of both human and non-human are in deep delved crisis due to the unconscious and exploitative activities of human beings. Developments and modification as defined and done by humans often equated with modernization and civilization have adversely affected Earth—the only known life-sustaining planet. The human pursuit of power, ego and greed of humans has emerged as impediments to the sustainability and inclusivity on this planet. Although anthropocentrism is a relatively recent phenomenon in the evolutionary timeline of the planet, its rapid intensification is alarming. This is a critical moment to reflect and act wisely for the sake of future of this planet that supports lives. Environmental activists, writers, and journalists are repeatedly warning against the continuation of an anthropocentric approach, urging a shift toward sustainability to ensure survival on this beautiful Earth, which thrives on balance, unity, and harmony. The book *Marginlands: Indian Landscapes on the Brink* by Arati Kumar-Rao is a compelling work of environmental writing that vividly portrays ecological emergencies from the perspective of India's marginalized landscapes. This paper critically analyses this book as an environmental reportage and studies how *Marginlands* addresses the interconnected issues of environmental degradation and social injustice experienced by marginalized communities. The study also explores how mistreatment and misguided government policies have become a threat to the natural environment and ecosystem of these margin lands. Furthermore, the paper investigates how the text amplifies the voices and struggles of the marginalised communities while highlighting the profound impacts of ecological degradation on their lives and landscapes.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism, environment, developments, *marginlands*, sustainability.

## **Introduction**

Arati Kumar-Rao inspired by her father's environmental consciousness from an early age, made a significant career transition by leaving a secured corporate job in the multinational sector to pursue a path in environmental storytelling. Through extensive reading, researching, and field travel, she has established herself as a multidisciplinary environmental communicator, working as a photographer, writer, artist and National Geographic Explorer. Her work primarily focuses on documenting the consequences of environmental degradation across Indian subcontinent especially marginal landscapes. In her book *Marginlands: Indian Landscapes on the Brink*, Kumar-Rao examines anthropogenic transformations of marginal landscapes of India and their subsequent impacts on local livelihoods, cultural practices, and ecosystems. Her documentation provides valuable insights into the socio-ecological ramifications of human-induced environmental change.

Although anthropocentrism is relatively recent in the evolutionary timeline, its acceleration is unprecedented and alarming. Considering themselves as the superior to all creation and the sole owner of the planet humans have been disrupting the ecological balance from ages. While some of their actions have direct environmental consequences, others result in far-reaching, long-term effects. The latter has been termed as 'slow violence' – "a kind of destruction that unleashes itself incrementally, over seasons, often over generations." (Rao,13). Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the poor* has talked about this slow violence and commented "...one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice. If, under neoliberalism, the gulf between the enclaved rich and outcast poor has become ever more pronounced, ours is also an era of enclaved time wherein for many speeds has become self-justifying, propulsive ethic that renders "uneventful" violence (to those who live remote from its attritional lethality) a weak claimant on our time." Kumar Rao emphasizes the intensity of this gradual degradation, describing it as "Unspectacular and sometimes imperceptible, it can be spatially dispersed: a disruption in one place can affect landscapes-and the ecosystem themselves-die by a thousand cuts."

The book, divided into five chapters, takes the readers on Arati Kumar Rao's journey through distinct landscapes across India urging them to listen attentively to the voices of its inhabitants in crisis. Almost each part of her book has become a powerful documentation of misguided decisions and intentional ignorance of the government and authorities to preserve the authenticity of these lands. Kumar Rao questions the derogatory impacts of these willful mistakes that causes irreversible environmental hazards affected both human and non-human existence. By critically analysing this thought-provoking environmental rapportage, the paper investigates how the text amplifies the voices and struggles of the marginalised communities while highlighting the profound impacts of ecological degradation on their

lives and landscapes.

### Land Ethics in Practice: Traditional Wisdom vs. Modern Intervention in the Thar Desert

Juxtaposing the environmental philosophy of Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" through a comparative ecocritical lens with Arati Kumar-Rao's observations of traditional desert communities in *Marginlands* this paper explores fundamental environmentalism. The central theme is the contrast between the ecological wisdom of indigenous people who embody a deep, respectful relationship with their environment and the destructive consequences of state-led "development" projects that overlook local knowledge systems.

Aldo Leopold, in his book *A Sand County Almanac* (1994) coined the term 'land ethic' to promote the relationship between human and land. The idea concept urges a rejection of anthropocentric views that seek to dominate or alter ecosystems. In his essay "The Land Ethic", Leopold elaborates: "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land...[A]land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such." (Leopold, 1949, p. 171). Although Leopold's idea has faced criticism for leaving some fundamental questions unanswered, it remains significant that communities inhabiting marginal lands have long practiced such ecological ethics. From centuries these people are abide by the law of nature long before the philosophical thought by Aldo Leopold.

In the first part of the book *Marginlands*, titled *The Desert*, Kumar Rao writes about the people of the Thar desert, who inherently follow land ethics. They view themselves as members of a community that includes land, sand, water, air, and the species that co-exist with them. During her field-work, Kumar-Rao meets Chhattar Singh, from whom she learns about the ancient wisdom of living in this marginland with a small resource of water yet never face the shortage of water. They know the art of survival without harming the balance of environment by intimately understanding their environment and by employing traditional methods. It is astonishing that the geology of the desert has been made in such a way that it can capable of keeping surface-level water, which has supported life for centuries. Always dependent on nature, the people of Thar acknowledge its blessings and never suffer from lack of water or food. They utilize minimal rainfall with such efficiency that the resulting crop yields are sufficient for year-round survival. Kumar Rao observes "Creating a water source in the desert for the benefit of the community and without harming the environment is considered punya-a sacred work." (*Marginlands*, p. 23) People values the rule of community living, sharing water sources with other species of the desert and never claiming water for personal use. Traditional desert dwellers, whom

Rao calls “barefoot geographers” possess an intimate knowledge of the land.

This harmonious existence began to unravel when the Government of India deemed the region ‘wasteland’ and implemented interventions without understanding the land. Interlopers are unaware of the secret of this harmonious living as they do not belong to this place. Their decisions to develop the regions disrupted the ecological balance. In the chapter titled “*The Landscape of Loss*”, Kumar Rao discusses the consequences of such governmental actions. discusses the consequences of such governmental actions. The Indira Gandhi Nahar Project, which aimed to ‘de-decertify’ and transform it into agriculturally productive terrain, largely failed. The project which is against the nature in the name of development renders large areas of the desert waterlogged and useless. Kumar Rao writes, “As waterlogging rendered the land unproductive, the desert was damned twice: it not only lost its native vegetation but was also deprived of the ability to regenerate itself.” The canal water, viewed as polluted, was rejected by the locals, who preferred to rely on natural sources. These so-called ‘developmental’ projects also destroyed native grasses that once supported millions of goats and sheep, thereby undermining both human and animal life. Even wildlife such as griffon vultures suffers, with windmill blades endangering their lives. From illegal limestone mining to afforestation in the desert, these careless interventions are “playing havoc with an ecosystem they have not made an effort to understand.

### **Human Intervention and Its Impact on Riverine Ecology and Marginal Communities:**

The foresight of Rabindranath Tagore in his play *Muktodhara* which highlights the degradation of natural resources due to anthropocentric activities has come true. In reality, numerous dams have been constructed to hinder the natural flow of rivers for human profit. These constructions have not only caused adverse effects on nature but also impacted human lives, particularly those from marginalized communities. Arati Kumar Rao, in the second chapter of her book *Marginlands: Indian Landscapes on the Brink*, titled “The Farakka Folly,” discusses the follies of the Farakka Barrage, which was built to control the natural flow of the Ganga—the lifeline of our country. The Ganga is one of the most sediment-producing rivers in the world. The sediment it carries acts as an organic fertilizer and provides sustenance to millions of people living in West Bengal.

#### **Rao observes in her book:**

“A related facet of Himalayan rivers is their tendency to meander through their deltaic reaches. They deposit silt in one channel, blocking their own progress, and carve a fresh path elsewhere only to repeat the process all over again. Swinging this way and that, fickle, wild, unpredictable, these thick, muddy rivers move about, unloading their cargo of silt, creating

deltas, making food bowls." (*Marginlands*, p. 23)

Instead of working in harmony with the river's natural courses was done with earlier ports such as Satgaon and Hooghly—modern interventions have tried to force the river into submission. The Satgaon and Hooghly Ports, which gradually lost relevance due to heavy siltation, illustrate how nature resists long-term manipulation. The construction of the Farakka Barrage did not achieve its objective of reviving the Kolkata Port; rather, it exacerbated environmental problems such as riverbank erosion and flooding.

Due to the barrage, large quantities of sediment accumulate in the riverbed, forcing the Ganges to overflow its banks and sometimes alter its course. This has had devastating consequences for the people living along the river. Thousands of farmers and fishers who once depended on the Ganges for their livelihoods have lost both homes and sources of income. These disasters while appearing natural are in fact the direct results of human intervention. The people of these marginlands have become casualties of ecological mismanagement and are now left in a state of distrust. As Kumar-Rao poignantly notes, they have "learnt to trust neither nature nor man" (Kumar-Rao 27). Through her field observation Kumar Rao poignantly points to the fact that the river not as a resource to be exploited, but as a living entity whose rhythms and flows are integral to human survival.

Human intervention in riverine ecosystems often leads to significant ecological disruptions, adversely affecting both the underwater biodiversity and the marginalized communities residing along riverbanks. Kumar Rao, through her fieldwork, highlights the ancient wisdom of communities that have historically sustained their livelihoods in harmony with river systems. She critically examines the ecological consequences of modern practices such as the construction of dams for hydroelectric projects and the colonial legacy of controlling rivers to mitigate floods. These interventions have endangered various aquatic species, notably the Indus and Gangetic dolphins. The process of dredging rivers to maintain navigability for waterways is one of the primary causes of the decline of various aquatic species. Both the Gangetic and Indus dolphins, being blind, rely on echolocation to navigate and find food. However, the noise generated by dredgers and the engines of cargo vessels interferes with their ability to detect echolocation signals, making it difficult for them to survive.

Not only these national aquatic animals but also many other aquatic species are threatened by human activities such as the construction of embankments, sediment dredging from riverbeds, and the mining of rivers for rocks and boulders. In the Brahmaputra River, for example, numerous small indigenous fish species have gone extinct due to the destruction of their natural habitats. In Assam, many people who live on marginal lands along the Brahmaputra and depend on fishing for their livelihoods are now suffering from poverty due to the declining fish population.

Through her extensive field research, Kumar Rao underscores the intri-

cate interconnections between human intervention and the disruption of biodiversity in rivers and wetlands. These ecosystems, often described as the lifelines of the land, are crucial not only for environmental stability but also for the socio-economic well-being of local populations.

### **Environmental injustice and the Struggles of Peripheral Communities:**

The concept of an "environmentalism of the poor" (1998) was developed by historian Ramachandra Guha and economist Joan Martínez-Alier. They highlight issues related to livelihood, the distribution of resources, and social justice. Marginalized communities living on the peripheries of society have, for centuries, aligned their lives with natural resources. Their belief in harmony and coexistence has fostered a mutual respect between humans and nature. Unfortunately, these communities are now in a state of plight, as modern environmental consciousness, primarily shaped by Western ideologies that tends to disregard the ancient socio-cultural practices of local areas. In many cases, indigenous and marginalized communities are evicted from their ancestral lands or are restricted from utilizing natural resources for subsistence due to wildlife conservation projects.

In the novel *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh portrays the tension between conservation efforts, particularly those centered on wildlife, and the survival rights of marginal communities. Similarly, Kumar Rao, in her book *Marginlands*, addresses these issues in the chapter titled "The Tiger's Lair." Here, she confronts the jeopardization of the livelihoods of people in the Sundarbans, who are prohibited by the Forest Department from entering the "core areas" under the Tiger Conservation Project, which are essential to their survival. The government appears to have little concern for these communities, who are the most affected by environmental disasters such as coastal erosion, floods, and droughts, as well as human interventions like deforestation and development projects in the name of modernization.

In another chapter titled "When the Glaciers Disappear," Rao discusses the injustices brought about by First World environmentalism. Places like Leh and Ladakh, India's northernmost plateaus which produce a negligible carbon footprint, yet they suffer disproportionately from the effects of global warming. As Rao notes, "glaciers have disappeared from some ranges, while others are shrinking in size and receding to higher altitudes." The ecological disruption caused by climate change has led to severe floods and water scarcity in these high-altitude regions, which are situated over 3,000 meters above sea level.

Local wisdom is being applied to confront these crises. Sonam Wangchuk, a renowned engineer and educator, has attempted to address the water crisis by constructing *ice stupas*, drawing on traditional ecological knowledge. These efforts are rooted in environmental sensitivity and sustainability. Wangchuk also criticizes the government's neglect, stating, "We need a defence budget, a plan to help safeguard people, landscapes, ecosys-

tems."

### Conclusion

Arati Kumar-Rao's *Marginlands: Indian Landscapes on the Brink* offers a haunting yet deeply insightful exploration of India's marginal ecologies and the communities that depend on them. Blending environmental journalism with lyrical nature writing, Kumar-Rao sheds light on the cumulative effects of environmental mismanagement, misguided development projects, and anthropocentric policies that not only erode landscapes but also dismantle the lives and cultures built around them. Her work challenges dominant narratives of progress and development by placing emphasis on forgotten geographies—deserts, deltas, wetlands, riverbanks, and glaciers—often dismissed as unproductive or peripheral by mainstream governance.

By documenting these vanishing margins, Kumar-Rao gives voice to the environmentalism of the poor, exposing the ecological injustices that result when marginalized communities are alienated from their land, water, and cultural heritage. Her writing underscores a critical truth: these communities have long maintained an intrinsic ecological wisdom, one that modern development continues to ignore at great cost. As she navigates the arid terrains of the Thar, the floodplains of the Ganga, the forests of Sundarbans, and the high-altitude ecosystems of Ladakh, Kumar-Rao reveals a deeply interwoven reality—where environmental degradation is never merely ecological, but always profoundly social and political. Through her lens, the environment is not an inert backdrop to human progress but a living entity—fragile, resilient, and sacred. *Marginlands* is thus not just a documentation of ecological decline, but also a call to reimagine our ethics, policies, and practices with a renewed commitment to sustainability, inclusivity, and justice. It reminds readers that to save the planet, we must first listen deeply, patiently, and respectfully to those who have lived closest to the land for generations. Their survival strategies, born of necessity and wisdom, offer a viable path toward ecological renewal and ethical coexistence.

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