

Progress versus Regress: Critiquing Sen's *River of Stories* in the Context of Hydrocolonialism

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Abstract

Postmodern discourses are exhaustively suspicious of the Eurocentric notion of 'Progress'. Progress in human civilization in the material sense has been accelerated through modern technoscience and instrumental rationality. Progress therefore exemplifies one of the key signifiers in Modern epistemology. Modernist discourses believe in the idea of progress which is linear and chronological in character. Modernist ideologies aided in harbouring an anthropocentric attitude towards Nature which invariably typified the inception of the era of the anthropocene. Colonialism as an immediate and an 'unfortunate' aftermath of Enlightenment Modernity caused a systematic destruction of Nature. Nature eventually broke down both literally and metaphorically. Afterwards colonialist ideologies began taking up multifarious strategies for domination. Hydrocolonialism is one such paradigm which centres around confiscation of waterbodies for capitalist gains at the cost of rigorously dismantling the ecofriendly ways of living of indigenous populace. Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (2022) is a graphic novel which deals with colonialization of water through the construction of Rewa Sagar Dam which is subsequently followed by gruesome expropriation carried out by the Adivasis of Jamli village. Sen compellingly illustrates the tension among the Adivasis which is exacerbated through hydrocolonializing effects like displacement, migration, dispossession of land, loss of the indigenous knowledge systems etcetera. Sen's acute expertise in presenting a graphic text as a 'serious fiction' is furnished with the propagation of a decolonial stance through tribal ecoconsciousness. The Adivasis are seen clinging onto a 'regressive' outlook which denounces the Modern vision of progress by reverting back to their earlier standards of living driven by environmental ethics. This paper is a modest attempt to analyze how 'regression' works as a *modus operandi* in the decolonial project against hydrocolonialism.

Keywords: Hydrocolonialism, Graphic Novel, progress, regress, Adivasi, ecoconsciousness.

River of Stories (2022) by Orijit Sen till date remains a very pertinent work of graphic fiction. Apart from being a designer and an academician, Sen has been a social activist. *River of Stories* bears testimony to his monumental efforts to direct

our attention to the gruesome repercussions of extravagant projects at the cost of vigorously tearing down the ‘course’ of Nature. Sen’s work exerts close resemblance with the fulminations from the natives of the Narmada valley over the construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam built on the Narmada River which was inaugurated in 2017. In the headlong race towards progress in the 21st Century, the third world nations “being invigorated by decolonialization process” began following the “western ideas of modernization” which in due course culminated in the establishment of expensive megaprojects (Nayak 69). These megaprojects caused consistent protestations and resistance shouldered by the aboriginal people who faced the dreadful backwash of the same. Man-made constructions precipitate a chaotic social disorder at the cost of deliberately damaging the basic forces of Nature. In this era known as the anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh expresses his uneasiness with this proclamation: “climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction” (9). Anthropocene not only challenges our preconceived notions about Nature but also complicates our inventiveness to deal with eco-disasters of contemporary times. This primarily summarizes the fact that we need stories which would help us prognosticate the coming times, stories which would attend to the variegated urgencies of contemporary times. Sen’s graphic novel, as Arundhati Roy remarks in the foreword, “continues to be current, urgent and perhaps the most important story we need to hear and understand” (Sen 3). *River of Stories* focuses upon how varied strategies of hydrocolonialism methodically wreak havoc upon the locals of Jamli village.

The prologue of *River of Stories* is titled “A Dream” which in an allegorical manner sets the tone of the graphic narrative (Sen 8). The prologue revolves around a dream which Vishnu experiences. Vishnu, who works as a journalist in a magazine titled *The Voice*, conceives of himself as a socialist too. The dream is about an honourable minister of sports by the name of Shri Khapi K. Soja who with his incentivizing deliberation tries to veer the attention of the audience to the forthcoming multimillion dollar projects which the government is planning to undertake with the help of foreign companies. Soja launches a fierce diatribe against the presumed socialists and emphasizes upon their ineptitude in deciphering ‘progress’. Soja lectures upon “research stations on Antarctica”, “largest dams”, “Latest nuclear reactors”, “tallest statues” etcetera and proffer them as “National priorities” (Sen 10). While on the contrary, Vishnu seems readily flabbergasted by the ineptness of Soja’s vision for the future because his speech voluntarily dismisses salient issues like employment, literacy, malnutrition etcetera. Vishnu’s dream centres around some vicious insinuations regarding the modernization projects which call attention to the “greater control which modern man has over his natural and social environment. This control, in turn, is based on the expansion of scientific and technological knowledge” (Huntington 286). Jan Knippers Black in his article titled “Development and Modernization Theory: A Critical Review” (1977) writes that “a nation’s primary development goal should be meeting the basic needs of all of its people. Some aspects of modernization may serve the goals of development; others may frustrate them”, and *River of Stories*

testifies to the unendurable circumstances which the aboriginal occupiers underwent following the construction of a massive dam (55). The idea of water-greed pops up as a conspicuous matrix around which the catastrophic consequences of hydrocolonialism like soil erosion, deforestation, mass migration, flash floods etcetera emerge. Isabel Hofmeyr in her book titled *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (2022) signifies hydrocolonialism as “colonization by way of water (various forms of maritime imperialism), colonization of water (occupation of land with water resources, the declaration of territorial waters, the militarization and geopoliticization of oceans), a colony on (or in) water ... and colonization of the idea of water (establishing water as a secular resource)” (15-16). Hydrocolonialism in Sen’s novel revolves around the expropriation of waterbodies and waterways which Rewa personifies. The entire dam project is built around the incorporation of water into commercial networks across the metropolitan cities in the country in order to meet capitalist means. Sen in a sarcastic manner discloses the aloofness of the so-called educated masses with these environmental movements since they are only concerned about the multifarious benefits of it. P.K. Nayar in his book titled *Vulnerable Earth* (2024), regarding the same issue, writes that “hydrocolonialism is both material and symbolic: it works through a material-spatial separation of the resource and through the symbolic humiliation and discrimination perpetuated on the thirsty” (59).

The initial part of the graphic novel is titled “The Spring” which concentrates on Relku’s life story and her unanticipated migration to a city following a number of mishaps in her family (Sen 13). This part begins with an introduction of Malgu Gayan, a mythical singer, who sings “the song of all existence” which expresses his huge admiration for Kujum Chantu, a goddess who created a beautiful world by rubbing and squeezing dirt from her chest (Sen 14,15,16). Gayan in the creation story refers to a garden full of various kinds of creatures in which humans constituted one of the segments. This exemplifies a biocentric stance in the mythical narrative. What rather fascinates the readers about Gayan’s tale are the references drawn to “laws of humankind and animal-kind” which stand in “stark contrast to the world’s western/rationalist/scientific history” (Dastidhar 6). Vishnu gets acquainted with Rewa through Relku who is his housemaid. Vishu was about to have a dialogue with Relku regarding migrant workers for an article when she introduced him to her bygone days of childhood in Rimli village which is three hours away from Ballanpur. Relku’s remembrance depicts an idyllic lifestyle in a bucolic setting featuring deeds like collecting mahua flowers from the forest with her brother Somariyo (Sen 19). Relku spoke of an uninterrupted and unflustered country dwelling. But afterwards, the government officials encroach upon their territory and ask them to evacuate themselves. Initially the officers seek to manipulate the villagers by pronouncing the public utilities which the agricultural workers barely comprehend. The ‘modern’ futuristic vision of the office-bearers is typified by the western notions of modernity who make mention of “pucca road”, “proper houses”, “factories” etcetera in order to

bring about a ‘progressive’ change into the region which as of now they regard as “reserve forest” (Sen 22,21). But the villagers relate themselves to the forest in a different manner because they could sense that “man-made changes are entirely different from evolutionary changes and have more wide-ranging effects, which cannot be foreseen” (Rangarajan 52). The Adivasis bring forth their humanitarian sentiments shaped by ecological sustainability and verbalize their perception about the forest in the following manner: “the land is our *mata*. She gives us food and shelter. She takes care of our needs. We worship the trees, the river, the hills...” (Sen 21). Relku with utter disappointment reveals before Vishnu how the coveted changes which the officials accounted for systematically materialize. Consequently, the villagers were forbidden from entering into the forest and they were even debarred from collecting essentials like firewood, fruits, flowers etcetera which gradually intensified their suffering. The visits of the officials of the forest department along with the contractors escalated with time which enhanced the routinized exploitation of the jungle: “the thekedars, who had all sorts of paper and permit, were allowed to bring their labourers to cut down as many trees as they wished to take away to the city” (Sen 24). In addition to that, Relku shares her personal experience. Relku refers to her uncle named Maaru who being a chronic alcoholic used to drink on credit from a local alcohol retailer by the name of Guptaji. Maaru has been enmeshed in a debt trap worth eight thousand rupees. Antriyo, Relku’s father files a complaint against Gupta in the local police station which ultimately worsens the circumstances for Relku’s family. Relku’s father was unlawfully detained and pummelled by the police and afterwards their house was set on fire by the local goons. Relku’s story uphold how merciless assault is carved out upon penniless masses by the influential heads in a society and with regard to this issue Dastidhar writes:

Reason and judgement belong to the economically and materially superior classes, and such parties would fain give up their position of comfort to create room for other minorities with credible voices. Subtle counter-measures, as a self-defense mechanism against the geographical shift of reason, act as snares for the less careful among the repressed- for instance, carving out areas of land and punishing those who trespass on it, marking those who skip providing gifts to the corrupt officials while revoking their permission to graze cattle, and in consequence constraining their freedom of movement, setting debt traps by selling alcohol on credit and countless other such maneuvers. (8)

Relku’s sheer hopelessness is substantiated through these coercive measures which compelled her to remain docile in those situations and resettle in a city. Relku alludes to the Rewa river while unfolding the unhappy events of her life, and with a heavy heart she concludes her story in the following manner: “My life is like a river, mother... And on it I float away to the big city. I hear the sirens of the factory, father...calling, beckoning. I leave your world far behind...” (Sen 33). Relku equates her journey with the swift motion of a river which in a figurative manner

substantiates how intimate she had been with the river. Relku also considers that close proximity to Rewa makes her house a potential target for hoodlums. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) offers a similar situation in which Vilie, the lone wanderer plunges into finding the river of his dreams which he considers to be animated and spirited. Relku too mediates over Rewa as being instrumental in bringing about the means for impoverished Adivasis.

The second section of the graphic narrative, which is titled "The River", focuses specifically on Vishnu's expedition to Ballanpur where he runs across Anand who guides him throughout the journey (Sen 35). Alongside, Sen introduces another mythical narrative regarding the origination of Rewa which begins with a disturbing proclamation by Ratukamai: "our task is big. Our mountain is changing... Tigers and boars are roaring" (Sen 36). The piercing cry of the animals along with the machine-made changes in the mountains accurately spell the seriousness of the current situation. Subsequently, Maglu Gayen writes a letter to Relukabadi, asking him to pick up the rangai and sing the 'river of stories' to arouse the people across the world from their sombre sleep and retaliate against those forces perpetuated through limitless violence and excessive greed. Relukabadi undertakes the lonesome voyage (though his two daughters, namely Revli and Devli begin following him afterwards) attempting to find the Vije mountain which ends in the discovery of a towering teak tree which eventually fell on a *malta* (soil clay) and the sweeping water from the *malta* gave birth to Ganga and Rewa (Sen 44,45,46). The juxtaposition of a mythical narrative with the current set of events (i.e. systematized exploitation of natural resources as being laid out in Jamli village) in the text succinctly epitomizes a stark contrast between an eco-friendly and non-eco-friendly way of living. Before reaching Ballanpur Vishnu comes across a technical supervisor associated with the Rewa dam project who tries to justify the utilitarian aspects of such models of development as the "dam will generate 1450 megawatts of power, the canals will carry irrigation and the drinking water to drought-prone areas" etcetera (Sen 40). These justifications fall short of words before the indigenous people because they consider themselves as "the children of Rewa" (Sen 44). The gigantic dam project posits an existential threat to Rewa which would obviously culminate in "crisis over or about water, a crisis often originating in and exacerbated by colonial history, postcolonial greed and models of development, human callousness and climate change" (Nayar, *Vulnerable Earth* 21). The construction of the dam would invariably choke Rewa, break apart her natural tributaries and side streams which will result in an unforeseen demise of the river.

While reaching Ballanpur, Vishnu initially interacts with an individual who, by his attire reveals himself to be a Muslim, refers to the river as "Ma Rewa" which, according to him, is a "holy one, the provider and protector of life" and asks Vishnu whether the government would be able to provide another Rewa if they obliterate the current one (Sen 42). This question in the text remains unheeded as it gets no respondent. The very act of divinizing Rewa encapsulates the

epistemological foundation of the tribal belief-systems which stand in stark contrast with modernist epistemologies which unambiguously suggests “how a division is made historically between two or more intelligent beings/races/communities based on power, which is sanctioned by capital, and how exploitation is possible with the lure of liberation and modernity” (Dastidhar 4). Vishnu meets with Anand who quit his job as an electronic engineer and joined the Adivasi agitation. Anand at the very outset of the meeting illustrated his very profound understanding regarding the current state of affairs and brings forth a number of pertinent questions: “What is this thing called ‘development’? How does it work in society? Who benefits and who loses? What has development really brought to us?” (Sen 43). Anand’s foreseeing of the environmental deterioration amounts to his ecological awareness which he concurs with the Adivasis of Ballanpur. Sen’s astuteness with respect to the repercussions of hydrocolonialism is comprehensible in the sense that “the text exhibits a collective experience of the tribal community in a certain critical juncture of time and their momentous struggle; it is not a saga of an individual, though both the cases need serious concern and feeling of the masses” (Mondal and Banerjee 2991). Sen’s critique of modern development strategies has a universal appeal which is further intensified through the use of visual aids.

Anand enlightens Vishnu regarding various aspects of the survival strategies of the Adivasis in this region. The region endured lifelong intervention of outsiders and the Adivasis have neatly crafted their indigenous knowledge systems comprising of “many legends and songs about folk heroes who fought for their freedom” (Sen 48). The Adivasis cling to their tradition by means of folklore which glorifies Rewa with an ecological worldview which typifies the fact that “subjugated or local knowledges always tend to do less violence to the local particulars and are also less likely to impose hierarchal structures of credibility based on universal claims about the proper procedures of justification that foreclose the contributions of many unconventional or lower-status knowers” (Alcoff 80). Institutionalized historiographies have not taken account of these epistemologies with serious consideration. Anand vehemently criticizes the promulgation of the idea of ‘reserve’ forests by the British Government in this regard which inordinately fueled the systematic exploitation of natural resources. Ramchandra Guha in his influential work titled *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2014) pays particular attention to the restrained implementation of Forest Acts in the 19th Century in the chapter titled “The ideology of Scientific Conservation” where he identifies the Forest Department as a “reviled arm of the colonial state” and writes:

For the acres and acres of woodland taken over by the state were by no means pristine, untouched forests; rather, they had been controlled and used by humans down the centuries. Peasants and pastoralists, swidden cultivators and wood-working artisans, all looked upon the forest as a provider of their basic means of subsistence: the source of fuel for cooking,

grass for livestock, leaf for manure, timber for homes and plows, bamboos for baskets, land for extending cultivation, herbs for curbing ailments, and so on. When access to these resources was restricted by the creation of strictly protected government reserves, escalating the conflict between local communities and forest departments was the inevitable outcome. (55).

Anand while unfolding the socio-political history of the region focuses specifically on how methodically the Adivasis have been driven into the periphery by the outsiders. The perpetual conflict between Adivasis and the governmental officials in contemporary times exemplify a state of “coloniality” which “refers to the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations” (Grosfoguel 205). The Adivasis hang on to their primitive ways of living which in a way revert the readers back to the premodern era but the inception of the culture of development represented by hydro-regulation and hydro-commodification “means that the rhetoric of progress, of salvation, of technology, of democracy goes hand in hand with the logic and practice of oppression, racial discrimination, political concentration of power in the hand of a creole/Mestizo/ an elite” (Mignolo 495). Nevertheless, the aboriginal people of the regions have resisted against the various forms of colonialist ideologies by being vocal about their very thoughts about Rewa: “we, the children and guardians of Ma Rewa, vow that we shall never allow the forces of greed and self-interest to exploit her natural bounty” (Sen 50). The Adivasis adhere to a regressive attitude to hold out against the modern notions of development characterized by an absolute indifference to environmental awareness. The Adivasis are looking for an “appropriate environmental action” which “is not complete without virtue ethics, which helps humans move away from anthropocentric attitudes to the frontier of change where they see themselves as participants, and not conquerors” (Rangarajan 49). Regression with regard to Adivasi’s ecoconsciousness works not in a sense of retrogressing but rather in adopting a more humanitarian, environment-friendly and sustainable means of existence.

The distraught villagers reacted vehemently against the ideology behind the commodifying tendencies of the administrative officials. They condemn the very idea of development aggravated by hydrocolonialism which “continues to be based on a way of thinking that treats people and nature as things’...” (Sen 52). Sen enlightens us regarding how the Adivasis are themselves are willing to adopt an alternative model of development. One such instance from the text occurs when one of the Adivasis edifies Vishnu concerning the primitive ways of controlling water which even the reputed engineers adapted for “catching and storing water-building channels, checkdams, and ponds” (Sen 53). The indigenous knowledge system promotes models of sustainable development. The idea of promoting sustainable development in the current era is not devoid of complications either. Shamshul Haque in his article titled “Environmental Discourse and Sustainable Development: Linkages and Limitations” (2000) deliberates upon the recurring challenges in implementing methods of sustainable development and focuses on

anthropological studies which “show that although many tribal cultures and lifestyles (e.g. the tribal farmers, hunters, and fishermen of Amazonia) did not involve urban infrastructures and modern technologies, they were quite adequate to satisfy basic human needs without much environmental costs” (13,14). *River of Stories* exemplifies how indigenous canny could assist us in formulating a different model of development. The villagers react to the modernist notion of progress with discordance because metropolitan knowledge fails to decipher the fatal after-effects of artificial constructions. The history of economic growth in post-independence India has been markedly influenced by dams which “became the symbol of development and their multipurpose utility-generation of electricity, irrigation, flood control and navigation-contributed greatly to the growth of a nation” (Nayak 69). The tribals manifest their shrewdness in dealing with watercourses as one of them acquaints Vishnu with how indigenous methods of harnessing water were adopted by engineers in Gujra district (Sen 53). The tribals do not romanticize the dam project because they could anticipate the impending eco-disasters and Sen dexterously employs “aesthetic social realism in order to inscribe the fears, anxieties and threats associated with the consumption of water, the iniquitous social order, the politics of development and the modalities of state or corporate ‘development’” (Nayar, *Vulnerable Earth* 53). Adivasis advocate for “true development” which according to them would benefit not only humankind but would also remain favourable for maintaining environmental sustainability as they also suggest how “these farmers have protected the catchment, planted the right crops, trees, and grasses to improve the soil- so many things which enrich the environment instead of destroying it” (Sen 53). The tribal’s comprehension of ‘development’ seems quite befitting for the current era. *River of Stories* by specifying the severity of the recurring environmental predicaments emerges as a “serious fiction” as per Amitav Ghosh’s phraseology elucidated in *The Great Derangement* (2016) which is one of his notable works (11).

The epilogue which is titled “Under the Mahua Tree” appears to be a befitting denouement for the graphic narrative for a number of reasons. Sen in this section furnishes a short conversation between a village dweller (having an appearance very similar to Malgu Gayen) and a political leader (as it seems from his attire). The politician figure rebukes the villager for whiling away time without doing any constructive work. He further advises the idle inhabitant to prepare himself for the 21st century “to enjoy the fruits of progress” (Sen 64). The stout person keeps on imbibing in him ideas for generating profits and pursuing an opulent livelihood. But at the very end, with a moment’s pause, the villager quite sarcastically remarks that he was doing the same thing without taking account of the comer’s bidding. The villager authenticates his position in a “place where happiness and simplicity are considered more important than capital generation and wage against labour, logic does not have a place at all” (Dastidhar 15). The graphic narrative is concluded in an aboriginal setting where the demeanor of a country dweller is being concentrated upon who remains oblivious of the mainstream happenings. This is how the narrative itself comes full circle as it takes

the readers back to a primordial setting. The narrative closure in Sen's work establishes how amidst the 'national' rush towards progression "the so-called 'backward people' living on the land of their ancestors, who want to retain their way of life and their belief in deities and spirits held over many centuries. But they were faced with displacement by a massive damn which flood their homelands" (Sen 4). Sen illustrates how a heavy price these tribals are compelled to pay for the steady fabrication of the dam. Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) can be an appropriate reference in this regard which is based on water-related crises and wars in Delhi. This graphic novel discusses how the conventional images associated with water (like life-giving ingredient) gradually became linked with armed conflict and active hostility following the privatization of Bharat Copper Limited in Tambapur township. Banerjee's "parody forces us to see the consequences of hydrocolonialism as akin to the territorial disputes and colonialisms that produced global as well as local crises" (Nayar, *Vulnerable Earth* 61). Hydrocolonialism signifies how various colonial forms of subjugation have persisted beyond the colonial times which carry on with producing undesired effects on the environment. *River of Stories* certifies that graphic narratives can be a powerful medium not only for addressing the environmental issues but also advocating proper strategies to tackle with these crises. The graphic tale offers several stories which emerge from the river concentrating which the Adivasis eke out a living. The dam would invariably deny their access to the river which functions as a conglomeration point for both human and nonhuman species on earth. Sen in a compelling manner collocates indigenous livelihood, modern technology and local myths in order to ensure that "we see a social conflict, and a contest over not just the land but over the stories of this land- and this is the critical literacy demanded of us by the form" (Nayar, *Indian Graphic Novel* 112). Sen succeeds in certifying hydrocolonialism as one of the most urgent threats to human existence on earth in contemporary times.

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