GREENING EVERYDAY LIFE: A READING OF SELECT (UN)SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN INDIA

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Abstract: The increasing instances of ecological catastrophes across the globe call for new ways of reading climate narratives. Most discussions on climate change focus on metanarratives that highlight anthropocentrism and ecological insensitivity as the primary reasons for the depletion of natural resources. The impact is also discussed in most situations, including its effects on human lives. This paper uses the concept of everyday life to examine the effects of environmental disasters in India on planetary systems and imagines solutions focused on 'greening' everyday life to reduce the intensity of ecocides. The sustainable practices popular in India, along with the new types of interventions required in everyday life, are discussed in detail. The paper foregrounds the role of quotidian lives in defining (Un)Sustainability and the importance of analysing the everyday lives of the non-human world.

Introduction

In this age of global warming, frequent floods, earthquakes, wildfires, and typhoons, a conceptual understanding of the right to everyday life is relevant. These climatic catastrophes are, to a great extent, anthropogenic, irreversible, and fatal. While media discussions and scientific explanations of these disasters emphasize the unethical forms of profiteering by countries of the global north and international conglomerates, the concepts of everyday life and the human-nonhuman binary in the context of eco-crisis ought to be investigated in detail. The intensity and frequency of environmental catastrophes demand a multispecies perspective that dismantles the dualisms between the human-nonhuman world and the animate-inanimate. Anthropological studies alone wouldn't do justice to the planetary system, which is populated by a wide variety of flora and fauna and natural resources. Along with bringing in fields of study like Animal Studies, Environmental Humanities, and Blue Humanities, the exclusive use of theoretical concepts for human beings should be discarded. To decentre human beings, we need to reimagine our understanding of the biosphere. Everyday Life provides a theoretical framework to decode the experiences of all forms of life. The unrestricted exploitation of natural resources and environmental contamination destabilise ecosystems, affecting the everyday lives of all species, including humans. On the other hand, critical interventions into our everyday life practices would provide valuable insights into how we can approach sustainability as a way of life. To have a deeper understanding of the disruption of the everyday life of animate and inanimate worlds and their inseparable existence, we need to trace the history of anthropocentric modes of development, eco-collapse, and eco-precarities (Nayar, 2019).

I. Colonialism and Anthropocentric Turn

We live in an epoch driven by neoliberal logic of profiteering and ever-diminishing sustainability of ecosystems. The early stages of these changes began in the post-

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Enlightenment period, when progress in science and technology led to the formation of a thriving capitalist economy. The epistemological foundations of the modern human subject placed too much faith in humanist philosophy and scientific rationality. The anthropocentric turn in human perception was conditioned by a lopsided logic that created a value system privileging humans at the expense of other living species on the planet. The period of modernity was founded on a set of binaries that included human/non-human, culture/nature, and subject/object (Cook & Crang, 1996, 131-53). The colonial regime, together with the formation of nation-states, accelerated the pace of ecocide and ethnocide through their anthropocentric policies. Colonialism, as a global force, was the consequence of capitalist logic that sought unlimited profit through the exploitation of natural resources. The deep nexus that existed between colonialism and environmental exploitation has led to the formation of Environmental Colonialism as a specific epistemic formation. The pace of ecocide and that of subsequent ecological disasters were not so conspicuous everywhere across the globe till the end of the twentieth century. The capitalist market that evolved in the nineteenth century and the colonial patterns of development conditioned by anthropocentrism were forms of "slow violence" against the ecosystem (Nixon, 2011, 151-174).

With the definitions of education, science, and civilization inherited from the West, new forms of marginal identities were constructed across the globe. The rampant exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of the 'civilised man' involved the erasure of indigenous habitats and their subsequent displacement (Gómez-Baggethun, 2022, 1139-1157). When Benedict Anderson defined the modern nation-state as an imagined community, the 'imagination' was lopsided with certain sections of the society relegated to the margins as "unimagined communities" within the nation-state (Nixon, 2011, 151-174). They were labelled as "surplus people" whose presence was not called for in the newly formed cities (Ibid.). The forced alienation of the indigenous communities from their ecospheres, reducing them to the status of development refugees, was accompanied by the irrevocable destruction of the environment owing to the anthropogenic paradigm that emerged in the Age of Reason (Federici, 2021). The age of capitalism was followed by neoliberalism, an economic system actively facilitated by the state through increased privatisation and market deregulation. The distorted ways of defining progress and development in the neoliberal age had been anticipated by Adam Smith when he expressed his anxieties about societies being exclusively under the control of the market economy (Metcalf, 2021). The state's receding from the economic sphere and the unrestricted corporatisation of everyday life hastened the destruction of the environment. The intensity of consumer culture and violation of planetary boundaries are now causing irreparable damage to the biosphere (Rockström, 2009).

II. Everyday Ecocide

As we comprehend the trajectories of "development" and "progress" that have disrupted the ecological rhythm, an engagement with the concept of everyday life provides critical insights into the everyday practices that contribute to the ecological crisis and the subsequent hampering of the everyday life of mostly the marginalised people, flora, and fauna. Moreover, the contemporary turn to everyday life in theoretical discussions has also facilitated the design of sustainable practices to add ecosensitivity. This paper is founded on the premises that: (1) the concept of everyday life helps us negotiate the current eco-crisis from a "planetary perspective" (García-González, 2024) (2) beyond the metanarratives elaborating on diverse dimensions of environmental crisis, a turn towards a discussion of everyday life and "embodied uncertainty" (Sword-Daniels, 2016, 290-307) would offer us more profound understanding of the disruptions in the lives of the voiceless and the significance of their social embodiment in defining their subjective experiences and (3) it is imperative to identify

and resolve the normalised forms of unsustainable practices we follow in our everyday life to reduce the intensity of anthropocenic changes. Similar to the notion of everyday sexism proposed by Laura Bates, "everyday ecocide" directs our attention towards the overwhelming presence of micro-moments of eco-blindness that define our quotidian selves. As explained on the Facebook page titled *Everyday Ecocide*,

> Everyday Ecocide shares examples of eco-blindness, climate denial, or erasure of non-human species. All of these small ecocides are like a daily tide, in and out, causing disconnection from nature, psychic numbing to ecological harm, and ultimately all adding up to the emerging catastrophe of environmental collapse. (Bridgetmck, 2024)

Until very recently, debates on reimagining environmental concerns primarily focused on first-world nations and corporate firms accustomed to unethical profit-making methods that dumped waste pollutants from their manufacturing facilities into third-world countries. A study of the emergence of climate refugees as an everyday phenomenon helps us understand the new forms of precarity emerging in the Anthropocene. According to Kaplan and Ross, "to advance a theory of everyday life is to elevate lived experience to the status of a critical concept—not merely to describe lived experience, but to change it" (qtd. in Dei, 2023). The concept of 'embodied uncertainty' puts into perspective the embodied nature of subjective experiences of uncertainties. The success of imagining alternative ecological futures depends on our engagement with the animate and inanimate embodiments. A planetary perspective implies approaching planet Earth as an integrated system of diverse entities whose lives are woven together forever. This interconnectedness could provide us with a framework to explore everyday life inclusively.

A discussion along these lines should begin with the experiences of the victims of the environmental crisis. It is the everyday life of the minority communities and the non-human that has been violently disrupted due to ecocide. The depletion of natural resources, alienation of the indigenous communities from their land, and the irresponsible methods of strengthening infrastructure and boosting industrial production have transgressed the threshold of planetary resilience. Independent India had, in effect, continued the colonial patterns of development that were non-inclusive and exploitative. The initial development policies were aimed at eradicating poverty and improving infrastructure. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, envisioned a development and progress model shaped by scientific culture, a planned economy, and heavy industrialisation. While both Nehru and Gandhi envisaged a developed India, they had different perceptions of the rural-urban divide. Even though Nehru was concerned about environmental degradation, as exemplified in a letter he sent to the Chief Ministers of all states in 1957, emphasising the importance of ensuring ecological stability when launching river valley projects and other industries (Sahu, 2018), his fundamental approach towards progress and development in the form of heavy industries was spatially located in urban landscapes. However, Mahatma Gandhi, with his much popular statement "The future of India lies in its villages", recognised the impossibility of holding the growing population of India exclusively in the cities and wished to offer equal attention to the villages as well through the formation of cottage industries, which would ensure sustainable forms of social and economic well-being (Thadani, 2015). The land-use policies that led to the rapid conversion of forest areas into agricultural land during colonial times continued in post-independent India as well to feed the entire population. The post-independence initiatives for the commercial use of natural resources reflected a lopsided understanding of the intricacies of equating development with technology at the expense of the non-human world.

III. Independent India and (Un)Sustainable Development

As the young nation began scripting narratives of development and progress, a simultaneous process of (de)privileging was shaping citizens' life experiences. The scaling up of economic resources was the prerogative of those at the top of the caste/class hierarchies. The top-down method of governance deepened fault lines in the social structure, worsening the precarious existence of landless peasants, tribals, adivasis, and women, to name a few (Jena, 2014, 1183-91). The undue pressure on agricultural lands resulted in deprivation, forcing rural people to migrate to cities in search of livelihoods, intensifying the formation of slums that had already begun to emerge due to the mass influx of partition refugees. Urban slums are a conspicuous example of a distorted mode of development that directly affects the quality of life of the underprivileged. The unsustainable forms of industrialization, the dearth of proper vision in developing rural societies, and non-inclusive policies have pushed select sections of society, including the ecoscapes, into precarity. While the nation was focused on its economic and scientific leaps, the minorities in the human world and the biome in the nonhuman sphere were subjected to deprivation and casualties, denying them their right to everyday life. The discrimination of certain sections of society, together with violence against the environment, brings to the fore the relationship between human rights and the rights of nature.

The “tyranny” of development that moulded the nation was also visible in the use of science to disrupt the flow of nature. The strengthening of the agricultural projects to feed the masses demanded effective water management systems. One of the earliest dams inaugurated by Nehru was the Bhakra Dam in 1954, intended to increase agricultural production in Punjab and Haryana. What the economic prosperity narrative conceals is the vast array of human struggles and deprivations that ensued after the project's inauguration. “The Bhakra dam led to the displacement of around 36,000 people and submerged Bilaspur, a town with a population of 4,000 people” (Narrain, 2005). The dam was also the cause of great environmental havoc due to deforestation, fatalities of wildlife species, and heavy use of chemicals and fertilisers, depleting the health of the biosphere. Here we find the continuing forms of violence blocking the flow of nature while at the same time crippling the tempo of everyday life of the dislocated human and non-human species. The Hirakud Dam across the river Mahanadi also has a similar story to tell. The rationale for constructing the dam in 1957 was to mitigate flooding and generate electricity. While the resistance to the dam eventually dissipated, studies show that even after 50 years of construction, the claimed benefits had not materialized. Moreover, the rate of human-nonhuman casualties was beyond the expected levels. A large number of villages were flooded, human beings were displaced, and many acres of agricultural land were submerged (Nayak, 2005). The violation of the right to everyday life is again apparent here, as the entire biosphere is forcibly destabilised. Despite increasing disasters resulting from unsustainable human interventions in ecosystems, a spate of dam construction has occurred in India since the 1970s. Some of the significant anti-dam protests included the ones against the Silent Valley Project, the Sardar Sarovar Project, the Rathong Chu Project, and the Bedthi Project. The New Economic Policy of the 1990s and liberalisation accelerated the ecological degradation due to rapid industrialisation and privatisation of natural resources. “The new buzzwords like foreign investments", "export promotion," "privatization", and 'SEZ’...” (Jena, 2014, 1185) thrived on violence against the marginalised indigenous communities, non-human species, and inanimate elements of nature. Their seamless integration into the environment defined the everyday lives of indigenous communities. The neocolonial strategies of development controlled by corporations and facilitated by governments derailed planetary health. Disasters like the Uttarakhand tunnel collapse, constructed in the fragile Himalayan region without proper scientific studies, ought

to be addressed as eco-crimes against that ecoscape. This incident and similar ones underscore the criminality of these constructions, which violate the workers' right to everyday life and the ecosystem. The destructive logic of capitalism, which deepened the vulnerabilities of migrant workers and biodiversity, was also evident in the land subsidence at Joshimath. The unscientific construction methods, combined with the unrestricted entry of tourists, led to the collapse of the terrain. Instances of unscientific land use that disrupt the lives of vulnerable groups can be found across the country. The state of Kerala has been bearing the brunt of unscientific land use, resulting in floods and landslides over the last few years, and the threat of severe drought looms due to rainfall deficits and overexploitation of underwater resources. Likewise, the state of Sikkim experienced devastating flash floods in 2023 owing to the improper construction of the Teesta Hydel Project. Around 50 people were killed, and 60,000 were affected.

Another form of interrupting the everyday life of the biosphere is environmental pollution. The spillage of industrial as well as domestic waste into the environment vitiates the quality of air and water consumed by all species. One of the worst green crimes in the history of the world was the Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984. The magnitude of the disaster due to the leakage of around 40 tons of methyl isocyanate into the atmosphere when people were fast asleep is beyond imagination. While the number of human casualties has been reported, how this incident has unsettled the everyday life of the ecosystem forever has not received enough critical attention. The continuing contamination of the environment is a result of criminal negligence on the part of the authorities. “Union Carbide shut down the site and left it to rust. It has never been cleaned up, and so the poisoning continues. In 1999, testing of groundwater and well-water near the site revealed mercury levels up to 6m times greater than what is accepted as safe by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)” (Edwards, 2023). The everyday lives of all animate and inanimate beings are affected in various ways, including the prevalence of genetic disorders and pollution. A similar, albeit less severe, form of natural havoc is now being witnessed in our cities: air pollution from vehicular emissions, stubble burning, and fireworks during festivals. The deteriorating air quality index, which causes discomfort in the eyes and respiratory tracts of humans, has also disrupted the quality of life of birds and animals (Sumanth). The current water woes in Bangalore are yet another consequence of “decades of unplanned and unregulated growth, rapid erosion of green cover, overexploitation of natural resources, concretisation, corruption, and encroachment of lakes are some of the reasons Bengaluru has been pushed to the brink of an unprecedented water crisis” (Poovanna, 2024). The unprecedented rise in temperatures due to global warming, driven by carbon emissions, is another worldwide crisis affecting the lives of all species. The melting of polar ice caps has raised sea levels, submerging coastal regions and threatening inland life. The destruction of forests and coastlines exacerbates the displacement of climate refugees, who are left without necessities. In this age of media distractions—clickbait and viral content —the reports of floods and droughts hold our attention for only a very short time. However, the everyday life of the affected ecoscape is never the same, and the continued survival of the life forms depends on their state of vulnerability. Human beings defying nature's resilience threshold have resulted in ‘nature striking back’ out of desperation.

IV. Greening Everyday Life

We have so far seen the diverse ways in which the everyday life of any biosphere is destabilised by the predatory forms of development designed by those in power. The turn towards sustainability also demands ‘greening’ our conceptualisation of everyday life. For instance, single-use plastic products are a common presence in most households in India and are later discarded into the environment. The cooking method is essentially fuel- and water-

intensive. Discharging waste cooking oil into the drainage system contaminates water resources, posing health hazards to all species. The use of fossil fuels in vehicles and the presence of Chloro Fluoro Carbons in home appliances, while enhancing the comfort of everyday life in the short term, pose a long-term threat to vulnerable lives in the biosphere. The use of non-biodegradable menstrual pads, which usually end up in landfills, is another primary everyday source of pollution. Redefining everyday life through sustainable interventions is possible through the design of green alternatives. The immediate impact of these interventions could be in the form of disruptions to daily life. However, these disruptive technologies hold immense potential to transform the futures of both human and nonhuman species. Here, disruption acts as a positive force, prompting us to modify our lifestyles to reduce our ecological footprint. Across the globe, those who are eco-sensitive are coming up with innovative solutions to tackle ecocide. As the media circulates information on these technologies, people are generally aware of them. Still, the questions of affordability and disruption can at times stop them from being active participants in this eco-turn.

The basic resources we need for everyday life include food, water, clothing, and shelter. Reimagining the culinary practices has been a primary target of India on World Food Day, celebrated on 16 October 2023. The focus on eating habits extends from its production to consumption. The National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA) focuses on sensitising farmers to sustainable cultivation methods and providing financial support to revamp their agricultural practices. Optimising the use of natural resources and fertilisers, together with the cultivation of less water-intensive crops, are among the other steps introduced. Consumers are inspired to adopt healthy diet patterns that exert the least pressure on the environment. Eating locally and avoiding food waste are other methods popularised to ensure a smaller carbon footprint. India's sustainable water management policy is titled "Ripples." Access to affordable, clean drinking water through schemes like the Jal Jeevan Mission ensures the health and well-being of the downtrodden sections of society. Documenting the details of available water resources is another initiative to protect and strengthen these resources. Jal Shakti Abhiyan promotes water harvesting across the country to preserve rainwater, thereby reducing the exploitation of water bodies. The government has introduced various schemes to protect wetlands, rejuvenate rivers, mitigate river water contamination, ensure dam safety, improve water-use efficiency, promote wastewater treatment, introduce methods to guarantee renewable energy for agricultural purposes, and map aquifers for effective groundwater management (Khandula, 2023). We are also witnessing the formation of the Indian Vegan Movement, which is being popularized across media by celebrities to redirect popular sensibilities towards non-violent practices of defining one's lifestyle, including food. "Veganism is a way of living which seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of and cruelty to animals for food, clothing or any other purpose, as defined by The Vegan Society. Veganism also encourages denouncing zoo or aquarium visits, or taking part in dog or horse racing or shows" (India Waking Up…). India has also made its mark in the world of sustainable fashion. The emerging startup ecosystem in India and Fashion Schools are focusing on green fashion to promote clothes made from organic materials. There are also widespread discussions about ensuring the affordability of sustainable clothes for people across all classes through promoting reuse and recycling, as well as creating a trend of buying second-hand clothes (Shiraz, 2023). The construction of living spaces is another significant component of everyday life that contributes to environmental pollution. All these schemes, if implemented effectively, would enhance the sustainability of our everyday lives.

There is also a larger presence of unsustainable practices punctuating our everyday life that require deeper social and political engagement. Even in a highly literate state like Kerala, the imagination of a house is influenced by notions of social prestige, irrespective of the

requirements of a family and the availability of economic resources. This leads to a waste of space, labour, and resources. Moreover, the financial resources wasted on unnecessary constructions could be used to ensure sustainability and energy efficiency. Together with reducing environmental footprint, "sustainable homes prioritise health and well-being through thoughtful design, emphasising superior indoor air quality achieved via ventilation systems, air purification, and low-emission materials" ("The Growing Demand for Sustainable Housing in India…"). There are increasing conversations happening in India on the issue of greening living spaces. A global NGO, Habitat for Humanity, organised the Sheltertech Summit India in 2023 to discuss strategies to reduce carbon emissions from the construction sector and share the best practices followed by builders (Press Trust of India). Measures such as utilizing wastewater for gardening and promoting organic farming practices would further enrich the sustainability of living spaces. The food and hospitality sector is another central sphere of carbon emissions through the regular use of plastic cutlery, which very rarely decomposes. The eco-friendly alternatives include recycling cutlery, popularising budget-friendly edible cutlery made of a mixture of jowar, rice, and wheat, or using biodegradable materials to make cutlery. The provision of free water in hotels, which is wasted in most cases, is also to be restricted. A nominal water payment, or serving water only on request, could reduce this wastage. Yet another irresponsible act that regularly happens during marriage feasts is the distribution of drinking water in plastic bottles. Auditing the carbon footprint of such mega events could be a game-changer towards sustainability. People's everyday mobility is another source of carbon emissions. India is incentivising the use of electric vehicles through tax cuts and subsidies. Still, the rate of transition is happening at a snail's pace due to its cost and the limited number of available options. Strengthening public transport and spreading the culture of shared taxis are alternative green options.

The private lives of women, along with their 'gendered roles' in the domestic space, are essential concerns to strengthen sustainability in everyday life. A shift away from disposable menstrual products towards reusable or biodegradable alternatives could be one way to bring sustainability into these intimate spaces. Both state and central governments have now launched many initiatives to popularise reusable menstrual cups made of medical-grade silicone or rubber, one of the most eco-friendly options for sustainable periods. Since women typically handle cooking and cleaning in most households, keeping them informed about effective water management, healthy diets, and proper disposal of kitchen waste would significantly help make sustainability an everyday habit.

Conclusion

Everyday Life is a critical framework for inculcating a planetary perspective and studying the impact of human-induced ecocide on multiple species. The violent erasure of natural habitats, environmental contamination, and disruption of everyday life underscore the importance of everyday moments in defining the extent of our sustainability. The struggles against ecocide have to be re-narrativized to understand how climate crises disrupt the everyday rhythm of the planetary systems, thereby aggravating the impact of climate catastrophes on multiple species.

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