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Irada: A perspective of Eco-Terrorism in India

*“Ecoterrorism, also called **ecological terrorism** or **environmental terrorism**, destruction, or the threat of destruction, of the environment by states, groups, or individuals in order to intimidate or to coerce governments or civilians. The term also has been applied to a variety of crimes committed against companies or government agencies and intended to prevent or to interfere with activities allegedly harmful to the environment” (2)*

Eco-terrorism is a lesser-known concept in socio-political discussions. It seems to be the unlikely amalgamation of 2 unrelated topics; yet, its presence in the modern world is a deeply disturbing concern.

As mentioned in the above quoted definition, the concept envelopes the extreme activism (terrorism) conducted against the humans (or human organizations) for environmental causes. But, an alternate definition also includes the severe, intentional actions taken against the environment for personal and other ulterior gains by an individual, an organization or even the government (covertly). The point to note is that the intentional damage constituting eco-terrorism is by primary motive and not a side effect of other activities such as pollution, biodiversity loss, etc. The result of such actions is

almost always destructive in nature despite any positive motives behind it. However, some interpretations also include unintentional harm to the environment as an act of eco-terrorism.

As mentioned earlier, the term was not coined until recently (in 1960s), when a massive wave of ecological uproars took place in the West. However, in smaller scales, the concept was still practiced prior to its naming. One of most notable medieval incidents in the West is the “War of Desmoiselles”, or “War of the Maidens”. It was a series of peasant revolts in response to the new forest codes implemented by the French government in 1827. In May 1829, groups of peasant men dressed in women's clothes and terrorized forest guards and charcoal-makers who they felt had wrongfully taken the land to exploit it. The revolts persisted for four years until May 1832. However, this is considered a pre-history rather than an actual act of eco-terrorism due to the fact that the peasants were not environmentalists. The peasants committed their acts to protect the environment because they felt they had a claim to it; it being their main source of income and their way of life for generations.

“The thought behind eco-terrorism rises from the radical environmentalism movement, which gained currency during the 1960s. Ideas that arose from radical environmentalism are “based on the belief that capitalism, patriarchal society, and the industrial revolution and its subsequent innovations were responsible for the despoliation of nature”.^[5] Radical environmentalism is also characterized by the belief that human society is responsible for the depletion of the environment and, if current society is left unchecked, will lead to the ultimate complete degradation of the environment”.⁽³⁾

A ‘fight for the environment’ perspective of eco-terrorism has been minimally addressed in South Asia and has a much longer drawn history in the western countries. Hence, the subject of all

further discussion for the rest of the essay would refer to eco-terrorism as 'terrorism against the environment'.

The primary cultural text chosen for the analysis of eco-terrorism in India is a Hindi movie, *Irada*.

Irada is 2017 Hindi film written by Aparnaa Singh & Anushka Rajan and directed by Aparnaa Singh. It is an environmental drama cum thriller which raises the contemporary ecological issues of uranium poisoning, reverse boring and fertilizer poisoning due to the green revolution and their immediate adverse impact on the people who live in the Malwa region of India. It won the award for the 'Best Film on Environment Conservation/Preservation' at the 65th National Film Awards.

Uranium and other chemicals are used majorly to generate energy. However, it is exceedingly difficult to dispose off their wastes as these minerals are non-biodegradable, highly reactive, exceptionally large pollutants and are radioactive (and thus carcinogenic). While scientists have found ways to extract energy from them, dumping or recycling these nuclear wastes still remains a question at large.

The process to introduce these chemicals in the groundwater includes a process known as "Reverse Boring". In this process, the water is pumped vertically downwards through a well (opposite of a Boring Well). When such chemicals reach groundwater sources, they travel everywhere through these water channels. These then get picked up along with water by other nearby boring wells for drinking, sanitary, irrigation purposes, etc. Ingesting or coming in close proximity to these chemicals causes several severe diseases such as Cancer, Tuberculosis, etc.

This movie is set in a semi-realist background, i.e., While the particular incidents in the movie are fictitious, the backdrop of Uranium poisoning in Punjab is very real (Similar to the Hungry Tide). Set in Bhatinda, Punjab, it is a multi-character film that has several sub-plots. The principal plot-line revolves around Lt Col Parabjeet Walia (Retd) (played by Naseeruddin Shah); an ex-army man and his daughter Riya Walia (played by Rumana Molla) who fatally suffers from lung cancer. Consequently, her father's dream of making her a world class swimmer turns to ashes before she succumbs to the cancer. After much investigation, the colonel deduces that the cancer is induced by the carcinogenic nature of the groundwater in and around Bhatinda. This Uranium, Ammonium Nitrate and Chromium contamination of groundwater is intentionally introduced by a wealthy capitalist and business tycoon Paddy F Sharma (played by Sharad Kelkar) by a process called Reverse Boring. By means of polluting the ground drinking water, Paddy wants to induce cancer in the population, thereby boosting his blood bank business profits. He also has the backing of the corrupt chief minister of the state, Ramandeep Braitch (played by Divya Dutta). The second plot-line focusses on a journalist who has evidence of Paddy's misdoings, but is kidnapped and silenced by Paddy and his entourage. However, his girlfriend, Maya Singh (played by Sagarika Ghatge) swears revenge and exposition on behalf of her lover. The colonel deals his daughter's death's revenge by blasting Paddy's factory with a bomb. What ensues is a series of honest investigations of the incident by an NIA officer, Arjun Mishra (played by Arshad Warsi) who is actually hired by the CM to pull a rug on the problem. However, on witnessing the plights of victims of the groundwater contamination (and its resulting cancer), Arjun decides to side with the Colonel and Maya to bring justice to those afflicted by the waters. The movie also has several other minor plot-lines and incidents interspersed throughout the story, but these can be discussed as the need arises.

“Irada” means Intention in English. Every major character in the story has an awfully specific intent. The Colonel wants to train his daughter for the defense services, Riya wants to LIVE an independent life, Paddy wants to grow his business by hook or crook, the Chief Minister wants to earn her share under the table and wants to maintain power, Maya wants to expose Paddy for his ill doings and Arjun wants to honestly solve his investigation. The drive in each of their “Iradas” create conflicts between them.

The movie displays a reasonable number of aspects highlighting the human – non human conflicts, the effects of the eco-terrorism and the capitalist – patriarchal thought processes that lead to the eco-terrorism events.



The movie begins with and recurs the above frame several times throughout the film. It sets the pessimistic, melancholic atmosphere that is preserved for almost the entirety of the film. It also conveys

an initial impression of the effects of the eco-terrorism on the non-human. This is a crucial shot, because the consequences on the non-human are very minimally depicted in the film. The high factory minarets, the smoggy atmosphere and the dullness of the sun's light shows the extent of pollution set on the city due to the factory. Overall, it serves as a constant reminder to the viewer that the situation cannot be perceived in a positive light what so ever.

The movie heavily emphasizes on the change of attitude of characters over time with exposure to the knowledge of the events of groundwater contamination. For instance, the Colonel is initially portrayed as a jolly, determined and a positive person. However, by the time his daughter passes away, he is crippled at heart and lost at motivation. But, by the end of the chapter he can only observed as a shadow of revenge. Though this revenge is a little exaggerated, but his motive for revenge stands justified. Furthermore, the eco-terrorist activities force ordinary citizens to embrace / envision their dark sides which may interfere with their integrity and value structures. Examples of this include the Colonel's bombing attempt and Maya's stealth operations with drones.

His daughter on the other hand, grows wary of her father's ambitions but continues her swimming practice despite her reservations. Her motivation stems from her will to live a long life; long enough to eventually resist her father's choices. Hints at this thought-process are observed during the scene where she is rejected at the defense services. Her piercing tantrums bellowing "I'm not numbers!" evince at her compressed feelings of subdue. But her chances at comfortably voicing it out as well as leading an independent life are hacked down by the cancer. Ultimately, neither she nor her father could achieve their ambitions on account of her demise. In the process, she loses her self-confidence and her hope to live. This is subtly yet beautifully shown in the scene where Riya cuts her own hair and releases the fireflies. The fireflies might possibly represent her act of letting her dreams go; such that there will not

be another morning and the sun has set forever. The hair on the other hand is a reference to her helplessness of the situation, and her preparation of the inevitable. This is quite similar to the pseudo-widow forms taken by the women of the Sunderbans in the Hungry Tide.



(1)

A second crucial outcome of the eco-terrorism event is the complete loss of trust between the people and their ideals of power. Blood donation is a very pure and noble cause, but when even such holy deeds are corrupted by heinous actions like ground water contamination, it causes insecurity within the foundation of the society. Arjun's comical yet sincere statement "Chai kis paani se banaya tune? ... Agar chai yaha ke paani se banaya toh andar kar dunga tereko!" prompts a re-evaluation of fear and doubt of a person's basic essentials of life such as water and healthcare.

Moreover, a deeper view is taken of the political and business arena in the backdrop of the eco-terrorism incident. Here, Paddy acts as the agent for a capitalist – patriarchal regime while people like

Maya's boyfriend act as the victims. However, the movie also provides us with an unorthodox female representative of this regime as well; the chief minister. This puts forth an interesting observation that the capitalist – patriarchal ideologies are not correlated to any gender, but instead to a social structure and hierarchy where it is prevalent within all individuals. This would also imply that an eco-feminist reform must be driven by not just the women in the society, but a communal uprising is instead necessary to overcome capitalism.

The introduction of a capitalist regime also disrupts the systemic hierarchy of power. The chief minister has unfortunately become a puppet in the hands of Paddy, owing again to the massive profits earned by Paddy due to eco-terrorism. Parallels of this can also be seen in the real world, where private companies have flourished by over-exploiting natural resources such as natural gas and water to the extent of securing intercontinental dominance over other nation's economies too.

“Blood! Blood!

A positive, B positive, O positive!

Blood! Blood! Blood!

Boliye, aaj ka rate 150 rupiye!

Haa ji! Do bottle ke saath ek bottle free!

Blood! Blood! Blood!”

“Chemo! Chemo! Chemo! Chemo!

First stage! Second stage!

Chemo! Chemo! Chemo! Chemo!

Chemo package insurance!

Chemo insurance! Chemo insurance!

Bolo uncle! Chemotherapy?”

“Oxygen cylinder! Oxygen cylinder!”

“Abhi pata hai kya, abhi 3rd stage hai. Toh aapka marna confirm hai uncle. Toh apne parivar ke liye kuch kar ke jao! Itthe par ji ne ganga jal paaya, una deich account me paisa tab aaya. Mera cut de 25 percent.

Challo, sign kara lo.”⁽¹⁾

One of the most engaging and distressing scenes in the entire movie is the one when Arjun is returning from one of his investigations. He accidentally boards a cancer special train. He is dumbfounded as he walks through the corridors witnessing the sheer strength of patients on the train. The train is full of hawkers persuading the patients to buy blood, chemotherapy sessions, oxygen cylinders and life insurances. The above list of quotes elaborates on their selling slogans. The train seems to be metaphorized for the life of these cancer patients. The journey seems hopeless, and the hawkers are seemingly the cancer parasites that are leaching out whatever they can salvage from the patients' degrading bodies. The offers of security for the families seem like false promises, yet the patients do not have much choice.

Mental illness is a common side effect of eco-terrorism. It strains the inter-personal relationships extensively. The sub plot of Bhagat Singh is exemplar of this situation. He is an employee at Paddy's Prompt Pulp and Fibers Private Limited (PPFPL) who aids in the process of reverse boring of water contaminants. He is aware of the consequences, but is too poor to heed them. Eventually, he

resents his job role as his wife is detected with cancer. In order to stop from further damage, he joins hands with the Colonel to bomb the PPFPL facility. However, his wife's suffering becomes unbearable for him to see, and he commits suicide. The mental load and guilt of such decisions become complex to manage. Also, the consequences of eco-terrorism bear multifold impact for those from poorer sections of society such as Bhagat Singh. The immediate priorities of feeding your family become pertinent before the consequences of groundwater contamination. On the other hand, once the detrimental effects of contamination reaches the individual or his family, he / she no longer has monetary support to treat the patient. Thus, it is a loss – loss situation for poorer sects of people.

The comical inputs by Arjun does provide solace from the persistent tenacity in the movie. However, the character offers much more than what meets the eye. He is perhaps the only character in the film that has a neutral point of view for a lengthy period in the story. Even so, he is a seasoned veteran when dealing with politicians, corporate and individuals. While a side-pin in the first half, his background story with his son is well established. Although his son appreciates his job profile, he never sees Arjun as a vigilante or a 'Batman'. However, this opinion changes through the progression of the story. In the latter half, like Bhagat Singh, Arjun too is faced with the dilemma to resolve the conflict between his integrity as a police officer and his human side. He chooses the latter, thus stepping up for himself and his son.

Lastly, the inappropriate use of science and technology in aiding the advancements of eco-terrorism shameful. This is the gap that the humanities try to bridge. The science looks at the problem objectively, without considering its 'human' impacts on its surroundings. The humanities certainly does that by generating an appropriate response through cultural texts such as this one.

“Article 21, The Right to Life, includes the right to have healthy food. The right to life means the right to food. The right to food means not toxic food; it means healthy food. Healthy food means no poison in the food. Therefore, who is putting in the poison? The corporation, the government, everybody in putting in the poison. Therefore, stop it. As simple as that.”⁽¹⁾

A passing mention must be made at the legal implications of the Eco-terrorism. Any vandalism in the name of nature or against nature is punishable by law under Article 21 of the Indian Penal Code as explained in the above quote.

In conclusion, the movie and its characters provide narrow yet deep insights into specific aspects about the effects of eco-terrorism and its environment.

“In 1960, the green revolution started in Punjab, in 2016 it is the cancer belt of India due to chemical contamination. There runs a train called the Cancer Train in Punjab. 1332 hazardous waste is generated around Ludhiana. Nearly 7 lakh people die of cancer annually. Chemical toxicity is a nationwide threat. In the last two decades, there have been more deaths due to chemical contamination than terrorism worldwide. The new face of terrorism is Eco-Terrorism.”⁽¹⁾

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