The Death of Nature in the Era of Global Warming

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Premonition as Adaptation

In *The Discovery of Global Warming* Spencer Weart (2008) writes about walking home one day noticing the maple trees lining his street and suddenly being able to see the maples dead—in his words "felled by global warming." His book is a history of how scientists came to imagine such things to spur their research into climate science. I am very interested in this way of formulating one's relation to global warming, that of presaging the natural world as dead or dying, the attentiveness to natural phenomena it requires to be able to see in this manner and the attitudes and actions such envisioning spurs. In this paper I excavate visions of the death of nature among my interlocutors, positing such visions as one way to gauge how the perception of the climate as changing may be taking hold. Given the current emphasis within the social science literature on climate change on the necessity for "adaptation" to changing, in many cases worsening, climate conditions, I end by asking if the imagination of decay of the natural world may constitute an adaptation.

Ben Orlove (2005) well elucidates the general conundrum of developing criteria for adaptive behavior within and across societies under environmental distress. In the three societies he examines, the Classic Maya of Mexico, the Viking settlements of Greenland and the US dust bowl, he shows how the deterioration of the physical environment, the onset of a shortage of resources and the demise of a particular way of life were incrementally evident to each of the societies. Although the archaeological and historical records show that these societies responded with rapidity to conditions as they changed, Orlove stresses that there were limits,

individual, collective, political and structural, to what such accommodations could forestall, to adaptation as such. Perhaps the most damning for the optimistic search for the evidence of adaptive capacity, that is of the elasticity of the human species, is that in each instance Orlove finds a repeated displacement of perceptual and experiential knowledge, "resistance to changing established patterns of action" (2005: 599).

In the face of perhaps unwarranted or rather insufficiently spelt out optimism about adaptation, Beatrice Hanssen's new reading of Walter Benjamin provides me an unexpectedly productive manner to enter the question of adaptation to climate change for our present (2000). In a close and subtle reading of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragedy* Hanssen suggests that Benjamin's privileged mode of history is that of natural history, marked by decay and transience and given witness by the figure of ruins. She shows how this vision of natural history, for our purposes dead, dying or death dealing nature, is not a spur to an apocalyptic mood, or even a pessimistic attitude towards the future. Rather such an acknowledgment of the disposition of nature to die and regenerate is suggestive of a displacement of the anthropocentric perspective of history. Whether such a sepulchral perception of nature and the temporary displacement of the human from the seat of history constitutes adaptation remains a question with which I struggle in this paper.

Ahead I trace a few anticipations of the death of nature among a loosely defined community of *chauras*, so called for living on temporary silt islands or *chars* within

the river system, specifically the River Jamuna, in northern Bangladesh (EGIS 2000; Sarkar et. al. 2003). But before I do so, I introduce several key components of their everyday lives by means of which they are brought to reflect upon the climate, notably the exertions of the river, the vacillation between indifference and intervention by the state towards their suffering and the well meaning efforts of non-governmental actors to secure their lives against the worst of climate change. In so doing I hope to lay out the plane of concepts, perceptions, intuitions and senses within which the intimation of the death of nature acquires its particular distinction of allowing one to perceive climate change.

The River of Global Warming

The Jamuna River is everywhere at my field site of an island char in the district of Sirajganj in so far as it constitutes the single most important condition of possibility for this char and those living on it. The specific community of itinerant farmers I study originated in a westward shift of the river in the 1930s (Coleman 1969; Best and Bristow 1993), which displaced many hundreds of thousands of villagers living along its banks. This migration of the river effectively produced a new culture of people in the northern region who have to move with the movements of the river (Haque 1988; Baqee 1998; Schmuck-Widman 2001). At the same time the river is curiously not entirely visible to me. People don't speak of it that often, busy in their agrarian lives, village dynamics and domestic squabbles. Yet it is there. It is enfolded into their every word in the awareness that they may at any point fall victim

to river erosion as they have done many times before, packing up what they can in the hopes of moving to another life much like this one.

Despite its singularity, I fear that I cannot do justice to the river, that my description will have the look and feel of the conventional description of geographical settings that introduces untold anthropological works. In the past my eyes have simply skimmed over such sections to advance eagerly upon the stuff of ethnography, such as, ritual, politics and the everyday. Now I am tasked by the responsibility to produce a gripping description of the river to show its physical liveliness and entanglements with chaura lives and my growing awareness of it. I have also to attend to the concerns over global warming within this description of the river to communicate something of the difficulties of speaking about climate change in such a physically dynamic ecology.

What follows is my first brush with a description of the Jamuna. I present it, and the ethnography of the state and chauras that follows, in the exploratory manner in which I have observed Veena Das to present her ethnography. She does so with the expectation of revisiting individual figures, particular words and gestures, and specific events again and again over the course of her writings (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000a, 2000b) not so as to arrive at the most complete description or polished analysis of them but to show how they continue to evolve, housed in one's thinking, revealing in so many ways their inhabitation of the ordinary (2006). Let me illustrate this aspect of Veena's ethnographic method with an example. The most persistent

yet shadowy figure in her archive of writings is that of the child. Beginning with an early piece titled "Voices of Children" (1995) we are treated to the manner in which children are born into worlds not of their making but which they come to occupy through shrewd observation, stealth, experiences that exceed their capacities for active engagement and expressiveness that exceed the adult imagination. In this article the child is yet a figure, a civilizational obsession as she calls it. But this figure appears again and again in her writings each time acquiring more specific contours of subjectivity, for instance in the figure of Suraj in "Violence, Knowledge and Subjectivity" (2000) as the adopted son of Asha, the widow who would marry again to the shock of her first husband's family and Suraj's own consternation. Whereas in the earlier piece we learn of how children come to learn about culture and their place within it through indirect communication, through passive participation in conversations of which they are the indirect subject, in the case of Suraj we learn further of the pain and secret pleasures of this mode of inculcation into a largely adult world of affairs. Thus my engagement with the river, an outgrowth of my longstanding interest in the agency of matter, is considerably deepened by Veena's ongoing ruminations on the ethical claims of women and children, imbricated in but nonetheless marginalized within their cultures, upon their cultures by making them habitable in the first instance by, what she calls, "the voicing of culture." Might we think of the river as having a child like aspect in my ethnography, in so far as its presence is pervasive but unremarked upon in the course of daily life? What would it take to grant the river voice?

Of a country of 700 rivers, the Jamuna is the second largest of the three large rivers that currently constitute the defining geographical features of Bangladesh. Of these three major rivers, the Padma is the Ganges entering Bangladesh in the west and the Jamuna is the Brahmaputra entering Bangladesh in the north. The confluence of the two comprises the Meghna, which runs directly into the Bay of Bengal. The Jamuna is relatively new compared to the others, a female tributary of a male river. It is the new course of the Brahmaputra (literally the son of Brahma) which moved away from its eastward course to its current direction due south between 1787 and 1830 (Rashid 1991). At present the Brahmaputra/Jamuna continues to bow westward even as it disgorges to the south. The specific community of chauras I am studying seem to have emerged out of a relatively more recent westward movement of the Jamuna in the 1930s.

An earthquake in Assam in 1950 produced this new course of the Brahmaputra in its current length of 240 km, massive size of almost 10-15 km width at some places, great depth, and a maximum water disgorging capacity of 100,000 metric cubes per second. This event reminds us that in addition to the diverse microclimates and elements of physical dynamism constituting the geography of Bangladesh, it also the site of active tectonic movements (Sarkar, et. al. 2003). As a result of the earthquake entire mountains collapsed into the river with the Jamuna to carry the sediment load towards the Bay of Bengal. It is only now that the sediment load of that event has been flushed out of the delta (Coleman 1969; Rashid 1991; Best and Bristow 1993).

This river is given to swelling up with rain waters, melted ice and silt during the monsoons as a result of which Bangladesh experiences floods almost every year (Brammer 2004). However, a distinction is maintained between *borsha* (flooding) and *banna* (flood). The first indicates the expected overspill of water during rainy seasons and the second the unexpected or greater than usual overspill of water significant enough to entail severe damage to lives and livelihoods. During the winter months, the rivers shrink considerably contributing to drought or *khora*. Consequently, the riparian climate is marked by extremes of wet and dry.

In addition to overspill and shrinkage of water, and extremes of wet and dry seasons, the other significant characteristic of the Jamuna is its tendency to carry large loads of silt and deposit it alongside existing lands or the middle of the river. While this tendency simultaneously suggests the tremendous erosive capacity of the river (for where else does the silt come from?), it is responsible for the steady accumulation of silt deposits called chars. Between 1984 and 1993, char land increased by 25% in the Jamuna (Sarkar et. al. 2003). These are hailed by local populations as boons from the river, as the river giving back the lands that it had destroyed/was destroying. At the same time the chars are often obstructions to the flow of river water and a further cause of flooding.

While the Brahmaputra in its older course was a meandering river, the presence of these chars within the Brahmaputra/Jamuna gives it a braided appearance, another characterization of rivers. Braiding is indicative of a river that behaves very

differently at each point of its length and breadth informed by the specific dynamics of land and water. So although the Jamuna is a river with an overall tendency to produce more land and simultaneously more erosion than the other large rivers of the country, these enduring tendencies spell greater physical changeability and seasonal unpredictability for those living on the river (Rashid 1991; Brammer 2004).

While Bangladesh is undoubtedly affected by climate change, particularly by the rise of seawaters and increased salinity in its coastal areas (Haq and Rabbani 2011), it is hard to know for sure what comprises climate change within the river system. The usual fear relating to rivers is that of flooding. With global warming, the increased precipitation from temperature rise is projected to produce more rainfall causing the Jamuna and other rivers to overflow more often and more unexpectedly (Rashid 1991). At present the standing rainfall data does not point definitively towards a rise in temperature within the country or even in the region and therefore to increased floodwaters (Islam and Neelim 2010). Yet there is still widely expressed concern about floods arising from global warming (Brammer 2004). I would argue that this concern is in part about the growing inability to anticipate floods. While there has always been a clear distinction between periodic flooding and catastrophic floods, in the past the later still manifested a cyclicality (3-5 year cycles and 10-15 year cycles) that helped to anticipate them or at least to explain them in retrospect. This cyclicality does not seem to hold at present (Brammer 2004). Furthermore, this frequently articulated concern about floods arising from global warming is expressive of an anxiety among climate scientists in Bangladesh that regional processes and

local variability underlying rainfall have not been sufficiently integrated within global trends and larger timescales to be able to say anything definitively about climate change (Islam and Neelim 2010). In other words, understanding climate change, or even simply the climate in Bangladesh, that is, the long term and large scale average of daily weather, may be bedeviled by the overwhelming presence of weather itself, that is, the profusion of minute to minute, day to day, month to month, even season to season details, a cacophony of elements only further amplified within the riparian ecology.

The State of the Chaura

Despite living in this very complex ecology and in need of substantive structural support, the char population in the northern part of Bangladesh has an overdetermined relationship to the state. It has been routinely blindsided in state development and engineering works. For instance, the government built embankments for the west bank of the Jamuna for protection from erosion in the 1960s (Brammer 2004; Kamal 2009). The disastrous floods of 1988 demonstrated the insufficiency of this protection. Even within the long history of natural disasters in this country, these floods were record breaking inundating 60 percent of the country and entailing a tremendous loss of lives and livelihoods. These events led to a multilateral, multi-million dollar effort called the Flood Action Plan (FAP) to secure Bangladesh from floods. Yet FAP left out char dwellers from serious consideration (Zaman 1996; Adnan 2009). The reason given for such neglect was that char lands were unstable and not worth the investment to secure them.

Furthermore, char dwellers were considered too risky for microcredit and other development projects because they moved too frequently. The mainland was privileged in river engineering projects at the expense of chars.

This privileging of the mainland is particularly apparent in Sirajganj district. The town of Sirajganj was secured from disastrous floods by means of a FAP project. The bridge built in 1995 traversing the Jamuna was built in Sirajganj effectively connecting northern Bangladesh to the rest of the country (Zaman 1996). The Jamuna Bridge reduced the isolation of this region but also introduced considerable turbulence into the river immediately surrounding Sirajganj. Consequently, extensive engineering works accompanied the bridge to mitigate the vulnerability of the mainland of Sirajganj to river erosion (Crow et. al. 1995). Such engineering adversely affected island chars in the area but again to the indifference of the state.

At the same time as char dwellers feel the force of the state's neglect in the form of a lack of investment in chars, even indifference to whether extant chars continue to exist or not, char dwellers in the Jamuna have put to advantage the state's lack of will in reinforcing its own laws. The current law on alluvial lands claims such land as *khas* or state property to be distributed among the landless. This law has been attempted to be put into effect in the coastal areas and in other rivers such as the Padma, largely by means of land rights activists and land movements rather than by the state (personal communication with Khushi Kabir, founder of Nigera Kori, the largest and most active land reform NGO in Bangladesh at present). In the riparian

char areas, however, newly emergent land are routinely claimed and possessed by local strongmen and landowners as their property (Zaman 1991, Baqee 1998). On one hand, this mechanism of land possession solidly serves the status quo, perpetuating domination and depriving the landless of land legally theirs. On the other hand it has ensured the continuity of villages with their particular land holdings, social structures and relations of reciprocity as the land under them break and are reconstituted close by. The state's neglect of chars has translated into the ability to perpetuate a familiar arrangement for the short duration for which any village is in existence at a stretch.

Although we have state indifference towards the fate of the char and a certain amount of creativity by chauras living in the relative absence of state authority, there is one arena in which state rhetoric and exertions extends to the chars. This is in making actionable the minutely elaborated principles for disaster risk reduction developed under the rubric of the United Nations (UN/ISDR 2007). These DRR principles, as they are called in short, has produced an elaborate architecture of disaster management in Bangladesh created by central ministries and put into effect by local administration and non-governmental organizations (GOB 2006). At present every governmental or non-governmental organization in the flood prone area of riparian Bangladesh has to show that they attend to DRR principles within their activities. The local NGO, Manob Mukti Shangstha, which serves as my gracious host in the char island casts almost all its activities within the discourse of reducing human risks to disasters (MMS 2010).

Without a doubt life in chars is filled with extraordinary hazards, risks and disasters, some of which I explore in the upcoming sections. Attentiveness to these gives Bangladesh its superlative reputation for emergency responsiveness and effective coordination in the face of national disasters, most notably floods. At the same time the enframement of one's environment by the concept of disaster makes difficult the ability to see nature as anything other than pregnant with risks. Consequently, this powerful disaster laden perspective on nature has ramifications for disinterring climate from weather as desired by climate scientists and policy makers (see above).

Bringing Climate Change into Focus in the Chars

Most recently, the effort to discern the effects of climate change upon char dwellers in this district has been undertaken by international NGOs such as ActionAid, which seek to put together a holistic picture of climate change in Sirajganj through the participation of the beneficiaries of their development projects. They attempt to do so by having their members take stock of every element of change that they perceive in seasonal rhythms in relation to their everyday lives, which the NGO then compiles into meeting notes, charts and flow charts, calendars and action plans.

On one hand, we might think of these meetings and record keeping as disciplinary techniques by which to bring into line the speech of a local population with global and national climate change discourse. But what becomes clear in conversations with both ActionAid representatives and Manok Mukti Shangstha employees to

carry out ActionAid's projects within Sirajganj is that they themselves are not sure what climate change entails for this part of the country. Therefore they couch their approach to the char dwellers as research into everyday experiences to garner local or indigenous knowledge. At the same time there is little doubt that this is a pedagogical, even political exercise as there are several positions that they communicate without reservation to their beneficiaries. For instance, a flip chart that ActionAid has produced for training purposes emphasizes that (1) climate change is the making of industrialized nations and that its burdens fall unfairly upon those who have had no part to play in creating this change, and, (2), that those suffering will persevere, which is the upbeat optimism about adaptation of which Orlove (2005) speaks, now infused with a national pride about the resilience of the Bengali rural.

While we might think of these procedures as disciplinary, on the other hand these meetings and reports are very insightful guides to the visceral experience of living with tremendous physical dynamism, with the uncertainties and irregularities that are a natural part of the riparian climate system (Islam and Neelim 2010). They also provide a means by which climate irregularities of a different order from physical complexity and the erratic-ness of weather, can come into view, sometimes coaxed by the leaders of the meetings and sometimes proffered by the beneficiaries. But they also suggest the overwhelming presence of DRR principles in the manner in which everything eventually comes to be cast as a possible risk, hazard or disaster. In what follows, I consider a final report compiled by Manob Mukti Sangstha on a village on

an attached *char* in Sirajganj by the name of Bhargaova, which I also visited for the purposes of participating in one of their meetings.

On the winter day I visited the village of the report in 2009 it was a hamlet of randomly distributed households interspersed with vegetable and lentil cultivation, grazing fields, sandy dunes and deep lunar like pits from which earth had been lifted to raise up households above the levels of the 1998 floods. The report noted that this village was named after a village of that name eroded by the river a long time ago and considered to have been reconstituted and eroded many times since. This particular incarnation of the village only dated to 1998-2000, that is, after the floods of 1998 when the land on which the village currently stood surfaced. The village had a population of approximately 700 people.

Although a few lived and farmed their own lands, most lived on land belonging to others, that is, by means of renting and/or sharecropping. While most were farmers, the village also had a large weaving community. The physical, demographic and social description of the village provided by the report paints a picture of a community in continual movement. They move to accommodate the breakage of their village, a movement vectored for potential return. They move within the village itself as each time it is reborn it has a changed topography. For instance, what was once cultivable land for being at the highest point of the village could be returned as a swampy area to be avoided for both residence and cultivation. The village boasted a mosque and a small market close to it but this market did not provide all the

essentials. This necessitated regular trips to a nearby town. Moreover, there were many who were day laborers who had to leave the area on a daily basis for work. If work was in short supply within walking distance of the village they left the district for long periods of time. There was also the constant return of people to their village.

The nearest village was no more than two miles away but these miles included a stream that swelled to a river during some months requiring transportation by boat. The continual eruption of the weather into daily life was suggested early in the report by its reference to flood waters during the summers and heavy fog during the winters. Thus even before we come to any description of the perceptions of climate change we are alerted to the physical suffering involved in being ordinarily part of this village. Seasonally, people have had to face floods, erosion, droughts, hail storms and cold waves. Water was described as particularly disruptive of almost all livelihoods as farmers could not grow rice paddy and weavers found their machinery waterlogged and inoperable even if rigged safely above waters. The report also noted the steady impoverishment of land quality by sand deposits upon them by floodwaters and the continual vulnerability to insects as additional difficulties besetting life in this village.

As this report aimed at trying to put together a community adaptation plan to weather related events and climate change, it noted the variety of ways by which difficulties and afflictions were countered. Lean period management saw the sale of hens, goats, the tin in one's household to get by or the procurement of loans at high

interests from local moneylenders. During my own fieldwork in another char in Sirajganj I was alerted to the fact that everyone lent money, even money lent by microcredit programs that expressly forbad the circulation of loans as further loans. Regardless there were long stretches within the annual calendar in which villagers noted that there was no work and they were genuinely at a loss to deal with hunger and ill health.

The report noted that it took considerable work to make participants in this research program sift through their past and present experiences of great seasonal variability, natural disasters, and the peaks and troughs of impoverishment to determine what might constitute something like a decisive and permanent shift in climate. But once they had done this work of organizing their memories and experiences, climate change came into clear perspective. Among those aspects of change directly attributed to the climate the villagers noted the following. Previously, "twenty years ago" or "ten years ago" being the usual refrain, the villagers perceived all six of the seasons characterizing the Bengali calendar. With the change in coastal currents (*jol bayu poriborton* is the phrase used to indicate climate change but refers specifically to change in the coastal currents), it was perceived that there were now only three seasons in Bangladesh, summer, winter and rainy. Furthermore, these seasons weren't delimited as previously, with the distinguishing elements of each showing up willy-nilly in other seasons. So it was not unusual to have a sudden rainstorm in winter, an almost unheard of occurrence in the past, or long stretches of drought during the rainy season. Summer lasted so long with such intense heat that the

previous modes of cutting earth to access water close to the surface was no longer possible. The duration of the rainy season has become shorter as a result of which many crops dried up in the fields with little or no yield. Previously there were many early indications of the onset of the winter season. Now there was little warning, with the cold descending almost overnight and with far denser fogs than previously. If in the past char villagers were out of work for about three months out of the year, now they were out of work for much longer and more unexpectedly, derailing the usual modes of planning and coping.

The report provides insight into the finely tuned categories at work in differentiating all aspects of life, for instance labor, within the village, which are highlighted and mobilized to put forward a very decisive picture of the effects of weather upon livelihood, of the daily suffering imposed by weather. At the same time the new discourse of climate change, introduced by means of such efforts, also provided char dwellers the opportunity to aggregate their perceptions and experiences and to place their lives in a particular temporal sequence to allow a perspective on climate to emerge. What emerged as a result of this was a sense that their expectations of climate were being continually disappointed.

At the same time the DRR conceptualization of disaster (*durjog* as opposed to the more colloquial expression for disaster meaning misfortune, *bala* or catastrophe *kiyamot)*, was pervasive in the report and possibly in people's narratives. It threatened to undo the above careful disinterring of weather from climate. For

instance, "twenty years ago" and "ten years ago" were the marks most often referenced in the past with which to put together the present. These marks were not simply conventions of speech. They coincided with the 1988-1989 and 1998 floods, the two most devastating floods in recent memory and spoke to the cyclicality attributed even to catastrophes. But in the present moment the threat to this village no longer lay in disastrous floods as the course of the river had changed, moving further away from it. While water was still the main cause of suffering, the water being referred to was that of unexpected rain storms that beset the village causing the water-logging of agricultural lands (see Brammer 2004). The concept of disaster allowed this present without floods or at least anticipatable floods to be rendered similar to flood related moments in the past, as if the present was already a disaster without having being brought on by a specific disastrous event. In other words, the concept excised temporality in so far as past and present became relatable for being disaster filled. It excised the specificity of weather related experiences, particularly that of river based floods as separate from water-logging caused by excessive rainfall. And it made moot the distinction between weather and climate, of the immediate cause of suffering from the long duree of expectations. Disaster framed one's perception of any environment as one beset by risks, hazards and potential disasters, making the everyday extraordinary.

The Death of Nature

Further ethnographic work allowed me to see how the vision of nature as dead or dying could co-exist with the apprehension of nature as risky and hazardous. In the

village of Dokhin Teguri, an island char of Sirajganj, where I am residing for a part of this year (2011-2012), I asked an elderly man, Moinul Bhai, one of the original inhabitants of an earlier incarnation of the village and a land surveyor by profession, what he made of the future of possible disasters betokened by climate change. Almost in confirmation of my above reading of the recorded perceptions of climate change, in which disaster enframed every erratic behavior of the weather or every discernible change in climatic conditions, making the everyday out to be extraordinary, Moinul Bhai said mockingly, what future of disasters? It is already around us. Just look around you. I did as he bid but not having developed the eyes to see disaster around me all I saw was a sunny day in the summer of 2010, children playing in water filled ponds, cows and buffalos being washed by their owners and fields of crops, both rice paddy and jute intermixed with vegetable gardens and open grassy lands. Sirajganj had experienced sudden flooding much earlier in the season than expected and since then had no more floods or rain although threatening clouds passed overhead all the time in the direction of the mountains. It was now August and growing increasingly unlikely that floods or rains would come. Crops were dying in the field and the men who congregated in the courtyard of the office where I was staying spent a lot of time being puzzled that Pakistan and China were being devastated by floods. What happened to our waters? How did they get to Pakistan and China? They laughed a little at the incongruity of the present.

Clearly I was already in the midst of unfolding personal disasters as people thought quickly ahead to the months of hunger ahead with no secure storage of food. But

each inch rise in the water bodies everyday, seeping in from ground waters, brought a strange hope that the waters were just around the corner. This longing for the floods belied my comprehension of them as disasters, forcing me to keep in mind the distinction maintained between borsha (flooding) from bonna (flood) by my interlocutors. Fairly soon all the distinct water bodies, one for private toilet, others for bathing and swimming and others for washing animals were conjoined with everyone having to traverse submerged areas in their bare feet. If anything grew, it was the green algae taking over the surface of the once shimmering waters and our legs and feet began to itch. Even this polluted water was something as some of the rice paddy revived from the extreme heat to shoot up again. As Hugh Brammer has said it is often not the silt from floodwaters but the algae, the bacteria and the legumes that replenishes the soil (2004).

This ethnographic attentiveness nuanced my initial reaction that a perspective oriented to see the environment as disaster-prone was necessarily flattening of the variations of weather related experiences. I learnt that it was never a single event but a series of events that produced a disaster. In the previous case of the village of Bhargoava, it was the series of river-based floods tapering off to be replaced by flash floods produced by sudden storms that produced the perception of a disastrous everyday. In the village of Dokhin Teguri it was the flash floods that came too early and destroyed the crops that produced the sense of a disaster but this sense was soon mitigated by rising water, even if it was not the flooding that they held out hopes for. In other words, a sense of a disaster filled present was not necessarily fixed but

evolved as events were added up to produce a series inflecting the everyday as disastrous or only potentially so. This intuition into the apprehension of disaster was strengthened by what I witnessed this year in the summer of 2011 in which there were no regular rainfall or flooding nor flash floods but this was endurable because the rain that came was sufficient to produce bumper crop upcountry allowing the men of the village to work the fields there for rice to be brought back to the village. Again a series of events deflected the course of a potential disaster.

Moreover, the perception of an environment as hazardous did not necessarily pathologize it. Just in the two years I have been going to Dokhin Teguri, I heard of the two children who fell into the water when their parents were looking away. The man who died of rabies after being bitten by a dog and did not have access to a health facility to get shots. The dumb girl found dead last year who was later found to have been murdered. These deaths were considered the unfortunate side effects of choosing to live in this place over the mainland, as the rest of Bangladesh was called. But these were accompanied by statements such as "my nostrils constrict when I am in the mainland" said a woman who was taken to a hospital in the nearby town, "all I want to do is vomit when I am there." "The town is diseased and smells of death" says a young man who I would have imagined to be drawn to the big life. These words suggest that the openness of these chars and the free flow of the air here affirms life with the mainland constituted as disease filled and destructive.

Why then do I hold out hope for the flash of intuition that reveals nature to be dead or dying over the apprehension of an environment as hazardous or potentially disastrous? And what kind of hope is it? Sabina Yasmeen, named after a famous Bangladeshi singer, provides an instance of a flash of the future of nature as destroying and destroyed. This slip of a girl, maybe sixteen-seventeen years old, comes to my room when no one is about, that is, at rare moments. She wants to speak of her husband who loved her in secret and forced his parents to accept her as his child bride. However, her ruminations keep running in the direction of her mother-in-law who becomes more and more fierce in her descriptions with each of her visits. I realize that two elements make particularly tense her relationship: that land promised as part of her dowry seems to be making no moves to emerge out of the water and that she is scared that her mother-in-law may harm her as her husband is increasingly away for long stretches of time doing the work of a weaver abroad (that is, no more than a boat ride away but still designated as being abroad). She hopes that the land that they are put up on at present, very close to the river bank, may break forcing her in-laws to move inland at which point she promises that she will threaten suicide to make her husband stay on in the village.

I see Sabina take cognizance that the river, never reliable as a giver of land, is growing less so such that the land promised to her will not return. The fecundity of the river is on the decline. And in its dying thrashes it is trying to take down as much as it can with itself. In some respects, the river in a state of decline puts her life on the line, vulnerable to the daily abuses of her mother-in-law that may or may not

culminate in her being killed, a fear grounded in the large statistics of what is called dowry deaths in Bangladesh. But rather than wait for death to befall her, Sabina wants to throw in her lot with the destructive powers of the river, to wish that it would destroy more, bring more death and devastation to her in-laws at which point she will wager the one thing that she can claim as her own, her life, to keep her husband by her side. And in this flash of intuition about the encroaching death of the river and the devastations it will bring in its wake and how she might insert herself into the river's movements, Sabina not only realizes but also acknowledges that something is changing irrevocably in nature.

Although Weart's scientists are operating at a different scale of the climate, that of the global, taking a different kind of action, namely experimentation and policy work, at the level of the local we have to be able to incorporate such turns of sensibilities, changes of perceptions and risk taking behavior as also involving an acknowledgment that something is going wrong in nature, to nature and taking steps to try to be in step with these changes. If Orlove (2005) feels that the category of adaptation is not only too optimistic but too nonspecific, I would put forward the premonition of the death of nature not only as a finely tuned register of climate change but also a minute but necessary perceptual adaptation to such change. It may move us past the fear filled apprehension of the environment as always besetting us to a productive sense of being alongside nature as it wanes. The figure of the death dealing and/or dying river may yet find a voice within this perception of nature.

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