

Ambient Seas

Occasional notes from
October 12, 2013 to August 17, 2015

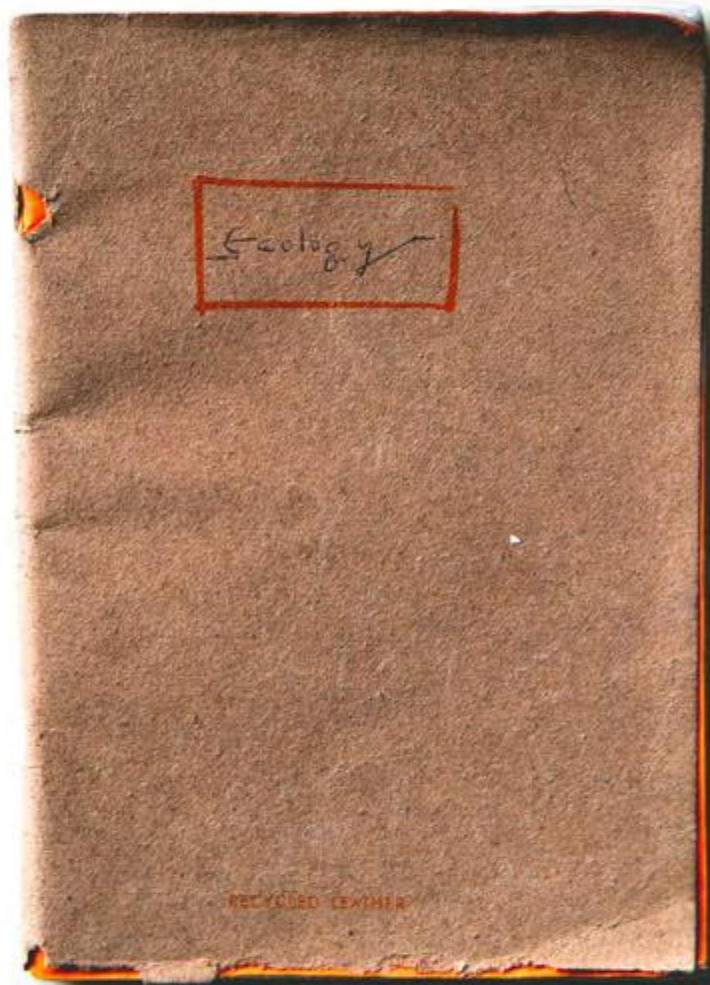


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Ravi Agarwal
2015



temple
sail
wife
self
Boat
net
friends
trawlers
shark
relatives
Panchayat
television
child
diet
neighbor
motorcycle
language
shifting sand
ocean
money
large fish
Planet
age
mha.

sickness
scale
fish market
beach
tent
monsoon
Innovation
bank
store per
power
weather
deteriorate
neighbor villages
big boat with engine
channel days negotiating information
tourist
tradition
seabornise
storm
subsiding
age
catamaran
fishing net
cyclone
wave glass
waves
police men







urgency

Two years ago, I had close encounters with the sea, a first for an inland urban person. It continues. The ground changing experiences, led me to further my ongoing explorations about ideas which constitute nature. Today, the planet is in an ecological crisis. This is framed as a conflict between economic development and the planet's limit to support a growing and resource intensive human population. The crisis is validated by measurable tipping points which indicate, scientists claim, that we have entered an age of the 'anthropocene,' where for the first time in history, human actions will determine the future of the earth. The era arguably began, with the industrial age of mass production. Here technology and capital combined to create economies based on natural resource extraction and waste generation on a massive scale, using fossil fuel energy. As a way forward, new markets for environmental solutions are being offered, which involve making economies and markets more efficient and energy less fossil fuel based, but based on the same trajectory of extraction, consumption and waste. There is no guarantee of future survival. However ideas, such as reducing consumption trigger fears of 'going back' in time and fly in the face of 'growth' and 'progress.' Even more remote is a questioning of the deeply inherent and fixed oppositional binary positions we have over time taken about 'nature.' In the Deluzian way, this may be an opportunity to re-consider evolution as a positive set of responses to 'desires' and uncover their genealogy and geology. Re thinking a foundational human - nature relationship could be more critical to future sustainability, than merely creating better markets.

My explorations have led me to consider that the idea of nature itself is more complex and pre-dates the history of capital/ technology/ industrialization. As per Bruno Latour, in a Platonian way, the fixing of nature as 'absolute' and measurable only by scientists as experts, replaced all other pre existing human-nature subjectivities and relationships. The loss of the subjective self, reduced to a capitalist one, has led to the privatization of wilderness, fencing of forests, taming of rivers, and the rapid destruction of other species. The history of migrations, dispossessions, gender discrimination, colonization and racism, can be re-read as a history of ecology. Those who lived on the 'land' have become poor, while those who live 'off' it have become rich, while institutions have been created to systematically perpetuate such actions.

Nature has been reduced to an object which can only be 'acted' upon through it being 'extracted,' 'admired,' 'enjoyed,' etc. but not 'lived' with. Like patriarchy, ecology too is caught up in a framework of dominance. Contemporary philosophers like Timothy Morton have proposed that nature as a category should be discarded altogether and replaced by a network of relationships between animate and inanimate objects. We need to look beyond to examine if other trajectories are/were possible which co-create a more complex idea of ecology such as suggested by Felix Guattari.

Ancient Sangam Tamil love poetry (akam) for example, reflects such subjectivities. It relates five physical landscapes (kurinji - mountains, mullai- forests, marutam – agricultural lands, neithal- sea, palai - desert) to five interior ways of feeling (sexual union, yearning, sulking, pining, separation). Some tribal societies 'inherit' the planet for the future, not 'own' it as private property. Alternate imaginations and other relationships with nature, can temper our actions, shifting us from certainty to creativity. Ideas about science, economies and futures need to be put on an equal footing alongside other ideas like mortality, fragility, vulnerability, balance, equity and democracy.

The works which resulted, besides this documentation, are an outcome of my struggle to comprehend the times I inhabit. They are based on encounters in a fishing village near Pondicherry, where fishermen friends helped/ are helping me navigate new waters.' The ever changing sea led me to these explorations. There is urgency in the air. Else, all will be still.



desire



The water lily, drooping

The sea - a constant landscape. A universal space, unchanging, steady on the horizon. A basis of life on the planet. Meditative. The unending breaking of waves on the shore, or the soft lapping of waters away from it, suggest deeper reflections. The unfathomable and inaccessible depths hide unsolved mysteries locked within, possibly since the beginning of time itself.

Fluid grounds.

The view from the long stone groyne, jutting more than 30 m into the sea, facing the pre-dawn sky as it lightens, up, the endless horizon and the unknown cosmos appear as ideas in themselves. The twilight stars link the universe to the earth. It lies somewhere outside the edge of the stone jetty, boundless, fear filled, and without beginning or end. It is a time for superstition, and wonderment. The time scale is galactic, and mortality a mere meaningless blip.

Behind, on the shoreline, the row of fishermen's houses, affords no time for such introspection. Life is material and harsh in its everydayness. Till recently this is where the fishermen lived. Now, many have sold the beach facing houses to outsiders. The view to the sea is stunning, especially on a good day. Huts have been transformed into nice whitewashed homes, pretty and reflective of a good life. The surfers are testimony to that. The village now stretches behind this row, where the fishermen still live.

Ancient Tamil Sangam poetry identified landscapes with views of nature. Akam and Puram – interior and exterior. In Akam, the sea – Neithal, denoted the pain of waiting and pining for the loved one. 'Nature' was internalized. The separation was there, but incomplete. Fade in – fade out.

In contemporary times nature must be acted upon. Now it is a 'view,' or an 'adventure,' or a 'resource.' Without this operative relationship, we are lost. Not the fishermen though. For them, the sea is the lived life.

As 'fish,' 'storm,' 'boat,' 'net,' 'livelihood' or 'longing.' The landscape is internal as well as external. Akam and Puram, as in ancient Sangam poetry. The divide is now complete. Freedoms and isolations go together.







with petals closed

The beach. Lined with boats. There are two distinct types. Those with outboard engines, and long propeller shafts – rudders – and others, hand powered by broad wooden rectangular paddles. Power and propulsion depends on who owns them, and their economic status.. Access to technology is not democratic. Capital overshadows labour. For some it is eternal labor. There is no escape.

The flat, human powered boats are made of fiberglass. A decade ago, they were made of softwood. Merely six long pieces of wood lashed together with rope. And then three more of upturned wood, to form a keel. Impossible to sink, heavy, soaked water, but no repair required. Today they lie scattered around beaches, broken, unused, as junk. Disuse and disrepair. Replaced by industrial fiberglass post disaster, post tsunami, along with the diesel engines.

Two propelling devices, – two economies. One boat costing a mere Rs 15,000, while the other Rs 15 lakhs. With a diesel engine, a big net, the figure goes upto Rs 25 lakhs. Technology allows selective access to the sea. A small boat travels 2.0 km in, while the powered one over 20km. Every day, without fail. The fish catch is bigger, the nets trapping everything that moves. Fish as well as non-fish. The smaller boats have to be content with a smaller catch. Left overs. Worth maybe 200 – 300 rupees daily – if that. When the seas are rough, the small boats stay at home.

Eternal labour, but even that is not guaranteed!

The dream of a larger boat, with a diesel engine, keeps the fishermen going. One way is to sell their beachside hut facing the sea (those who have it) to outsiders, and live in a smaller home inside the village. Those with such land allotted to them after the tsunami, did that and invested in larger boats – often jointly with other fishermen. Others, without such assets, toil on. Fishermen village to beachside retreat!

All live inside the village, behind the fancy houses. They sleep on the beach. The sea breeze is cooler than inside and the familiar sound of the sea beckons them. Like always.

Technology in the form of a diesel engine is changing the landscape of the village. Technology and capital have come together to change the idea of ecology itself. From a lived reality ecology, the beach has become a 'desired' space. Those (outsiders) who have the money can aspire to the 'nature experience.' The fishermen only live on, off and in it.



resembles the body

Then there is the new port nearby. Desired by politicians and others who wanted to be known as the modernizers of a sleepy coastal town, it was built despite all reason. No one asked the fishermen. Possibly, as whispers go, there were lucrative contracts hidden in the sand. Who knows! Yet the small seaside town was never a big industrial hub, nor did it have a huge amount of commercial shipping. So who was the port for? However the port was built. A huge wall and jetty were constructed. Artificial harbor. As predicted, the sand from the estuarine river close by, and it was in millions of tonnes each year, could no longer flow. Normally it deposited onto the seashore, to form the beaches. The fishermen lived and parked their boats on them. Without the sand, they may as well pack up and go home. The port stopped the sand from flowing along with the coastal currents onto the shores. Millions of tonnes of sand piled up on one side of the port wall, as the beaches waited and waited, pining away, thinning down. The sea eroded the beaches even more, and soon the water was lapping upto the fishermen's huts. No place left to launch the boats.

The desperate fishermen went to town, fearful of a loss of livelihood. This is all they knew, the only skill they had. In a knee jerk reaction the politicians decided to act. Only to worsen the situation. Making long stone jetties along the sea, to protect local coastlines, they changed the currents even more. Uncertain consequences! In some places where there was already substantial erosion, they blocked off the shore with large stonewalls. The walls became garbage dumping points. The stone jetties managed to stop some local erosion, but the sea was unstoppable. It just went ahead and ate away the sand beyond where the jetties ended! Surprise?!

With no fresh sand coming in from the river, it was a domino effect of disaster!

As they say, 'when a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon, it causes a storm across the world.' That is how much we really know how ecology works!

Politics has a five-year time frame, human life a hundred, but ecology takes its time – it could take 10,000 or even 100,000 years, or more.







of a green legged egret

A big conference hall in a distant land. People in suits, and smart talk and legal important looking papers all over. Head of states, and scientists huddle together as well meaning NGOs watch. No fishermen or poets allowed. It is a crisis. Everyone looked worried. The sea was rising! Possibly Vishnu had begun his churning. Or the ocean serpent was restless. Everyone seemed to know, but no one knew what to do. The planet was under threat. Its future was at stake, and the humans were responsible. The climate was changing. A limit had been reached. But why o why, did no one tell the fishermen who went out every day on the rising ocean? Or even ask them what they saw or thought about it? This was no place for non-experts. Science too had its informers, its experts.

Our institutions which manage our cities, our landscapes, our rural hinterland, are lodged in histories which propagate the control and use of the planet. They are locked in their own imagined views of the world. Hence water is controlled, land is controlled, rivers are controlled, forests are controlled, wild life is controlled, human ideas and desires are controlled. Colonial landscapes perpetuate even today in what were earlier colonies of the Empire, in spite of other cultural imageries, or even new knowledges we now possess.

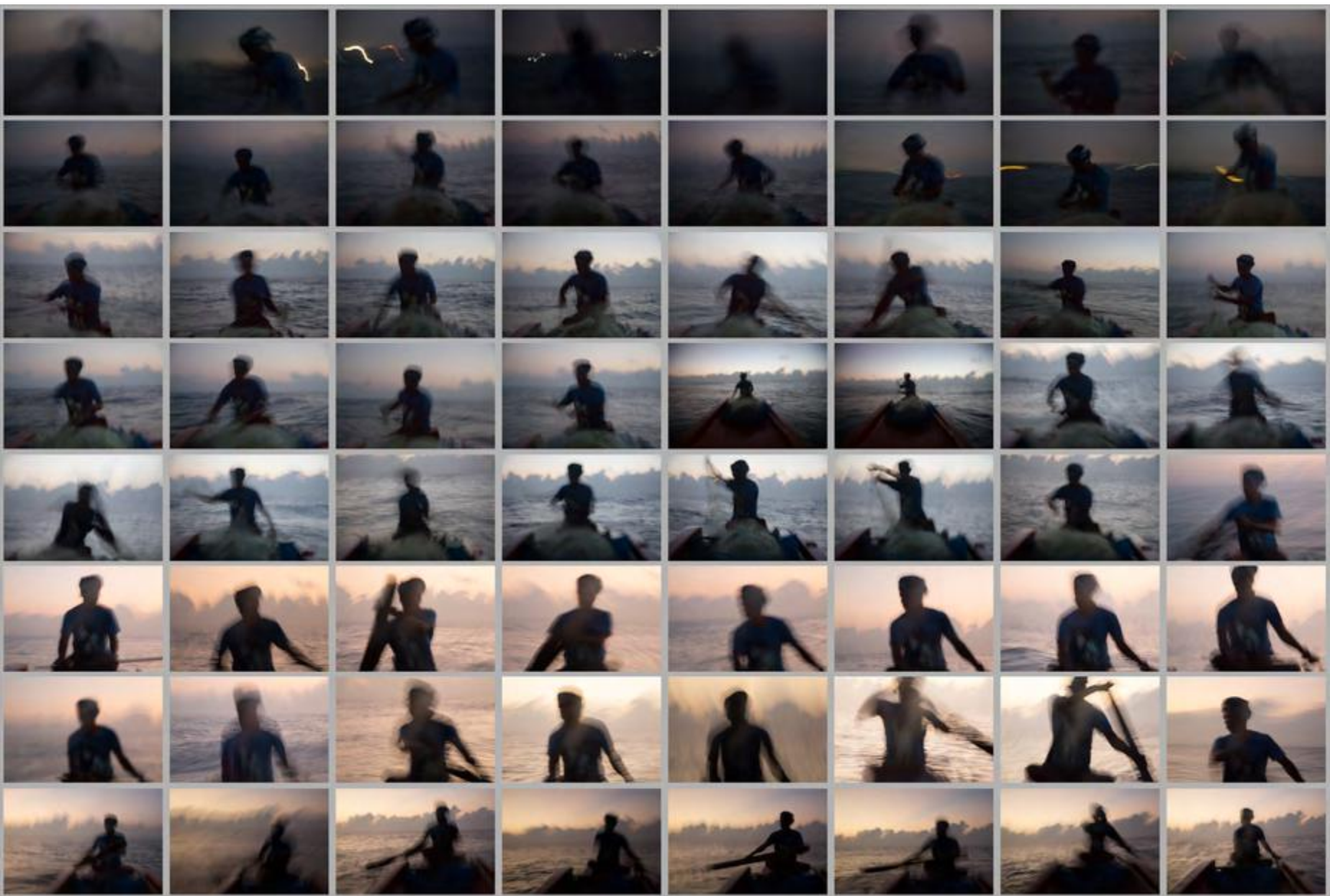
Each institutional measure of control has a logical rationalization, to perpetuate its existence. Yet the planet is in crisis. We have to reinvent, unlock and remake our institutions which work for the betterment of humans as well as all other species and the planet. We have to reboot them, make them up-to-date, not leave them dated and in decay. Else that which is meant to protect us, has become a problem in itself.

Bruno Latour asserts that Plato was right. Those in the cave could not speak of what was outside. Knowledge of 'absolute' nature must be limited to a few. The experts. Sangam poetry must be surely old fashioned!



dilemma







evening has come

His father was a fisherman. His grandfather too. He learnt to swim in the ocean, soon as he learnt to walk. Fishing was second nature to him, and the sea his first home. He could make catamarans, repair them, oil them to protect them from termites and borer insects, and sit on them legs astride and dangling in the water, paddling far out into the sea. He could read the waves, see their color change, and know when the sea was not welcoming. He could predict a storm looking at the skies, and sense when a school of fish came close to shore. If that happened, in a flash he could take off, and cast his net, no matter what time of day it was, and even if he had already paddled for hours before that.

Fishing was his livelihood, but it was also something he loved. The thrill of it. Each morning, an hour before sunrise, he would push his small boat over the waves, and jump into it as it crossed into more calm currents a few meters on. Here the waves lapped, and seemed still, but the waters were deeper, and the currents stronger. Above all, he claimed he could swim even 10 km in case he needed to. The sea was not a place of fear. It was home!

A bigger boat he would have liked, if he could afford to buy or share in one. Enterprising as ever, he found odd jobs during the day in the many homes which outsiders now owned along the seashore. He was trustworthy and honest, and they could trust him with their keys while they were away. He spent the afternoon cleaning the houses, and tending to their gardens. Occasionally he would receive a phone call, informing him of a pending arrival of a homeowner or his guest. He had found a way to survive in the new economy, and also keep his fishing income alive. It was more than what his children wished for themselves. His son wished to be an engineer and his daughter to find a decent job somewhere.

It was probably the end of the fisherman's line with him. He ensured his son did not learn to swim! While some of his neighbors prospered with investments in bigger engine driven boats, and also through those who invested in their business, fishing as a livelihood seemed to be a dying one. It would survive, but as a business, not a livelihood.

For him fishing was not even a livelihood, it was life. His house deity was the sea god, who he bowed to each morning before launching out to sea. Sea festivals were both places for socialization, but also for sharing food, songs and dancing, and occasionally also a little drinking – even though his wife disapproved!



not only evening

I push the fiberglass catamaran into the waves. Moonlight still reflecting on its edge as it hits the shoreline, I feel the warm waters swirl around my feet. Then the sand beneath them gives way, slowly, as I sink a few inches into the beach. It is disorienting. I regain my balance. Not for long though, as my fisherman friend shouts to push again, as the next wave comes in. I push. The boat is afloat. With the next wave and the next, I push again, knee deep in the water, and then jump on, balancing left and right – my land legs trying to accommodate the new 'ground.' As my balancing cells in my ear try to adjust, I sit down with a plop, into a small pool of water, which has collected in a cusp in the hollow curve of the small almost flat boat. Barely 6 feet long and a couple of feet across, the boat responds to the strong but silent paddling, and quickly makes headway – onto the horizon and into the unknown sea. I am on new 'ground.'

He is one with the water. A strong swimmer, coming from a fisherman's family, for him the sea is an extension of himself. For me though, a city bred, it is the great unknown. A fearful great unknown, where I would not survive for long, not be able to swim too far if I fell in, and if nobody helped me. I would not survive!

The boat moves on, in the hands of my friend, the expert. He knows when to wait, as a large wave comes crashing in, and lets it pass below the fragile vessel. Then he rows and waits for the next one. Soon, the shore is a distant line, lined by the waves breaking as the sea becomes a swirling mass. I could immediately feel the difference. Somehow it did not seem like water any more, but more like a moving, heaving treacle like tar – very deep, like a huge breathing beast. Only when the paddle splashes into this mass, and a fine spray of water emerges, do I have a sense of how liquid this mass is, how light and frothy.

As I sit here, while he is furiously paddling away using his slat rectangular paddle, I cannot but think of what lies beneath me. A few inches of fiberglass separates me from this fathomless body of water. Probably filled with beasts, strange and dangerous. I think of the first fish, which developed feet, as it moved onto the land, and started to inhabit it. I think of the limits to which light can penetrate into the sea below, where there is only darkness, and animals which have no need for eyes or color, live. I think of the deep chasms in the floor of the oceans which probably goes down right to the center of the earth, to the hot lava which lies at its molten core. I think of the high mountains, higher than the Everest, which lie hidden below.

Above all, I think about my own vulnerability, my mortality and my insignificance. On land I was certain, I could summon my social network and feel secure. I could call upon my legal and personal status and my ownership ledger and feel immortal. On land I could forget for a moment that I was just another being, a life, a life form. Here, I have left my socio political history and identity behind. The sea and my relationship to it has come down to basics! I have slipped from being an individual into my 'species' identity.

What is the sea? Can it be heard? Can it be seen? Can we see it or know it beyond our 'eyes' and 'ears?' Can it be ever be known fully?















soon,

A fishermans' beach has its own particular character. The beach itself changes with the season and ocean currents. In summer, the currents flow in a way as to take sand away from it, to form a curve, like someone has taken a large bite from it. During the winter months, the beach recovers as more sand is re-deposited onto it to straighten it out. When the sand is removed, the beach becomes abrupt, and slopes sharply down towards the waters. Fishing boats, especially the bigger ones are heavy and need to be hauled onto the shore. During summer, one can see a small tractor with a winch parked nearby. Each time a boat comes back in, it has to be winched in over the sharp sand bank. However when the sand is more even, fishermen are able to push the boat on the beach, assisted by the tide.

The beach is always busy. There is activity nearly all the time. Early, predawn the beach comes alive as boats head out to sea. It is still dark, and there is barely enough light to see the silhouettes of the boats. As light strikes the sands, one can see nets, bunched up in piles and covered with plastic tarpaulin. On the far end of the beach are make shift thatched huts, where the fisher-folk store nets, boat parts, anchors, and also sleep in at night.

As the day progress, the boats start to come in with their catch. The nets are spread out and the fish or rubble caught in them are removed by hand. Some are luckier than others. The fish are piled in bunches, and it is then one sees the fisherwomen appear. They will take the fish to the local fish market to sell them. The men stay back to clean and if need be, to repair the nets. This activity continues for most the day, till early forenoon. Some larger boats come in later in the day from their longer trips, and sometimes they need to order in large trucks with crates filled with ice to carry a very large haul to the market. The smaller boats however almost always have a small bag full of catch at best, which needs no trucks or containers to carry them. These are best hauled by hand, in small plastic bags.

The difference in the two economies is distinct and apparent. Economies are not necessarily democratic.



darkness too

A new hotel had come up on the beach. It was the first such venture, breaking the row of residential houses. It had a big board, marked by a pretentious insignia which carried a crest in its centre. The hotel had usurped two adjoining houses and converted them into a new building after demolishing them. Then the hotel had tarred the sand road running along the beach, grown grass on the beach itself, and constructed a concrete structure like a ramp on it. Worse of all it had painted the structure in zebra like yellow and white stripes, not unlike a traffic crossing. To top it all, in the center of the grass patch was a concrete bench, also painted in yellow and white stripes. A large neon lit board was erected both at the start of the tarred road which led to the beach from the main road, but also at the end of it, where the road ended at the beach. Two large spot lights were erected in front of the hotel which were lit each night, and stayed on till late at night. The peace of the beach had been broken with the new middle class aesthesis of the worst kind.

Each weekend, especially on Saturday nights, young men would drive in nice looking expensive cars, and drink on the beach till the wee hours of the morning. For the fishermen, the short night of sleep was now turning into a nightmare.

For a few months the fishermen were quiet. There were rumors that much money had exchanged hands between some in the village and the hotel owners for these special rights. The one day there was a storm. The fishermen gathered around the hotel and demanded that the concrete structures on the beach be removed. They also said that the hotel can run, but it cannot extend itself onto the beach, nor its guests drink and make noise at night. Strong words were exchanged. In the heat, one fisherman picked up a stone and hurled it at the neon sign, breaking it. The first salvo had been fired. What will happen in the future, is still uncertain!







dielectric



will close in.

Ecological time is mysterious. It never reveals itself. How does ecology change - in a dialectical Darwinian way, over many lifetimes, before any adaptation occurs, or has that all changed with the advent of man. Are we truly in the age of the sixth extinction which is caused by humans? Faster than mutations. The surely this is not what was meant by evolution. What role can the nuclear bomb as a destructive power have in such a scheme of things - surely none, compared to the combined power of all of us? Possibly this time we as a species have changed the order of business - the fine balance.

Possibly it is worse, since we could be caught up in the web of language itself, and what it signifies as 'nature.' Do we even know what it means, or what it is, in itself? Timothy Morton argues that the notion that we are 'embedded' in, nature, as a surrounding medium that sustains our being, is putting it on a pedestal and admiring it from afar, similar to what patriarchy does for the figure of woman. We need to re-imagine 'ecology' without nature.

Possibly the idea of nature as a duality (or even a non-duality?) needs to be questioned. Maybe like a moiré strip, or a Klein bottle, it is all one edge, all one dimension, but which can only exist in the three dimensional world which we can comprehend. Nature could also be a set of relationships rather than a boundary. A generic category which needs to be 'acted upon,' and not lived. It has to be seen, 'appreciated,' 'exploited,' 'explored,' 'imagined' or 'ignored,' but not lived as part of one's own existence. The separation is how we think of it, the categories are created through the process of self identification. Isolations.

Yesterday I saw a video of a top scientist explaining the theories about the beginning of the universe and what they know about it. It was highly technical, and theoretical, and soon went beyond the language I know. However it was obvious that they know now that the universe is expanding faster than ever. That it probably began with the big bang. However, what happened before the big bang? Is matter just that? Is there any human comprehension possible? Or have we fixed ourselves in one framework of the limited imaginations we are capable of, activated through the constructions of our brains and senses? So there could be infinite such frameworks or systems of understanding different parts of the universe, its forces, its spaces and non-spaces? It probably looks different in each. We have created one small sense order. But can it ever be more than that? Should we not 'realistically' live in eternal doubt and non-knowing?

What are the boundaries of 'ecology,' of 'nature,' of 'knowing?'

We need to think of our histories and how it makes us in the contemporary moment, and of cosmic time at the same time. The shaping of human ecologies through histories of dis-empowerment and dis-possession, and the idea of the cosmic universe itself can be separate ideas. Possibly these are like quantum and wave understandings of matter, which co-exist, on different scales of observations, both different, but inseparable. Mortality has a species related evolutionary function, besides being an individual truth. If genetically altered futures become real, then 'mortality' will reduce its power over life. Will then cosmic perspectives become more immediate?



Does the big dam on the fissured earth, through which the river flows, impact the planet enough to change the nature of tectonic forces? Or is it just a fantasy that we can cause change. Possibly, as individuals we cannot, but as a collective force maybe we can. Maybe by not one dam storing billions of gallons of water at a single point, but with thousands of dams storing billions of billions of gallons of water over thousands of points. Like acupuncture!

The earth slipped below itself earlier this year in one corner of the world. It caused great tremors on its surface. It had been slipping like this for billions of years, as what we call land tries to find a new equilibrium. Except it is only giant plates moving around on molten lava. All of this is sitting on little speck hurtling around with mindless energy. Everything is spinning so fast, and moving and melting and cooling and adjusting and readjusting, that what can a real stable state be? It was just revealed in a report that the core of the earth is possibly spinning faster than its surface, in a molten mass of lava. Unimaginable – the power of these forces! It surely cannot just exist? Only possibly in the very distant future, billions of billions of light years away, this universe itself could come to a rest.

Possibly without mortality or experience, there is no 'time.' Then that may be. When all is still. Again?

As a collective force we have now acquired the power (but unequally, and with a few who hold most of it) to change the natural order of forces. That is what the 'anthropocene' says.

"By the power, vested in (a few of) us, by capital and technology."

We are riding on the back of the tiger, only it is an illusion that we are steering it.

There have been other collectives in the past. Possibly not those which have had the possibility of such interference. They have survived for long, like the dinosaurs did for over 150 billion years. We have barely done so for a few hundred thousand. We still have a long way to go, but already possibly we are at the cusp of a fragile future.

Possibly now it is in our hands.

Or out of them.

Else, will all be still?



Essay subtitles from:

Evening has come, Neidal, Kurunthokai 122. pp 27 in, Love Stands Alone,
Translations from Tamil Sangam Poetry, M.L. Thangappa,
ed. A.R. Venkatachalapathy. Penguin/Viking, India, 2010.

"The water lily,
Drooping,
With petals closed,
Resembles the body
Of the green legged egret
Evening has come
Soon,
Darkness too
Will close in."

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