

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi
Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi
Cilt: 2 Sayı: 3 2013

**LOCAL PEOPLE OR LOCAL VICTIMS?:
AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*
AND KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'S *THROUGH THE ARC OF RAIN FOREST***

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ABSTRACT

*Rooted especially in the North American literary tradition, ecocriticism studies the "relationship between physical space and literature." As a constantly evolving literary theory, ecocriticism has expanded its scope to explore literatures from other countries around the world and bring into contact a wide variety of texts that have environmental orientation. As a result of this expansion out of national borders, concepts like local and global are in discussion especially in postcolonial literatures in which the identity formation plays a crucial role. This paper will discuss *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh and *Through the Arc of Rain Forest* by Karen Tei Yamashita building on the argument of Ursula Heise in "Local rock and Global Plastic," focusing on the concept of "deterritorialization" and compare these two literary texts from different geographical locations of the world and suggest that the deaths of literary characters like Fokir in *Hungry Tide* and Mane Pena in *Rain Forest* might be considered both as the indication of failure of the globalization project and preservation policies by utilizing the knowledge of the local people.*

Key Words: Ecocriticism, local, global, postcolonial literature, environment

**AMITAV GHOSH'UN *THE HUNGRY TIDE*
VE KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'NIN *THROUGH THE ARC OF RAIN FOREST*
ADLI ROMANLARINDA YEREL HALK YA DA YEREL KURBANLAR**

ÖZET

*Köklerini özellikle Kuzey Amerika edebiyatından alan ekolojik eleştiri kuramı edebiyat ve fiziksel çevre arasındaki ilişkiyi inceler. Sürekli gelişen bir edebiyat teorisi olarak ekolojik eleştiri kuramı araştırma kapsamını genişleterek dünya üzerindeki diğer ülke edebiyatlarını da inceleme altına almış ve çevre konularına odaklı geniş bir metin yelpazesini bir araya getirmiştir. Ulusal edebiyatın sınırları dışına çıkılması sonucu, yerel ve küresel gibi kavramlar özellikle kimlik oluşumunun önemli rol oynadığı sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyatlar dahilinde tartışmaya açılmıştır. Bu makale Amitav Ghosh'un *The Hungry Tide* ve Karen Tei*

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Yamashita'nin Through the Arc of Rain Forest adli eserlerini Ursula Heise'nin "Local rock and Global Plastic," adlı makalesinin odak noktası olan "deterritorialization" kavramını baz alarak tartışacaktır. Bu makale aynı zamanda dünyanın farklı coğrafyalarından esinlenen bu iki romanı karşılaştıracak ve bu edebiyat eserlerinde hayatlarını kaybeden Fokir ve Mane Pena gibi karakterlerin küreselleşme projesinin ve yerel halkın bilgisine dayalı muhafaza politikalarının başarısızlığına işaret ediyor olabileceğini öne sürecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekokritisizm, yerel, küresel, sömürgecilik sonrası edebiyat, çevre

The expansion of the ecocritical theory beyond the boundaries of national literatures such as American and British has created new dimensions for looking critically at various literatures from around the globe. This new literary movement within the literature and environment studies, which we can also call "comparative ecocriticism," is the direction dedicated to the critical reading of transnational literary texts that have a nature-oriented theme as their subject. As the final "palimpsest" of ecocritical theory so far, the comparative tendency in ecocriticism is resonated by many prominent scholars such as George B. Handley. Handley points out "literary criticism in the Americas desperately needs comparative studies of how ideas have moved across borders" (32). Another prominent ecocritic, Patrick D. Murphy, who, as early as 2000, voiced the need for a comparative ecocritical approach denoting that "it is necessary to reconsider the privileging of certain national literatures and certain ethnicities within those national literatures" which "will enable a greater inclusiveness of literatures from around the world within the conception of nature-oriented literature" (58). In the wake of these developments taking place in the field of ecocriticism, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of Rain Forest* present their readers the interrelatedness of environmental themes that make them worthy of exploring in the light of ecocriticism. Both novels, though originating in two completely different parts of the world, namely the Amazon rainforest and the Sundarbans, represent similar characteristics in depicting the relationship between the local people and the environment, in which the local people are either get killed due to natural phenomenon such as tidal waves or alienated due to the forces of globalism that are represented by outsiders such as literary characters who act biased while envisioning the life in the forest or by companies which try to exploit the environment to the exhaustion point. This paper will discuss *The Hungry Tide* and *Through the Arc of Rain Forest* building on the argument of Ursula Heise in "Local rock and Global Plastic," which focuses on the concept of "deterritorialization" conceived by John Tomlinson, which comes to mean the rupturing of

social, political and cultural practices from their native places and populations. Therefore, this paper will compare these two literary texts from different geographical locations and suggest that the deaths of literary characters like Fokir in *Hungry Tide* and Mane Pena in *Rain Forest* might be considered as the indication of failure of the globalization project and preservation policies by utilizing the knowledge of the local people. In other words, the preservation of unique places by local people like Amazon rainforest and the Sundarbans is doomed to failure as these spaces are open to the exploitative forces of the global capitalist economy and native people in these environments are not immune to the effects of globalization as the deaths of Fokir and Mane Pena suggests at the end of both novels. The reconciliation between the environment and humankind cannot be established even though the hand of local people facilitates it.

Antony Giddens in *Consequences of Modernity* suggests that emergence of modernity “tears space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (18-19: original emphasis). Giddens’ perspective on the effect of modernity on the local is a common theme in both *Hungry Tide* and *Rain Forest* since they depict the life of local people who are negatively affected by the powers of modernity and globalization.

Building up on Giddens view on modernity, Ursula Heise also points out to the literary representations of the disruption in the social and culture ties of local people. She draws attention to the resistance of the environmentalist literature and philosophy against the alienation of social and cultural exercises and claims that “[t]he detachment of social institutions, political processes, economic exchanges and cultural interactions from their ties to the local contributes, in the view of many environmentalists, to the alienation of individuals and communities from their natural surroundings” (130). In the light of Heise’s views and Giddens’ definition of modernity, this paper also aims to highlight the transnational effects of the global on the local people and environment.

In this respect, Ghosh uses one of the world’s most challenging environments in *The Hungry Tide*. The Sundarbans is a vast area of Sundri trees which are resistant to salt water, and they constitute the flora of the area. The title of the novel foreshadows the realities of surviving in such a desolate area, which is prone to the destroying effects of rogue tidal waves

and tropical cyclones. A. Jalai's depiction of the Sundarbans delta gives a clear picture of the setting of *Hungry Tide* as a place of both ecologically and politically authentic nature:

On the southern tip of West Bengal in eastern India, just south of Calcutta, the great river Ganges fans out into many tributaries over a vast delta before ending a journey that began in the distant Himalayan north with a plunge into the Bay of Bengal. The mouth of this delta is made up of about three hundred small islands, spread over an area of about ten thousand square kilometers and straddling India's border with Bangladesh. It is one of those areas of the world where the lie of the land mocks the absurdity of international treaties, because it is virtually impossible to enforce border laws on a territory that constantly shifts, submerges and resurfaces with the ebb and flow of the tide.... These are the Sundarbans – the forests of beauty. (quoted in Mukherjee 108)

On a land that is so volatile and unpredictable as the Sundarbans, beauty, as the name of the forest suggest, comes with its risks and dangers. For example, the fauna of the forest, which is home to famous Bengal tiger along with the crocodiles and snakes, presents constant danger to those who make their living out of the forest. It is this “unique biotic space, a chain of islands that are constantly transformed by the daily ebb and flow of the tides that create and decimate, at aberrant intervals, whole islands” that also destroys the specific hunting borders of the Bengali tiger and masses with the biological instincts of tigers, which eventually leads to the attacks on local people due to the scrambled and unbalanced marking of hunting areas (Kaur 127). Beside the clash between the lives of the local people and the natural fauna, the interaction between the local inhabitants and the outsiders, researchers such as Piya or businessman like Kanai, represent a different set of challenge in the relationship between the unstable environment of the rainforest and its inhabitants. Although Piya and Kanai have roots in this primordial geography, they cannot escape being categorized as outsiders since they cannot survive this land without the help of the local people like Fokir. RajenderKaur describes *Hungry Tide* as a novel which tries to connect local and global, past and present and the scientific and mythic overcoming the differences in race, caste, and class with “an open minded rigorousness, naïve idealism, cynical disengagement and a pragmatic activism, exemplified in the characters of Piya and Nirmal, Kanai, and Moyna and Nilima” (135). Fokir's place in this web of relationships is mediatory since he represents the group of people who makes a living out of the forest, in other words, the tide people. Therefore, he also becomes the symbol of preservation of the forest that he makes his living. It is no surprise that he is not involved with any of the sensibilities possessed by other characters like Piya, Nirmal or Kanai because he embodies a character that will reconcile the problematic relationship

between the local and the global. Fokir is “the only person who seems to exist in dialogic relation with all these different sensibilities” since he “lives in idealized harmony with the rhythms of the tide country” (Kaur 135). Fokir saves Piya from drowning when she experiences problems with the forest guards. The scene of Piya’s drowning in the muddy waters of Gange is one of the indicators that the environment will not present any relief in the future:

Rivers like Ganga and the Brahmaputra shroud this window [Snell’s window] with a curtain of silt: in their occluded waters light loses its directionality within a few inches of the surface. Beneath this lies a flowing stream of suspended matter in which visibility does not extend beyond an arm’s length. With no lighted portal to point the way, top and bottom and up and down become very quickly confused. (Hungry Tide 46)

Apart from the different characteristics of tidal waves, the water of the Gange River is also another challenge for those who try to do research like Piya. As Piya struggles to save herself from the fall, the disorientation caused by the murky waters of the river and “with her breath running out, she [feels] herself to be enveloped inside a cocoon of eerily glowing murk and could not tell whether she [is] looking up or down” (*Hungry Tide* 47). This ambivalent space presents ‘phantasmagoric’ images and it is no different than the world of the Sundarbans where the tide comes and goes, devouring substantial islands as well as people. As a mediator, Fokir saves Piya from drowning and becomes for the rest of the novel Piya’s guide through the Sundarbans while she tries to complete her search for Oracella.

Another incident of burgeoning intimacy between Fokir and Piya, which confirms the mediatory role of Fokir appears after Piya finds out the gathering spot of the Oracella dolphins, in which Fokir takes her into the Sundarbans. For Piya, Sundarbans “had been either half submerged or a distant silhouette, looking down on the water from the heights of the shore” (*Hungry Tide* 125). Only focusing on her research, Piya is not aware of either the beauty or the dangers of the rainforest. As they approach the tree line,

she was struck by the way the greenery worked to confound the eye. It was not just that it was a barrier, like a screen or a wall: it seemed to trick the human gaze in the manner of cleverly drawn optical illusion. There was such a profusion of shapes, forms, hues, and textures that even things that were in plain view seemed to disappear, vanishing into the tangle of lines like the hidden objects in children’s puzzle. (Hungry Tide 125)

Piya's imagination of the Sundarbans as an ambivalent and uncanny environment is the result of her being an outsider. Yet, for Fokir, the Sundarbans is a place, in which he has to work his way through in order to survive in such challenging conditions. Fokir, although illiterate by means of communication to Piya or Kanai, can interpret the signs of the forest in times of danger or solace. This aspect of Fokir's existence is a great relief especially for Piya, who is not prone to what the forest may offer in a matter of time. Piya builds complete trust with Fokir even though she "hesitate[s] for a moment, held back by her aversion to mud, insects and dense vegetation, all of which were present aplenty on the shore" and she considers getting out of the boat because "with Fokir it was different. Somehow she knew she would be safe" (*Hungry Tide* 125). The examples of the interaction between Piya and Fokir may be multiplied when Fokir again saves Piya from a deadly attack of a crocodile while Piya tries to measure the water depth in the area where Oracella spend most of their times:

Suddenly the water boiled over and a pair of huge jaws came shooting out of the river, breaking the surface exactly where Piya's wrist had been a moment before. From the corner of one eye, Piya saw two sets of interlocking teeth make snatching, twisting movement as they lunged at her still extended arm: they passed so close that the hard tip of the snout grazed her elbow and the spray from the nostrils wetted her forearm. (Hungry Tide 144)

With this incidence, Piya's dependency on Fokir is solidified one more time. Piya's quest for the Oracella is enabled by Fokir's knowledge and courage throughout the novel. However, it is of crucial importance to realize where Fokir stands in this entire quest. Fokir is a fisherman who catches crabs and fish for a living and he is only familiar with the Oracella as far as they help the fisherman by herding the fish into the nets and Fokir knows the routes the Oracella uses in the canals of the river only because he has to follow them in order to catch fish. Yet, Fokir's position does not make him a lesser man because Piya, as Kaur suggests, "comes to see the Oracella not in isolation as a particular marine sub-species to be saved at any cost but as a vital part of the larger ecosphere of the Sundarbans where the impoverished human community live equally threatened lives" (128). As one of the representative of the Tide people, Fokir's dilemma surfaces when he joins a mob that is killing a Bengali tiger. Although Piya sees him as the preserver of the environment, Fokir belongs to the community of people who are marginalized by the state to live in the environmentally challenging Sundarbans. Fokir is one of those people who are living a

“threatened life” because of the Bengali tiger according to Nilima’s unofficial records. Nilima points out to the number of people killed as she says

my belief is that over a hundred people are killed by tigers here each year. And, mind you, I am just talking about the Indian part of the Sundarbans. If you include the Bangladesh side, the figure is probably twice that. If you put the figures together, it means that a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans. (Hungry Tide 199)

Considering the number of people killed by tigers in the Sundarbans, it is no surprise to see Fokir “in the front ranks of the crowd, helping a man sharpen a bamboo pole” (*Hungry Tide* 243). This incident, which makes Piya realize the survival instinct of the tide people against the survival right of Bengali tigers, is one the revelations she goes through as she carries on with her quest. The dangerous situations she faces so far such as drowning, or being attacked by a crocodile or even going into the Sundarbans for the first time with the encouraging presence of Fokir, helps Piya to become aware of the fact that the tide people, who are the poorest of the poor, are unchangeable part of the ecological existence of the Sundarbans since they try to co-exist with the killer waves, tigers and crocodiles.

The death of Fokir while trying to protect Piya from the deadly cyclone that came beyond the scope of predictions is an open-ended resolution to the environmental and social issues that have been discussed so far. For the problem of local preservationist movements, Fokir’s death represents the failure of the project because no matter how well Fokir adapts to the Sundarbans and helps the representative of the global, Piya, he is also a human who is prone to the dangers like tidal waves or Bengali tiger. Fokir may kill a tiger if he has the chance because they are rivals in the game of survival and he can become the game if he does not kill it when he has the chance. The project of bringing the local and global together is doomed to failure because the desire of the politics to make human and non-human world co-exist in an ecologically challenging environment may not be easy as depicted in *The Hungry Tide*.

Through the Arc of Rain Forest by Karen Tei Yamashita also presents the problems of the local and global. Yamashita’s novel represents the clash of the local and the global within the frame of magical realist elements and characters. Taking the Amazon forests as its setting, the novel tries to draw attention to the consumerist policies that are carried out by the global economy and focuses on how this project effects the local people. *Rain Forest*, like *The Hungry Tide*, tries to present the reader with a transcultural and global framework by

bringing local people like the farmer, Mane Pena, and global characters like the Japanese railway engineer, Kazumasa Ishimaru, or the American businessman, J.B. Tweep. As the web of relationships between these characters are woven toward the climax of the novel, the Amazon forest and a geological formation called the Matacão become the focus of both local people and global enterprises J.B. Tweep represents. Yet, *Rain Forest* differs from *Hungry Tide* in the resolution it provides at the end because as the focus of the globalization project, the strange material discovered in the middle of the Amazon rainforest leads to the destruction of the local habitat and flora of the area as well as the local people. Again, in this problematic relationship between the local and global, this paper will focus on Mane Pena, who is consumed by the very material he discovers on the clearing he bought for farming in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

In the years, he discovers a rock-plate, as the torrential rains wash away the soil and makes it impossible to do farming; Mane Pena becomes the center of attention with interviews with TV channels and documentaries because

what was uncovered was neither rock nor desert, as some had predicted, but an enormous impenetrable field of some unknown solid substance stretching for millions of acres in all directions. Scientist, supernaturalists and ET enthusiasts, sorting the old Spielberg rubber masks, flooded in from every corner of the world to walk upon and tap the smooth hard surface formerly hidden beneath the primeval forest. (Rain Forest 16)

Unlike Fokir, Mane Pena is the receiver of what the forest may offer. In this case, he is deprived of his profession as a farmer. The rains that bring out the strange material destroy even his house. As a result of this Mane Pena and his family start to live in a residential area which is given to them by the government, but “the government condemned those buildings just five years after they were built, and a private real estate company came in and bulldozed them under, replacing them with American franchises wedged between and under exclusive penthouses with heliports and hotels” (*Rain Forest 17*). The rock-plate caused all this displacement and Mane Pena is doomed to his poor past once again until he finds the healing effect of the feather. The discovery of the healing effects of the feather constitutes for Mane Pena another turning point in his life toward the abundance of attraction and wealth:

The disjunction of each stage in Mane's life seemed as divisible as and as incomprehensible as the magic of the feather. Still, the feather, Mane concluded, was the only tangible evidence of coherence. Like the remote control and the buttons on his new TV, it made things happen. (Rain Forest 18)

As the region becomes susceptible to the enterprises from the First world countries as part of the globalization project, J.B. Tweep invests in the region and turns the town into a touristic place and he looks for ways of using the material in terms of technological advance. However, the first time J.B. Tweep shows up in the Matacão, Mane Pena is the first to meet him because of his new healing methods with the feathers. As J.B. Tweep invests in the feathers, he uses the expertise of Mane Pena and makes him an international figure in the alternative healing techniques. As the tourists visiting the Matacão want to try the healing power of the feather, Mane Pena's fame spreads which leads him to become a very busy person:

Mane Pena, now the feather guru, was so frequently accosted by feather enthusiasts and salespersons about the nature of the feather and its proper uses that he was finally summoned to give classes and lectures at the local college. (Rain Forest 79)

However, this wealth and fame comes with a price, which leads to the alienation of Mane Pena from his family. As a result of this alienation, his family disintegrates and he can no longer account for whereabouts of his sons. The exploitation of the human relationships in *Through the Arc* can be observed in the natural resources, too. Yet, what is ironical about the exploitation of the Matacão is the fact that the mysterious material is already a product of First world garbage as the scientist from J.B. Tweep's company finds out:

The Matacão, scientists asserted, had been formed for the most part within the last century, paralleling the development of the more common forms of plastic, polyurethane and styrofoam. Enormous landfills of nonbiodegradable material buried under virtually every populated part of the Earth had undergone tremendous pressure, pushed ever farther into the lower layers of the Earth's mantle. The liquid deposits of the molten mass had been squeezed through underground veins to virgin areas of the Earth. The Amazon Forest, being one of the last virgin areas on Earth, got plenty. (Rain Forest 202)

However, the feather, which prospers Mane Pena again determines the destiny of him because a typhus epidemic that begins around the Matacão originating from real bird feathers sweeps the area without categorizing poor or rich. Mane Pena loses all his family to the epidemic and he is helpless since the feather does not heal the effects of the disease. He suffers for five days and dies. The disintegration goes in hand with the degradation of the economy because the rock-plate as an artificial product of First world countries is found out to be vulnerable to some kind of bacteria. As it begins to dissolve into thin air, all the

enterprises brought by J.B Tweep are destroyed accordingly including buildings erected by using plastic in the vicinity of the area and the artificial feathers that would take the place of real bird feathers. As Ursula Heise points out,

The ironic reversals in this ending are of course multiple, as the non-biodegradable waste turns out to be degradable after all, the rock-hard plastic turns to dust, and the healing feathers kill. One might take these disasters to signal the termination of the globalizing project and the return to a more authentic experience of place. (137)

The decay of the globalizing project not only effects Mane Pena but also claims major characters like Chico Paco who is killed by head hunters really aiming for Kazumasa Ishimuro and even the representative of the project J.B Tweep commits suicide when his girl friend leaves him. Although *Through the Arc* suggests that the exploitation of the land comes originally from First world countries' degradable wastes and they appear in the Amazon rainforest as it is one of the virgin lands that is left, the novel ends suggesting that migration and plantations will inevitably continue to exist in the forests. The portrait that is made available to us is a different kind of globalizing project in progress:

The procession marched on, day and night, sleeping briefly on the roadside and nourished by the human poverty it encroached upon, continuing for weeks through the festering gash of a highway, through a forest that had once been, for perhaps 100 million years, a precious secret.

Retracing Chico Paco's steps, the mourners passed hydroelectric plants, where large dams had flooded and displaced entire towns. They passed mining projects tirelessly exhausting the treasures of iron, manganese and bauxite. They passed a gold rush, losing a third of the procession to the greedy furor. They crossed rivers and encountered fishing fleets, nets heavy with their exotic river catch of manatee, pirarucu, piramatuba, mapara. They crowded to the sides of the road to allow passage for trucks and semis bearing timber, Brazil nuts and rubber. They passed burning and charred fields recently cleared and parted for frantic zebu cattle, long horns flailing and stampeding toward new pastures. They passed black-pepper-tree plantations farmed by immigrant Japanese. They passed surveyors and engineers accompanied by excavators, tractors and power saws of every description. They passed the government's five-year plans and ten-year plans, while all the forest's splendid wealth seemed to be rushing away ahead of them. They passed through the old territorial hideouts of rural guerillas, trampling over unmarked graves and forgotten sites of strife and massacre. And when the rains stopped, they knew they had passed into northeast Brazil's drought-ridden terrain, the sunbaked earth spreading out from smoldering asphalt, weaving erosion through the landscape. (Rain Forest 209-10)

It is obvious that the ambition to use the resources in Third world countries has no stopping as the ending of *Through the Arc of Rain Forest* suggests because the capital leads enterprises to new virgin lands in order to bring a new life style or a new consumer product wherever it is possible. What this paper suggests is that characters like Fokir and Mane Pena are not different from one another when they are placed in the exploitative web of the globalism project because they represent a class of people who has no say in the working of the general system of globalism. However, they have a certain kind of authority in determining and surviving in their specific environments like Fokir, who has the will and ability to help Piya to survive many dangerous incidents throughout her quest for Oracella. In this sense, authority of Fokir as a local makes Piya realize the importance of local people; however, Piya also realizes that animals like Bengali tiger are in danger as well as local people because the Sundarbans' challenging environment does not let human and non-human to survive together. As Kaur points out, Fokir "exposes the limitations of this utopian global vision in dramatizing the vulnerability of the underclasses on whose sacrifice is built this vision of global solidarity" (135). The death of Fokir, in the final analysis, signals to the failure of the project to bring global and local together and Fokir remains a statistical number recorded in Nilima's notebook not as a victim of Bengali tiger but of the seasonal cyclone. Although *Rain Forest* follows a different way to point to the fact that bringing local and global together or bridging the gap between them is not likely to happen, the faith of Mane Pena resembles Fokir in the way he interacts with J.B. Tweep about the enterprise of the healing power of the feather. This act might be considered as a way to align the local culture with the global. To some extent, Mane Pena becomes the attraction point of international community. Yet, the globalization project, as *Rain Forest* suggests, has its degrading effects and the very means of bridging the gap between the local and global becomes the destructive object of the same project. Although the reader is informed of the other ongoing projects like dams, plantations, or mining, we are signaled that those are also doomed to fail in the future.

In comparing two characters, Fokir and Mane Pena, from two different novels that are the products of completely different geographies, this paper has read into the heart of the project of reuniting local and global through the symbolic deaths of these characters. *The Hungry Tide* and *Through the Arc of Rain Forest* attempts in their original ways to convey the impossibility of the globalizing project because of the gap between the First World's conception of the environment and the local people's understanding of it. Thus, characters like Fokir and Mane Pena who are dubbed as "the underclass" or "the poorest of the poor"

may suggest a way to understand the humankind's connection to and conception of the land. However, as one dies and the other sacrifices himself at the end, it may be a little while till we can successfully realize the project of reconciling environment and globalization project, whether it is Sundarbans or Amazon rain forest.

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