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INFRASTRUCTURE AS THE ARCHITECTURE OF ECOPRECARITY IN PANKAJ SEKHSARIA'S THE LAST WAVE

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Abstract:

Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave: An Island Novel* (2014) presents the Andaman Islands as a landscape where highways, jetties, concrete camps, and checkpoints actively contribute to the precarious circumstances of both indigenous and settler life. This paper investigates the Andaman Trunk Road, which is defined by the characters in the novel as "the lifeline of the islands" while simultaneously condemning it as "the biggest, if not the biggest problem" faced by the Jarawa. This fictional debate reflects a real, an extended legal controversy spanning decades: In 2002, India's Supreme Court mandated the closure of the Andaman Trunk Road, an order that continues to be ignored over a decade later, amidst what human rights organizations have labelled "human safaris". The study further develops Nayar's notion of the "architectural uncanny" (59) from ecodystopian fiction to the eco-realist context of Sekhsaria's novel by examining the compromised, incomplete concrete forest camp that serves as both sanctuary and peril during the 2004 tsunami. Along with it, this study aims to illustrate, via comprehensive textual analysis that infrastructure in *The Last Wave* is inherently biased; it serves as the mechanism through which ecological disaster is produced and inequitably distributed

Discussion:

Ecoprecarity originates across multiple disciplines, representing a synthesis of at least three distinct theoretical traditions. The primary connection refers to Judith Butler's idea of precarious living. In "Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence" (2004) and its sequel "Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?" (2009), Butler contends that precariousness and precarity are crossing ideas. The concept of existence is inherently precarious: it can be terminated either intentionally or accidentally; its viability remains uncertain regardless of any fashion. Butler's significant contribution is the notion of the "frame": political and media frameworks pre-determine "whose lives are deemed valuable, whose lives are lamented, and whose lives are regarded as ungrievable" (Butler 38). This serves as the foundation for understanding how the Jarawa are presented in Sekhsaria's novel—not as a community of defender of rights, but as "sightings," an outlook that fails to recognize their systemic vulnerability as forms of violence.

Then, Pramod K. Nayar's *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019), which aligns Butler's concept of precarity with ecological disaster, and proposes that "ecoprecarity pertains to the precarious existence of humans in the face of ecological calamity... and also to the environment, which becomes precarious due to human actions in the Anthropocene" (Nayar 7). Nayar proposes that ecoprecarity is not strictly limited to "the singular event of eco-disaster alone" (Nayar 10) but "emerges over time... as the consequence of processes and practices" (Nayar 10), that explicitly refers the third scholarly tradition: Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon depicts slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Nixon's essential assertion — that slow violence is founded on the root of social inequality and disproportionately affects those "devoid of resources" - imparts a political dimension to ecoprecarity: precarity is not uniformly allocated; it is constructed along power dynamics.

The present study proposes a fourth source: infrastructure studies. Brian Larkin's influential statement posits that "infrastructures are material entities that provide the potential for interaction across space. They constitute the tangible networks facilitating the exchange of products, ideas, waste, energy, individuals, and capital" (Larkin 327), and as "constructed networks," they "provide the framework for circulation, fundamentally supporting the infrastructure of contemporary societies" (Larkin, "Politics and Poetics" 328). Larkin's argument claiming that infrastructures require being analyzed concurrently through "biopolitics, science and technology studies, and theories of technopolitics" (Larkin 327) embodies the interdisciplinary methodology this paper employs to examine the Andaman Trunk Road: not merely as a representation of development or intrusion, but as a tangible, load-bearing structure that disproportionately shares risk, visibility, and vulnerability across a landscape characterized by dissimilar power dynamics.

The novel closely records the formally documented and ongoing legal and political battle. It symbolizes the Indian manifestation of ecoprecarity in the Andamans, rather than solely a novelistic conceit. In 2002, the Indian Supreme Court ordered the closure of the Andaman Trunk Road, which was constructed through the Jarawa Tribal Reserve. However, this order was not enforced for more than a decade, as evidenced by reports from Survival International

and international news outlets (Survival International; icmagazine.org). The occurrence that Sekhsaria dramatizes through Justice Singh's casual account of "good Jarawa sightings" and Basu's proposal to relocate the tribe "for their own welfare" is indeed a type that the term "human safari" refers to, which was coined by tribal-rights organizations following a 2010 expose and made globally notorious by a 2012 video showing Jarawa women being ordered to "dance" by a police constable for tourists (icmagazine.org). It is noteworthy that a 2013 report on the controversy quotes an activist's concern that the Andaman authorities refused to enforce the closure because they regarded the road as a lifeline for settlers. This language is nearly identical to Basu's own defence of the road as "the lifeline of the islands" (Sekhsaria, ch. 19). This convergence between fiction and documented fact emphasizes that Sekhsaria's novel is not a speculative allegory, but rather an eco-realist witness that is deeply rooted in an actual infrastructural conflict whose resolution is still unresolved at the time of writing. Additionally, the Jarawa Tribal Reserve as depicted in the novel can be precisely defined by Agamben's concept of the "zone of indistinction" - a space in which "the suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition" but produces "a zone of anomie" that "claims not to be unrelated to the juridical order" (Agamben 23). This bounded territory is simultaneously protected by law (as a reserve) and violated by law's own instruments, an illegally built road, government-sanctioned "safaris," religious fairs permitted "right inside the so-called boundary of the Jarawa Reserve," (Sekhsaria, ch. 20).

The novel's description of the Andaman Trunk Road serves as the most literal illustration of Larkin's assertion that infrastructures are "the physical networks through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance are trafficked" (Larkin 327). The road transports timber trucks facilitating illegal Forest Department logging "inside the Jarawa Reserve" (Sekhsaria, ch. 19). It handles tourist convoys that treat the Jarawa as roadside wildlife; and it carries a number of disease vectors against which the Jarawa have "no proper" immunity (ch. 19-20), as Seema fears (ch. 19). Basu's defence of the road, which claims that "it's crucial for our economic growth - it's a vital defence need" (ch. 19), employs the same developmental idiom that real-world Andaman authorities employed to justify the road's continued operation in defiance of the 2002 Supreme Court order. The novel's fictional Justice Singh responds only with bemused laughter upon learning the road may pass illegally through the Reserve; "Judges... they never learn" (Sekhsaria, ch. 19).

Justice Singh's casual remark - "We saw seven of them." It was intriguing - just young lads" (Sekhsaria, ch. 19) - enacts the exact frame Butler defines as precluding grievability. The Jarawa are caught within a frame derived from wildlife tourism ("sightings"), a frame that, in Butler's words, determines "whose life is a life, and whose life is effaced" (Frames, qtd. in Goodreads). Basu's claim that "all the Jarawas... should be collected and taken away to some other island" (ch. 19), is justified as being "for the benefit of the Jarawas" (ch. 19), exemplifies Butler's argument that certain populations are rendered "lose-able" - subject to violence enacted, paradoxically, in the vocabulary of care and protection. Seema's bitter intervention - "You want the Jarawas' welfare or to finish them off?" (ch. 19) - explicitly states this paradox, arguing that Basu's "civilizing" viewpoint and explicit dismissal are, in Butler's perspective, the same power action masked as different faces.

The novel's pictorial circumstances reinforce this interpretation. The French photographic artist's title, "An innocent creature of mother nature, on the virgin coast of the Andaman Islands" (ch. 15), creates precisely a composition of basic delicacy that justifies extraction while concealing force. All of this remarkably resembles the original 2012 film in which a

policeman can be heard claiming Jarawa women to “dance... for me” (icmagazine.org), an act of forceful performance delivered for visitors that prompted the Supreme Court’s brief 2013 ban. Sekhsaria’s fiction and the documented history of the Andaman Trunk Road thus share the same insight: infrastructure does not simply facilitate contact; it creates and legitimizes a specific frame inside which whatever is touched is produced spectacle rather than transgression.

The dispute between Harish and Seema about road closures echoes Nixon’s key claim that delayed violence is difficult to see precisely because it lacks the “spectacle” (Nixon, qtd. at Western Norway University) of a single catastrophic occurrence. Harish’s assertion that “the road is one of the biggest, if not the biggest problem” (Sekhsaria, ch. 21) and his description of it as “a public amenity being thrust into someone’s private property” (ch. 21) name a form of harm that is structural and cumulative rather than singular - logging, disease, cultural erosion, and voyeurism, none dramatic enough alone to provoke the same outrage as an ambush or an accident, together constituting what Nixon calls a “attritional Seema’s counter-argument - “traffic can be regulated, people can be educated... it’s too late to close down the road” (ch. 21) - represents the neoliberal position Nixon identifies as endemic to slow violence’s political invisibility: because no single moment demands closure, the road persists by default, just as the actual Andaman Trunk Road did for more than a decade after its court-ordered closure.

Crucially, Nixon’s insistence that slow violence is “built on the bedrock of social inequality” (Nixon, qtd. in Wikipedia) explains why Seema, despite her genuine sympathy for the Jarawa, resists closure: as a “Local Born” whose own community’s economic survival is linked to the road, she occupies a position of structural entanglement rather than straightforward villainy. The novel thus highlights the central political difficulty of slow violence: its perpetuation does not require malice, but rather the ordinary, distributed self-interest of a settler population whose own precarity (economic, infrastructural) is inextricably linked to, albeit radically unequal to, Jarawa precarity.

Agamben’s “zone of indistinction” (23) contains the most precise wording for the novel’s checkpoint and barrier passages. The barrier at Jirkatang, lifted routinely to allow tourist convoys through “the so-called boundary of the Jarawa Reserve” (Sekhsaria, ch. 20), and the religious fair permitted to sprawl “right inside” that same boundary (ch. 20), enact Agamben’s claim that the state of exception is “neither external nor internal to the juridical order” but a “threshold... where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur” (23). The armed escort’s practice of firing “blank shots in the air to scare the Jarawa” (ch. 20) as routine procedure, sanctioned by the state but indistinguishable in violence from an act of war, exemplifies what Agamben identifies as the state of exception’s tendency to generate “a killing machine” (qtd. in *Territorial Masquerades*) even when no formal suspension of law has been declared. The Reserve, supposedly the Jarawa’s most protected legal territory, is thus shown by the novel’s own infrastructural logic to be the place of most exception rather than maximum protection - exactly the paradox predicted by Agamben’s theory.

Extending Nayar’s “architectural uncanny” (59) into the eco-realist register, the incomplete forest-camp constructing that shelters Harish and Seema following the 2004 tsunami plays out infrastructure’s core double-bind with unusual literalism. The structure exists in an unfinished state because “the local forest officer... had siphoned off the money meant for the construction, and all that he had come up with was the framework of the pillars and a roof” (Sekhsaria, ch. 23). The corruption becomes, in Vidler’s language as conveyed by Nayar, the “crypt” or

“secret” (Nayar 59) that typically “ought to remain hidden” within working infrastructure - exposed only by the force of ecological catastrophe. This structure saves Harish and Seema’s lives, but its compromised and corrupted form injures Seema, whose head is “cracked... hard against the column” (ch. 23) by the pillar that shelters her. Larkin’s assertion that infrastructures “shape... their vulnerability to breakdown” (328) is dramatized here with harsh precision: the building’s vulnerability to breakdown is created in advance, by bureaucratic theft, long before the tsunami arrives.

When viewed through this composite perspective, the novel’s characters occupy various roles within the infrastructural network rather than acting as independent moral actors. Basu embodies the developmental idiom that legitimizes infrastructural intrusion (Larkin’s “technopolitics,” 327); Yadav embodies the administrative denial that produces Agamben’s zone of indistinction; Justice Singh embodies Butler’s touristic “frame” even from within the judiciary meant to check it; and Erema, in the novel’s epilogue, offers the only relation in the text that escapes the road’s frame of spectacle entirely - two grieving men meeting in a hospital ward. Socially, the road’s infrastructural logic generates a gendered economy of exposure (the coerced “dancing” documented by activists and dramatized in the novel’s photographic episodes), a settler-indigenous political schism (Seema’s entangled loyalty, Basu’s outright hostility), and a civilizational discourse that recasts dispossession as benevolence. In terms of the environment, the same infrastructural logic allows for illicit logging, pandemic vulnerability, and, in the case of the tsunami, a shelter economy that has already been undermined by administrative corruption. Across both registers, the novel insists that ecoprecarity’s environmental and political dimensions are inextricably linked: the road that endangers the forest is the same road that endangers the Jarawa; the corruption that depletes the forest camp of concrete is the same corruption that, elsewhere, allows for illegal logging.

Conclusion:

Through the convergence of Butler’s frames of grievability, Nixon’s slow violence, Larkin’s material infrastructure studies, Agamben’s zone of indistinction, and Nayar’s architectural uncanny, this paper has argued that infrastructure in *The Last Wave* functions as an architecture of ecoprecarity. This paper has demonstrated that Sekhsaria’s novel is best read as eco-realist testimony, closely tracking an unresolved infrastructural and biopolitical conflict, based on the documented history of the actual Andaman Trunk Road, including its 2002 court-ordered closure, its continued operation amid what activists called “human safaris,” and the near-verbatim echo between Basu’s fictional defence of the road as “lifeline” and the real administration’s own rhetoric. The novel’s ultimate turn toward Erema’s grief as a relationship forged outside the road’s frame of spectacle and its refusal to resolve the Harish-Seema debate into an easy anti-infrastructural moralism suggest that the text’s greatest ecocritical achievement lies in identifying infrastructure as the issue without pretending that its removal offers an easy solution. In order to determine whether the dialectic of “lifeline” and “vector” found here recurs as a broader grammar across the Indian English novel’s engagement with development, indigeneity, and ecological catastrophe, future research might expand this composite framework - precarity theory, slow violence, infrastructure studies, and biopolitics read together rather than through any one lens—to other Indian Anthropocene narratives.

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