

Research Article

## Submerged Lives and Silenced Landscapes: Ecology, Displacement, and Developmental Violence in Na. D'Souza's *Dweepa*

Ramesha N S

Assistant Professor of English, Government First Grade College, Shankaranarayana, Kundapura, Udupi, Karnataka, India;  
rbabaramesh53@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5 February 2026

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18493721>

**Abstract:** Literary works dealing with development-induced displacement in India increasingly foreground ecological loss alongside human suffering. Na. D'Souza's Kannada novella *Dweepa: Island* (2013), translated into English by Susheela Punitha, occupies a distinctive position within this discourse. It situates displacement within the fragile ecology of the Western Ghats, articulating nature as an ethically responsive presence rather than a passive backdrop. This study examines *Dweepa* as an ecological narrative that projects the cultural and material consequences of large-scale hydroelectric projects, particularly dam construction along the Sharavathi River Basin in Karnataka. It argues that the novel functions as an ecological archive of developmental violence, in which submerged landscapes and fragmented human identities emerge as interdependent outcomes of technocratic modernisation. Drawing on ecocritical and development-induced displacement perspectives, this study analyses how ecological consciousness in *Dweepa* is shaped through lived relationships with land, forests, rivers, and seasonal cycles. This study urges readers and stakeholders to interpret ecological narratives not merely as representations centred on recreation or leisure, but as urgent warnings concerning the sustainability of the environment as a whole. This study emphasises the need to move beyond exploitative models of progress and explore alternative, sustainable approaches to energy production and resource use that do not disrupt the ecological balance or weaken human-nature relationships. By foregrounding the ethical and ecological dimensions of development, this paper advocates for sustainable practices that preserve environmental integrity and reinforce the interconnectedness between people and the natural world.

**Keywords:** Eco criticism; Development-induced displacement; Western Ghats ecology; Submersion; Developmental Violence

## Introduction

Post-independence, India has pursued development primarily through large-scale infrastructure projects such as dams, power plants, highways, and mining operations. These projects have been justified through narratives of “national progress,” “economic growth,” “energy security,” and “development.” However, such narratives often conceal the uneven distribution of costs and benefits, particularly in ecologically sensitive regions (Roy 56–58; Cernea 1569). The Western Ghats, one of the world’s most biologically diverse hotspots, have been subjected to sustained environmental transformation through hydroelectric, mining, and irrigation projects, resulting in deforestation, biodiversity loss, and large-scale displacement of rural and Indigenous populations (Gadgil and Guha 112). Development-induced displacement remains one of the most under-acknowledged consequences of modernisation. While state discourse frames displacement as a temporary inconvenience in the name of national development, lived experience reveals it to be a long-term condition marked by the loss of land, livelihood, cultural continuity, and identity (Cernea 1570). Literature emerging from displacement-affected regions offers an alternative archive of development—one that foregrounds suffering, resistance, and ecological rupture, rather than economic gain.

Na. D’Souza’s *Dweepa* constitutes a significant contribution to this literary archive. Set in the Sharavathi River Basin of Karnataka, the novel narrates the ecological and human consequences of the construction of the Linganamakki Dam in 1964 for hydroelectric power generation to meet the state’s energy demands. The project displaced approximately 12,000 people and submerged nearly 175–190 villages across the Sagar and Hosanagar taluks of Shivamogga district, Karnataka. These regions are deeply dependent on forest ecology and monsoon rhythms. Rather than presenting development as inevitable or beneficial, *Dweepa* exposes its ethical failures and the violence it inflicts on the ecology. Although earlier critical responses to the novel have emphasised displacement and rural hardship, this paper argues that *Dweepa* must be read more comprehensively as an Eco critical text that conceptualises development as a form of structural violence.

This study positions *Dweepa* as an ecological archive of developmental violence in which submerged landscapes and fractured human identities are inseparable. Drawing on eco-criticism and displacement studies as theoretical frameworks, this paper examines how ecological consciousness, gendered marginalisation, Indigenous knowledge systems, and human and animal suffering intersect within the narrative. In addition, this paper situates the novel within contemporary environmental debates by linking its concerns to ongoing development projects in the Western Ghats, thereby foregrounding the continued relevance of *Dweepa* to discussions of environmental justice and sustainable development.

## Theoretical Framework: Eco-Criticism and Development-Induced Displacement

Eco criticism and development-induced displacement studies provide a conceptual foundation for reading *Dweepa* as a narrative of ecological violence and

displacement. Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, foregrounds the relationship between literature and the physical environment, emphasising how literary texts register environmental degradation and human–nonhuman interdependence (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Lawrence Buell’s understanding of environmental texts as moral engagements with place further informs this perspective, particularly in recognising nature in *Dweepa* as an ethically responsive presence rather than a passive backdrop (Buell 7).

Displacement theory, particularly Michael M. Cernea’s formulation of development-induced displacement, frames displacement as a process of structural impoverishment characterised by landlessness, marginalisation, and cultural disintegration (Cernea 1569–70). Within this framework, displacement in *Dweepa* does not emerge as an incidental outcome of development but as a systematic consequence of technocratic planning and state-led infrastructural interventions. The ecofeminist perspectives of Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood illuminate the gendered dimensions of marginalisation in the novel. Their work demonstrates how patriarchal development paradigms parallel the domination of women and nature, a convergence that is clearly expressed in Nagi’s character (Shiva 38; Plumwood 19). This approach reveals how ecological exploitation and female subjugation operate through the shared structures of power and control.

James C. Scott’s critique of bureaucratic rationality deepens understanding of how state-driven development reduces complex ecological and cultural realities to administratively manageable categories, thereby erasing lived experience and indigenous knowledge systems (Scott 2–4). In *Dweepa*, such abstraction is evident in compensation mechanisms and rehabilitation procedures that translate land, livelihoods, and cultural belonging into numerical and legal terms for displaced persons. These critical frameworks situate *Dweepa* within broader debates on environmental justice, structural violence, and ethical development. The convergence of ecocriticism, displacement theory, ecofeminism, and critiques of bureaucratic rationality allows the novel to be read as a sustained interrogation of development practices that marginalise both human and nonhuman worlds.

### **Ecological Consciousness and the Ethics of Place**

Ecological consciousness in *Dweepa* is rooted in the lived relationship between human communities and the environment. The inhabitants of Hosamanehalli in the Sharavathi Basin of Karnataka are not merely residents of the land; they are shaped by it through agricultural practices, ritual traditions, seasonal rain rhythms, and collective memory. Rivers, forests, animals, and soil are integral components of their sense of belonging. Nature functions as a moral and cultural framework rather than as a resource to be exploited (Buell 7; Glotfelty and Fromm, xviii).

The Sharavathi River, one of the major west-flowing rivers of Karnataka, occupies a central place in both the biodiversity of the Western Ghats and the novel’s ecological imagination, despite its relatively short length of 128 km. Prior to dam construction, the river sustained agriculture, enabled mobility, and anchored cultural

practices in the region. Its flow symbolises continuity, balance, and renewal. The damming of the river in 1964 represents a profound rupture in this relationship, transforming water into a regulated commodity controlled by the state authority. This transformation exemplifies the anthropocentric impulse to subordinate ecological systems to technological mastery.

Before the construction of the dam, Hosamanehalli—a village representative of the Malenadu region—functioned within a relatively stable socio-ecological system. This system was defined by an adaptive coexistence between its human communities and the local environment. Established less than half a century earlier, the village had sufficient time to align its agricultural practices, settlement patterns, and social relations with surrounding ecological conditions. This balance was sustained through interdependent relationships among three dominant farming households—those of Paramashivayya, a wealthy landlord who leveraged administrative influence to secure timely compensation; Hembha Hegde; and Ganapayya, who was economically weaker—and their agricultural labourers.

Integral to this system were the Dalit Hasala communities, particularly the families of Hala and Byra, whose labour, skills, and ecological knowledge were central to agricultural productivity. Their near-silence within the narrative points to the condition of the “unvoiced Dalit,” whose marginality persists irrespective of regional specificity. Together, these groups constituted a socially stratified yet functionally interconnected rural economy in which livelihoods, labour relations, and environmental practices were mutually reinforcing prior to the disruption caused by dam construction.

From an ecocritical perspective, *Dweepa* resists reducing the environment to passive scenery. D’Souza foregrounds the experiential dimension of ecological loss, illustrating how alterations to the landscape reshape human consciousness, memory, and ethical orientation. Nature is not silent within the narrative; it responds, resists, and bears witness to human intervention, reinforcing its role as an active participant in the unfolding of ecological and moral crises (Nixon 3).

### **Submergence and Development-Induced Displacement**

Submergence in *Dweepa* operates simultaneously as a material and symbolic process. At the physical level, villages, forests, and fertile agricultural land are submerged beneath the reservoir created by the Linganamakki Dam. At a deeper level, displacement submerges lives, identities, and histories. The loss of ancestral land entails the erosion of cultural memory and communal bonds that cannot be recovered through monetary compensation alone (Cernea 1570; Fernandes 213). Development-induced displacement, as represented in the novel, reproduces and intensifies pre-existing socio-economic inequalities rather than ensuring equitable developmental outcomes. Evidence from submergence-affected regions indicates that individuals with economic power and political influence were more likely to receive timely compensation and access to cultivable land. In contrast, marginal farmers, landless households, and Dalit communities encountered bureaucratic exclusion, corruption, and prolonged

administrative delays. These vulnerable groups were frequently subjected to bribery demands, procedural harassment, and exploitation by officials and intermediaries involved in rehabilitation processes, resulting in material deprivation and long-term psychological trauma.

Literary critiques of rural society, particularly in the works of Kuvempu and Poornachandra Tejaswi, expose structural injustice, corruption, and the marginalisation of small farmers within dominant development narratives (Tejaswi 1988; 1996). From an ecological and political economy perspective, state-led development and resource extraction systematically undermine local livelihoods and traditional land-use practices, disproportionately affecting socially and economically marginalised communities (Gadgil and Guha 1992; Gadgil 2011). The tragedy in the lives of these innocent victims of modernisation will now merge with the groans of the oppressed the world over, wherever this story is read (D'Souza xiii). Together, these perspectives demonstrate that displacement is not merely a consequence of development but a process through which institutionalised inequality and structural violence are reproduced. Rehabilitation schemes in *Dweepa* are depicted as bureaucratic exercises devoid of ethical sensitivity. Compensation mechanisms reduce loss to quantifiable assets, disregarding emotional trauma, cultural dislocation, and spiritual rupture. Displaced communities struggle to adapt to unfamiliar landscapes where ecological knowledge accumulated over generations becomes ineffective and irrelevant. The continued identification of displaced people as '*Mulugadevaru*' (*submerged people*) underscores their enduring marginality. Displacement emerges not as a transitional phase of development but as a persistent condition of social and psychological alienation (Fernandes 219). In this sense, the novel aligns with displacement studies that conceptualise development-induced displacement as a sustained process of structural impoverishment extending beyond economic deprivation.

### Monsoon, Temporality, and Ecological Rhythm

The narrative structure of *Dweepa* is shaped by ecological temporality, with chapters titled after monsoon-associated rain stars rather than conventional chronological or thematic markers. This structural choice reflects the cultural and environmental realities of the Malenadu region of the Western Ghats, where the monsoon governs agricultural cycles, mobility, and everyday life (D'Souza xiii). By aligning narrative progression with monsoon phases, the novel positions nature as an active force shaping human existence rather than as a passive background, a defining feature of ecocritical narrative practice (Glottfelty and Fromm).

As rainfall intensifies, villages such as Hosamanehalli become increasingly isolated, rendered inaccessible as the Sharavathi river swells. This isolation underscores the region's dependence on seasonal rhythms and ecological vulnerability (Gadgil and Guha). Ganapayya's attempt to secure farm labour from Kargal before the onset of the monsoon highlights the precarious conditions under which agrarian communities operate. As the text observes, "Heavy wind, thunder, and lightning were harbingers of the mirage phase of the monsoon. Once this intermittent rain became incessant, it would stop only after four months" (D'Souza 35).



The monsoon functions not merely as a climatic condition but as a catalyst for social, emotional, and moral conflict. The central interpersonal tension between Nagi and Krishnayya unfolds during the rainy season, suggesting that ethical transgressions and emotional upheavals are intensified by ecological pressures rather than occurring independently of them. Recurrent imagery of inundation and islandness serves both material and symbolic purposes, representing physical submergence caused by the hydroelectric project and Nagi's psychological isolation within her marital life (Nixon 3–4). The Malenadu region receives some of the highest rainfall in India, and life is organised around the monsoon cycle. Agriculture, movement, and social interaction are dictated by rain, reinforcing the dependence of human systems on ecological temporality (Guha 98). Dam construction disrupts these rhythms by imposing artificial regulation on water flow. The resulting ecological instability exposes the limitations of technological control and the consequences of disregarding natural cycles. Through its sustained attention to monsoon temporality, *Dweepa* situates ecological consciousness within lived experience rather than abstract environmental discourse (Nixon 14).

### Gendered Submergence and Eco-feminist Resonances

Nagi emerges as the central figure through whom the narrative unfolds along two parallel trajectories of displacement. One concerns the submergence and relocation of Hosamanehalli's inhabitants following dam construction, while the other traces Nagi's gradual marginalisation within her marital life. Although portrayed as practical and resilient, Nagi is increasingly sidelined by her husband Ganapayya, whose character is defined by inertia, dependence, and unwavering faith in ritual and divine intervention. Unlike other families who relocate after receiving compensation, Ganapayya, like his father Duggajja, refuses to leave, citing unsettled compensation and his belief that fate or divine forces will intervene.

Krishnayya, Nagi's cousin, arrives during the monsoon to assist the household. Although they had been brought up together, they separated after Nagi's marriage to Ganapayya. Krishnayya's entry into Nagi's emotional world alters the novel's rhythm. As her interactions with Krishnayya deepen, suppressed desires begin to surface. The narrative establishes a symbolic parallel between Nagi and the Sharavathi river: just as the river resists containment and submerges the land, Nagi resists domestic confinement, withdraws from her husband, and enters into a relationship with Krishnayya.

This parallel movement culminates in Nagi's destruction, revealing the novel's underlying critique of gendered injustice, wherein female transgression is met with disproportionate punishment. The creation of physical islands through submergence mirrors Nagi's moral and emotional isolation, presenting displacement as a profoundly gendered experience. Her oppression within a patriarchal marriage parallels the domination of nature under development-driven power structures. Just as the river is dammed and regulated, Nagi's autonomy is constrained by social norms and male authority, notably through Ganapayya (Shiva 38; Plumwood 19). Nagi's withdrawal into nature does not function as a romantic escape but as an act of survival and resistance. Nature becomes a space where selfhood persists beyond patriarchal and bureaucratic

control. This alignment between feminine marginalisation and ecological exploitation resonates strongly with eco-feminist thought, which identifies shared structures of domination governing women and the environment (Agarwal 126).

### **Bureaucracy, Indigenous Knowledge, and Moral Crisis**

*Dweepa* offers a sustained critique of bureaucratic rationality. Administrative systems operate through abstraction, reducing complex ecological realities and lived experiences to statistics, files, and policy documents. Ganapayya's moral deterioration reflects the psychological toll of displacement and his entanglement with corrupt institutional mechanisms that erode ethical judgment and agency (Scott 2–4). Indigenous belief systems such as 'Bootha worship (Bootha Kola)', 'Harake (Offerings to gods)' function as alternative ethical frameworks within the novel. These traditions recognise nature as sacred and morally authoritative, resisting commodification and instrumentalisation. Rivers, forests, deities, and ancestors coexist as guardians of life, restoring moral agency to the natural world and countering the extractive logic of state-led development (Guha and Martinez-Alier 67).

### **Biodiversity Loss and Human–Non-Human Conflict**

Ecological coexistence in *Dweepa* is articulated through the parallel presence of Belli, Ganapayya's cow, and the tiger of Sita-parvatha. (hillock) Their relationship extends beyond the conventional prey–predator binary to represent an ecological order grounded in interdependence. By situating both animals within the same landscape, the narrative advances a non-anthropocentric vision in which human life is embedded within, rather than dominant over, nature. Animals function as narrative agents rather than passive symbols. Belli, though domesticated, remains attuned to forest rhythms, while the tiger embodies the instinctual forces of the wild. The tiger's killing of Belli is depicted as an ecological inevitability rather than a moral transgression, reinforcing the natural cycle of survival and loss that sustains the forest ecosystem.

Belli's disappearance marks a critical rupture, signalling the erosion of coexistence between humans and nature. This loss exceeds Ganapayya's personal grief and anticipates broader destruction, revealing the fragility of human livelihoods when ecological balance collapses. The novel's climax—Ganapayya's death at the hands of the tiger—operates as a counterpoint to bureaucratic violence enacted in the name of development. Unlike instinct-driven predation, bureaucratic authority systematically devastates land, forests, and indigenous lives while legitimising destruction as progress.

Large-scale projects across the Western Ghats—such as Sharavathi, Varahi, and Supa in Karnataka; Idukki in Kerala; and Koyna in Maharashtra—have resulted in forest submergence and habitat fragmentation. Wildlife displacement has intensified human–animal conflict, symbolising the collapse of ecological boundaries. By foregrounding non-human suffering alongside human displacement, the novel extends ethical consideration beyond anthropocentric frameworks and affirms the interconnectedness of all life forms (Haraway 11; Nixon 15).

### **Contemporary Relevance and Developmental Continuities**

The ecological and ethical concerns articulated in *Dweepa* remain acutely relevant in contemporary India, particularly amid renewed infrastructural interventions in ecologically sensitive regions. Despite extensive environmental damage and social dislocation caused by earlier hydroelectric projects in the Sharavathi basin, development policy continues to prioritise energy production over ecological sustainability and human well-being. Communities displaced by earlier projects remain marginalised, often identified as *Mulugadevaru*, a designation that reflects displacement as a continuing lived condition rather than a resolved historical episode. Undoubtedly, *Dweepa* certainly holds the unseen and untold Bharat in its womb (Shreedhara, V.S. xxxi). The proposed Sharavathi Pumped Storage Project (2000 MW), “Aghanashini – Varadha river interlinking plan”, exemplifies this continuity of development-driven ecological violence. These projects threaten large-scale forest fragmentation, biodiversity loss, and renewed displacement within one of the most fragile zones of the Western Ghats (Gadgil and Guha 112; Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel Report). Endangered species such as the lion-tailed macaque, Malabar giant squirrel, Malabar Pied hornbills, and numerous endemic plant species face heightened risk, while indigenous and agrarian communities confront renewed uprooting.

Through these continuities, *Dweepa* transcends its historical setting and functions as a critical lens for examining contemporary development policy. The novel anticipates current debates on environmental justice, sustainability, and climate resilience, underscoring the urgency of reimagining development beyond extractive and anthropocentric paradigms.

### Conclusion

Na D’Souza’s *Dweepa* powerfully demonstrates how development driven by technocratic and anthropocentric priorities results in the simultaneous submergence of human lives and ecological landscapes. By situating displacement within the fragile ecology of the Western Ghats, the novel exposes development-induced displacement as a sustained form of environmental and structural violence rather than as a temporary by-product of progress. The loss of land, livelihood, cultural memory, and ethical belonging depicted in *Dweepa* reveals the inseparability of ecological destruction and human suffering under large-scale infrastructural interventions.

The novel’s relevance persists in the context of contemporary projects such as the proposed Sharavathi Pumped Storage Project and the Varahi Pumped Storage, Aghanashini–Varadha river interlinking plan in Karnataka, as well as similar hydroelectric ventures across the Western Ghats. These initiatives threaten renewed forest submergence, biodiversity loss, disruption of monsoon-dependent hydrological systems, and further displacement of indigenous and agrarian communities. *Dweepa* anticipates these consequences by illustrating how repeated developmental interventions deepen ecological instability and social marginalisation, transforming displacement into a permanent condition. By foregrounding ecological consciousness, gendered marginalisation, indigenous knowledge systems, and non-human suffering, *Dweepa* challenges dominant models of development rooted in extraction and control. The novel implicitly calls upon policymakers and governing institutions to reimagine



development through ethical, inclusive, and ecologically sustainable frameworks. As an ecological archive of submerged lives and silenced landscapes, *Dweepa* insists that genuine progress is possible only when human welfare and environmental integrity are recognised as mutually dependent rather than expendable.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Works cited

- D'Souza, N. A. *Dweepa*. Translated by Susheela Punitha, Oxford UP, 2015.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, 1988.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Cernea, Michael M. "The Risks and Reconstruction Model for Resettling Displaced Populations." *World Development*, vol. 25, no. 10, 1997, pp. 1569–1587.
- Gadgil, Madhav, and Ramachandra Guha. *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*. Penguin, 1995.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.