

# NATURE CONSCIOUSNESS AND REPRESENTATION OF FOREST IN BENGALI LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

Industrial development along with growing anthropogenic activities have been posing a grave challenge against the very existence of mother earth and human civilization in the current decade. The greed of man for better and better living are costing dearly in terms of vanishing natural wealth. It is not a matter of concern only for the scientists and environmental activists for envisaging proper action plan to protect our nature, but sensible minds in the field of art and culture have also expressed great care for nature and prudence that would be the source of abiding inspiration for the future generations. The Bengali literature is a treasure trove of wonderful portrayal of the natural world and the richness of forest in our country. Strating from Rabindranath, Bibhutibhushan, Manik Bandyopadhyay to Buddhadeb Guha, Sunil Gangopadhyay, we find profound consciousness for natural world and the theme of forest depicted as the principal elements in their creative arc. The present article delves deep into the history of Bengali Literature to explore the unfettered bondage of those masterminds with nature and its impact on human relation.

**Keywords:** Bengali Literature, Ecocriticism, Environment, Forest, Nature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change and its consequences on earth and human civilization remains the gravest threat of modern times. Increased emissions from the burning of fossil fuels coupled with wanton deforestation to pave way for industrial and technological advancement are leading to 'Global Warming' and actually rendering our lives precariously insecure. Human civilization is like a vehicle with wheels that is always on the move. This movement is essential for its forward march but deals the hardest blow to the sustainability of future generations in its wake. No other living components of our ecosystem like human being can be held responsible for

causing such irreparable damage to our environment in the name of development. Although removal of forest cover and its impact on environment may not appear to be a topic directly related to literature and art subjects, authors, poets, and environmental activists alike have reacted overwhelmingly to its adverse effects through the ages. The socio-economic challenges that communities face due to such events consequently have found bold, vivid, succinct and poetic description in their works. Mahasweta Devi is such a rare example of being an author and a nature activist whose life has been dedicated for the cause of marginalised people and tribal communities fighting their ways to save their homeland. Apart from being a paragon of literary skill that has earned her the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1996, Mahasweta Devi has also won Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1997 for the social work. Her life is a crusade against social injustice and loss of natural habitat that is home to tribal communities of our country. *Aranyer Adhikar* (published in 1977) depicts the tribal star figure Birsha Munda, whose struggle against the Indian and the British colonizers has assumed epical proportion [Raha \(2019\)](#). The author has been conferred the Sahitya Academy Award as well in 1979 for this splendid historical narrative.

## 2. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

‘Ecocriticism’ or ecocritical reading is emerging as an important field in humanities that encompasses systematic study dealing with interactive analysis of man as a part of Nature and its impact on the sustainability of environment. In more simple words, ecocriticism refers to a relationship between literature and physical environment [Awal \(2021\)](#). According to Cheryll Glotfelty, Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary in nature, embracing environmental studies on the one hand with the cultural and social studies on the other [Bakchi \(2022\)](#). In the essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” William Rueckert has strongly asserted the need for the protection of nature by human laws [Pandey \(2024\)](#). So, the conservation practice for the sustainability of our environmental resources goes far beyond the limits of scientific periphery to the realms of art and literature. During and after the period of our beloved Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore, eco-consciousness or topic of love and attachment with nature has found a prominent place in Bengali literature. Period compositions in particular have got enormous historical values. The engagement of a writer with his or her surrounding is reflected either through the socio-economic documentation during that period, or showcasing absolute love for nature. In fact, Tagore was travelling to Japan in 1916 when he felt aggrieved to see an oil spill over a vast area of the sea, subsequent to which his care and passion for nature got a new lease of life [Rahman \(2011\)](#). Restless and turbulent forties, infamous feminine have been described in *Ashani Sanket* by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. *Anandamath* (the Abbey of Bliss by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay), *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World by Tagore), *Ganadevata* (People as God by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay), *Sei Samay* (Those Days by Sunil Ganguly), *Teesta Parer Brittanto* (*A Tale by the side of Teesta* by Debesh Roy) are some of the greatest period novels written in Bengali literature. Any composition that depicts social anomalies and conflict, economic upheaval in the backdrop of natural environment adds a different dimension to the depository of literary creation. “*Padma Nadir Majhi*” or *The Boatman of Padma* by Manik Bandyopadhyay is the masterpiece that gives us a wide scope to explore the impact of nature and natural habitat on life and intricacies of human relationship.

### 3. OBJECTIVE

Over a period of time the outlook of the Bengali authors has changed as compared to their counterparts who have lived and worked during Tagore's era. As India achieved freedom and on her way to self-sufficiency due to the green, yellow, and white revolution boosted by industrialization, the simple and uneventful urban life underwent vicious shift. The themes of the novels accordingly have evolved into more complex storylines depicting the social and economic crisis, political turbulence, foul play in the workplace for going to the 'top' and modern-day intricacies of human relations. To cast aside the monotony of the city life and quotidian boredom, Bengali middle or elite class people enjoy taking a fancy to go out into forest areas to breathe fresh air. States of undivided Bihar, and Central India can boast off having many sanctuaries and national parks, lying in close proximity with West Bengal. The hilly districts of North Bengal also remain a happy hunting ground for the Bengali travellers. People arriving in forest areas either for amusement or for professional purposes tend to get entangled with adventures and incidents that may provide enough ingredients for a spicy and entertaining plot for stories and novels. The present article tries to explore the rich oeuvre of Bengali literature with the illustrious works by eminent authors from different time scale.

### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1. TAGORE AND NATURE

Even being a mastermind belonging to the literary world, Tagore's consciousness for preservation of mother earth is quite astounding and awe-inspiring. A great visionary and an in-born lover of nature, Tagore has made epoch-making contributions in two areas of environmental concerns: one in the field of ideas and the other in the field of actions. In the field of ideas, he has been vocal against unnecessary and harmful interference with nature. His denouncement of such practices is promptly evident in many of his poems, plays, short stories and essays. In the field of environmental activism, Tagore is instrumental in generating and popularising environmental awareness programmes, in general, and particularly afforestation programme [Ghosh \(2019\)](#). In the year 1928, he started 'Vriksha Ropan Utsav' or planting of trees at Santiniketan, a unique way of generating environmental awareness. Halakarshan (ploughing the land) was introduced in July 1927. Tagore wrote the song "*Maruvijayera ketana urao he shunye*" (raise aloft the banner of the conquest of the desert) during this period, the essence of the song being to increase the green cover across the deserts through tree plantation [Rahman \(2011\)](#). In his essay 'The Religion of the Forests' Tagore wrote - "The ideal of perfection preached by the forest dwellers of ancient India runs through the heart of our classical literature and still dominates our mind. --- Our two greatest classical dramas find their background in scenes of the forest hermitage, which are permeated by the association of these sages" [Roy \(2018\)](#). The poet no doubt points to the big presence of the forest in the grand epics that reflect the Indian cultural heritage. The opening line in the poem "*Sabhyatar Prati*" - "dao phire se aranya lao e nagar" (Give us back that sylvan past, take away the city) is obviously a strong protest against urbanization which has been taking place overlooking environmental issues. The poet delivered a speech entitled 'The crisis of civilization' at Santiniketan in 1941, the year he breathed his last. Tagore has strongly criticized unethical human interference in the plays "*Raktakarabi*" and "*Muktadhara*" which emerge as the great examples to study ecocritical perspective

in Bengali literature [Mishra \(2016\)](#). "*Raktakarabi*" (Red Oleanders) (1925) is inspired by the image of a red oleander plant crushed by pieces of discarded iron that Tagore witnessed while taking a walk in Shillong. Another play, "*Muktadhara*" (The Waterfall), tells the story of man's limitless greed and the backlash from nature. The plot revolves around a monstrous machine created by a king to block the natural flow of a huge river and how a prince comes forward to protect nature by revolting against the king. The fallout from the interaction between human being with the nature is critical for the very existence of this earth. Preservation of nature in view of Tagore is, therefore, utmost necessary not only for the sake of human interest, but the nature with all its diversity provides aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment to the human species [Dasgupta \(2011\)](#). Tagore's love for nature is blended with romanticism, philosophy, and microcosmic elements. In his numerous poems, songs, essays and stories, Tagore has expressed his unconditional love, empathy, joy, and sorrow for Nature. The poet has emphasized the importance of forest and villages in the evolution of human civilization in essays like *Palliprakriti*, *Aranyadebata* (The Goddess of the forest), *Tapoban*, *Halakarshan* (Tilling Land) [Rahman et al. \(2018\)](#). "Simar majhe asim tumi bajao apon sur" – the infinite within the finite beckons. This inclusiveness of the poet's vision unequivocally makes him the unmatched paradigm who has steered his spontaneous creativity for the mammoth literary oeuvre with the meaningful pursuit of societal well-being.

#### 4.2. TAGORE'S PEERS SHOWING LOVE FOR NATURE

Tagore's monumental contribution notwithstanding in the field of Indian literature, his peers who have worked during the early part of the twentieth century have immensely contributed for the nourishment of the subject. The likes of Jibanananda Das, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Manik Bandyopadhyay appeared in the arena of Bengali literature when Tagore was reigning supreme. It was, therefore, not easy for them to leave a perpetual mark, at times posing challenge for Tagore's sovereignty. Each one of these authors have won the hearts of Bengali readers by their distinctive style of writing, not to forget their deep bondage with nature. The time period a writer is working in, per se leaves a profound impact on his or her mind. It would have been impossible even for Jibanananda Das to demonstrate his fascinating fondness for rural Bengal, had he lived in recent times in view of the rapidity with which the villages are being urbanised. The Bengali literature would have been eventually deprived of the ever-green nature poems published posthumously in *Rupashi Bangla* where Jibanananda represents beautiful landscape of rural Bengal with its rich flora and fauna: '*I'll come again to the banks of Dhanshiri -- to this land Perhaps not as a human- may be as a white-breasted shakhachil or a yellow-beaked shalik*' [Zafor \(n.d.\)](#). The young and the old could have missed reciting the ageless romantic beauty of *Banalata Sen*, having the most alluring hair style! The poet has gone down the memory lane to rejuvenate his weird soul, conjuring *Banalata Sen*, the eponymous character whose facial appearance has become the epitome of beauty and elegance for a billion of throbbing hearts. His poems including this immortal creation are in continuous alignment with the natural world. Generous use of the theme of nature as the backdrop of his poems bridging the world of human being with its surroundings remains the hallmark of the poet's creative oeuvre [Hossain et al. \(2022\)](#).

No other poet like Jibanananda has perhaps captured the soul of Bengal villages in such a mesmerizing manner, often tinged with a tune of melancholy. Elements of nature like trees, flowers, birds, and rivers have appeared as a recurring motif in his poems [Mondol \(2019\)](#). Although Jibanananda wrote a number of stories and novels,

he has become a canonical figure popularly known as 'Rupashi Banglar Kabi'. Unfortunately, Jibanananda didn't get due recognition in his life time just as Gregor Mendel, went unheard until he died, and later came to be known as the 'Father of Genetics'. The gamut of Jibanananda's work is so versatile that it still transports the readers and researchers to uncharted territory of light and darkness, love and anguish, romance and estrangement, dream, and reality.

What Jibanananda has created through his poems, Bibhutibhushan has painted the quotidian motion of rural life with a lyrical charm in *Pather Panchali*. Satyajit Ray in 1955 made this into a film, one of the best ever film adaptation in the history of art and culture. It will be very difficult to find a Bengali person who has not seen the movie or has not gone through the novel. Major works of Bibhutibhushan are social commentary or rhetoric in the backdrop of rural Bengal. One novel that depicts nature and forest as monolithic congruity is *Aranyak*. The prologue of the novel makes us acquainted with the unique landscape of North Bihar, along with its aborigines. "Submerged without respite in the hubbub and the frenetic activity of the city, when I think now of the forestlands of Lohitulia-baihar or Ajmabad—the brilliant moonlight, or the still dark nights; banks of flowering kash and sparse stretches of jhau trees and the range of grey hills merging into the horizon; the quick-drumming hooves of herds of wild neelgai passing by in the depths of night, and in the intense mid-day heat, thirst-maddened wild buffaloes at the waters of Saraswati kundi; wild flowers in glorious colour in that wonderful stretch of rocky ground and the dense forest, blood-red with the flowering palash—I feel as though it had been a dream of a world filled with beauty, dreamt in the half-awake slumber of a holiday evening. As though there is no such land to be found in all the world" [Bhattacharya \(2021\)](#). Bibhutibhushan here repents that it is because of him the happy grazing ground of nature was destroyed for developmental purpose, and he is confessing the crime to lessen the burden of committing that offence. Such revelation by the author himself at the beginning of a story to make amends for his 'sin' is quite exceptional. The human elements in this novel are inseparable unit of forest to form a coalesced entity.

Coming to Manik Bandyopadhyay, we find idiosyncratic style of using natural habitat as a plot that has a great bearing on the life of communities. "*Padma Nadir Majhi*" or The Boatman of Padma presents an excellent case study of the complexities of life struggle of the underprivileged class when their habitat is badly affected by a natural catastrophe. The professional trajectory of Kuber, the boatman, changes because of the ravaging storm as he becomes subservient to the mischievous and evil intention of Hossen Miya. The entry of Kapila, Kuber's sister-in-law also brings respite to the otherwise monotonous life of the boatman. This concurrent existence of natural forces with human passion, emotions and strife is the hallmark of Manik's composition. "When there is hunger, the world is devoid of any melody/even the full moon in the sky appears hot baked roti" (self-translated) - the immortal quote of Sukanta Bhattacharjee can aptly describe the essence of the depiction of nature in Manik Bandyopadhyay's writings. There are many other stories written by Manik that narrate a beautiful ecosystem of nature and human struggle (*Haraner Natjamai* - Te bhaga movement).

#### 4.3. POST-TAGORIAN WORKS WITH FOREST SERVEING AS THE BACKDROP

As mentioned earlier, readers can find a significant change in the perspective to which the forest or nature has been used as the plot or central theme in the storylines, after India got independence. No other authors have depicted the charm



of rural Bengal as elegantly as that done by Bibhutibhushan or Jibanananda. Moreover, their treatment of the forest as the plot with human elements is entirely different from that of Buddhadeb or Sunil Gangopadhyay. The characters in *Pather Panchali* or *Aaranyak* by Bibhutibhushan, or in *Padma Nadir Majhi* by Manik Bandyopadhyay are closer to the nature, better to say they are absolutely inseparable from their natural habitat; they are born and destined to live there with the churning ebb and flow of human existence. In the post-Tagorian works, the forest mostly has the supportive role to play providing a perfect backdrop where human characters interact on some issues leading to a gripping storyline. One can feel the touch of Bibhutibhushan while going through the novel *Koyeler Kache*, where Buddhadeb Guha has delineated the beauty of the forest so eloquently. The protagonist (the author himself) describes the experience of staying his first night in the forest – “Far away from the madding crowd of civilization, I am spending the night deep into the forest on a hill-top. The darkness of the room is effaced by the glittering moonlight entering through the window. The night wind is causing a quivering of the twig of bougainvillea creeping by the side of the window into the roof. The shadow is dancing down my room. Sounds of laughter heard from the forest must be from the nocturnal animals. ----- To-day is a full-moon day. The full moon is ascending like a big flat yellow bowl on a summer evening over the canopy of the denuded Sal Forest. Blue, blue, blue sky. The moon sheds its yellow tinge into that thick blue to appear spotless white. All the forest and hill become agog with exhilaration with that light. The wind in its whims also starts dancing through the floor leading to a flutter of dry leaves” (self-translated). The entire novel is embellished with such enchanting description of Palamou forest. Against this backdrop, the author unfolds various shades of character of Jagdish Pandey, Mariana, Lalti, Sumita boudi, Ghoshda (Brojen Ghosh), Jaswant to make it a thriller novel.

There are many other stories and novels in Bengali literature where nature or forest presents an excellent background against which human relation revolves. In *Aranyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights of the Forest) by Sunil Gangopadhyay, four young friends from Calcutta leaving behind the din and bustle of the city life set out for a journey towards the beautiful undulating landscape of Bihar plateau. They encounter a series of experiences with the members of an elite family staying in the locality. One of the four friends also get entangled in a physical relation with a tribal woman. They realize at the end of their journey that the serene forest has taught them to explore their true character and unearth their identity. Satyajit Ray has also made this into a film that has added new dimension to the plot and story line with stunning monochromatic nature photography.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There is no dearth of nature consciousness in the great pantheon of Bengali literature. Love for nature is as spontaneous as the flowing river. The representation of forest or nature as the theme in Bengali novels, however, has changed significantly with the passage of time in keeping with the transforming society, growing urbanisation, and rising complexities of city life. Readers’ demand has also become an important factor to decide upon the themes; the special edition of magazines that are published before the Durga Puja festival have to cater to the requirement of ‘modern times’ for commercial viability. The spectrum of change our society has undergone from *Pather Panchali* to *Koyeler Kache* is easily palpable. Buddhadeb Guha has written a series of adventure stories with Rijuda supported by Rudra and Titir venturing into jungles that leave young and the old readers

captivated. The experience Guha gathered by undertaking extensive journey through Bengal countryside has helped him embodying the plots and characters of his story. Many stories of Feluda adventure series by Satyajit Ray or Byomkesh series by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay have also projected forest as the fascinating backdrop where eerie mysteries unfold.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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