

**Deconstructing Anthropocentrism: Re-reading Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's
Pather Panchali: Song of the Road from the Perspective of "Deep Ecology"****Bapin Mallick**Assistant Professor
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The concept of anthropocentrism is subject to various interpretations and occasionally lacks a clear definition. However, the term denotes a focus on human-centeredness by creating a dichotomy between humans and nonhumans. The term may be employed interchangeably with the notion of humanocentrism, and certain individuals may designate the concept as human supremacy or human exceptionalism. From an anthropocentric standpoint, the human species is perceived as distinct from the natural world and positioned above it, whereas other entities such as animals, plants, and other organisms are regarded as commodities for human exploitation. The origin of anthropocentrism are often attributed by numerous ethicists to the narrative of creation presented in the book of *Genesis* within the Judeo-Christian *Bible*, where it is claimed that humans are created in the image of God (*The Holy Bible* 1). This school of thought is not exclusive to Jewish and Christian theology; rather, it is also evident in Aristotle's *Politics* and Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. In contrast with the notion of anthropocentrism, deep ecology emerges as an important field within the realm of ecocritical studies. The term was introduced by Arne Naess, a philosopher from Norway, with the aim of fostering ecological awareness and developing a sense of collective identity between human beings and the entire biosphere. Research in the field of deep ecology posits that humans are but one species among the diverse array of organisms in nature, rather than occupying a superior position. The concept of human exceptionalism, if not properly addressed, is swiftly propelling us towards the anthropogenic deterioration of the natural environment. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, a highly acclaimed literary figure from Bengal, demonstrates a profound commitment to the preservation of the ecosystem and its role in ensuring the sustainability of all forms of life. His powerful articulations offer valuable insights that show the intrinsic value of all organisms in the biosphere. The present paper tries to revisit Bandyopadhyay's novel *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* from a deep ecological perspective with a view to deconstructing the notion of human supremacy for addressing the ecological crisis of the contemporary society.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Ecosophy, Deconstruction, Deep Ecology.

The ecological crisis is a significant issue in the current context. The occurrence of an ecological crisis may be attributed to alterations in abiotic ecological elements, such as the rise in temperature and other related issues. These transformations occur mostly as a result of human actions and behaviours, including urbanisation, industrialization, population growth, and advancements in science and technology. It gives rise to a multitude of challenges for the human population. The death rate experiences a significant increase as a result of pollution and other anthropogenic activities. Numerous ecologists and environmental philosophers are actively promoting awareness regarding the ecological issues at hand and their associated ramifications. It is pertinent to point out that the anthropocentric worldview, which is prevalent in cultures grounded in the western world, cannot be altered through the cultivation of consciousness alone.

The philosophical concept of deep ecology holds relevance within the context of the 21st century. The deep ecology movement originated in 1972 by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher. Deep ecology is widely recognised as a prominent academic discipline within the field of modern ecological philosophy. The objective of this study is to foreground the significance and necessity of deep ecology within the current context, with the aim of shifting from an anthropocentric perspective to an ecocentric one. The philosophical and social movement of deep ecology asserts that there is a need for a fundamental shift in the way humans perceive and interact with the natural world. This transition involves a departure from a utilitarian viewpoint to adopt the concept that nature holds an inherent value. Deep ecology presents an alternative conceptualization of the self that deviates from conventional understandings, encompassing both a social movement and occasionally incorporating religious and mystical elements.

In collaboration with American environmentalist George Sessions, Naess formulated a set of eight foundational ideas that serve as the basis for deep ecology. Deep ecology differentiates itself from other forms of environmentalism by asserting more comprehensive and fundamental philosophical propositions concerning metaphysics, epistemology, and social justice. There are eight platform principles, which are discussed below:

- The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.

- Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
- Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs.
- The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
- Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
- The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
- Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.

(Devall and Sessions 70)

Deep ecology promotes fundamental changes in the environment and foregrounds how people and nature interact with each other. This interaction between human beings and nature serves to foster improved practices and policies concerning the environment at a global level. Deep ecology is highly pertinent to the current global ecological challenges due to a multitude of factors. It encompasses more than just a collection of ideas; rather, it also focuses on the cognitive, affective, emotional, and spiritual bonds that humans form with all forms of life in the biosphere.

The primary objective of deep ecology is to foster a connection between the Earth and human beings while also cultivating an understanding of anti-anthropocentric ideals. Writers who oppose an anthropocentric worldview are sometimes labelled as misanthropes. However, it is important to note that these writers actually espouse anti-anthropocentric or ecocentric perspectives with a view to creating an alternative discourse for addressing the ecological crisis. The primary objective of these writers is to uphold a state of equilibrium among the various species inhabiting the planet while also fostering a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the nonhumans. Hence, the thinkers who are

associated with environmentalism, try to eliminate pollution from the environment and mitigate the overconsumption of natural resources, while also addressing issues related to overpopulation and promoting awareness regarding the detrimental effects of technology and scientific practices. These factors are identified as the primary catalysts for the degradation of the natural world.

The literary works of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay explore the issue of environment, as the natural environment serves as a central theme in nearly all of his prose narratives. His *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* explores the profound interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans. The author wrote the novel in Bengali in 1929. However, because of its global fame, the text was translated into various languages. The translation into English was undertaken by T.W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji in 1968, and subsequently, it was initially published by Harper Collins India in 1999. The eleventh edition was published in 2013. The novel prominently features several elements of eco-literature, such as the rural scenery, the relationship between humans and nature, the illtreatment of marginalised communities, and the influence of culture on the natural world. The author extols the virtues of the common people, whose perpetual battle for survival remains unrecorded in the illustrious annals of history. In contrast to Hardy's portrayal of nature, which often exhibits a sombre demeanour, the depiction of nature in this context resembles that of Wordsworth. Here, nature assumes a more uplifting role, fostering a positive mindset among the characters who seek comfort in its welcoming embrace. A fundamental tenet of eco-literature involves the examination of the physical environment and its interconnectedness with all living and nonliving elements in the biosphere as it argues:

Ecocriticism is most appropriately applied to a work in which the landscape itself is a dominant character when a significant interaction occurs between author and place, character and place. Landscape by definition includes the non-human elements of place like the rocks, soil, trees, plants, rivers, animals, air as well as human perceptions and modifications. How an author sees and describes these elements relates to geological, botanical, zoological, meteorological, ecological, as well as aesthetic, social, and psychological considerations. And then there is the historical vantage point. As Thoreau once wrote, there can be no history but natural history—if one believes that by natural we mean the human as well as the non-human world. (Howarth 69)

The exploration of the relationship between man and nature emerges as a prominent thematic element in *Pather Panchali*. The title itself implies that the novel possesses a strong ecocritical perspective. The term “Panchali” refers to a type of uncomplicated lyrical composition crafted by poets throughout the Middle Ages in the region of Bengal. The author explores the timeless narrative of rural life in Bengal, a subject that had previously been overlooked by numerous writers of the era. The term “path” functions as a metaphorical representation of a vital energy that compels the characters to venture away from their homes and into the natural world in pursuit of a more fulfilling existence. Throughout the text, the author has made reference to the deity associated with the road, whose influence serves as a guiding force for the protagonists in their respective journeys through life. The narrative presents the protagonist as a perpetual traveller. Therefore, it shows the correlation between human beings and their natural surroundings.

The novel explores the interconnectedness of the natural world, social ecology, and the mental ecology of the protagonist. It portrays a narrative of those living in poverty, whose poignant expressions of humanity through music are frequently disregarded by the wealthy social elite. The depiction of the rural region shows its pristine and untouched natural environment with great artistry. The seasonal variations have been eloquently depicted through the alterations in the ecological landscape of Bengal. The flora and fauna of village life exhibit a mutually beneficial relationship. Examining the novel through the lens of ecocriticism provides a gratifying experience, as it reveals the interconnectedness between the socio-cultural and religious practices of the villagers and their influence on the environment. The novel illustrates the displacement of the Roy family from a community renowned for its natural beauty as a consequence of the duplicity and degradation inherent in the prevailing social structure. In pursuit of a more promising future, they were compelled to relocate to the urban area. However, the pursuit of pleasure consistently evades them, and following several episodes of suffering, Apu ultimately returns to the next village accompanied by his mother. This period serves as an opportunity for them to reestablish their association with the natural world.

The term “ecosophy” plays an important role in the domain of “deep ecology”. Ecosophy encompasses a more complete comprehension of ecological principles compared to the scientific investigation of ecology. This particular concept is widely regarded as an ecological philosophy that has played a crucial role in promoting the reciprocal relationship

between humans and nonhumans. The present analysis of ecological science is inadequate in fully addressing the intricate and complex interaction between human beings and the natural environment. Therefore, it is crucial to cultivate a deeper understanding of ecology. The term “ecosophy” was originally coined by Arne Naess. Naess believed that ecosophy emerges from a profound comprehension of human existence achieved through the application of rational thought. According to his perspective, ecosophy may be understood as a philosophical framework employed to address specific ecological concerns. This field of study is alternatively referred to as eco-philosophy or ecological philosophy. Naess has provided a comprehensive explanation of ecosophy, as articulated in the following passage:

By an ecosophy, I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements, and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the ‘facts’ of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities. (Drengson et al. 8)

Pather Panchali provides a captivating portrayal of the scenic charm found in the lesser-known rural areas of Bengal, hence broadening global awareness and appreciation for their aesthetic allure. The novel foregrounds a family hailing from Bengal who find themselves in a state of poverty. It unfolds within the essence of Bengal, depicting the unspoiled magnificence of its rural landscape. Residing in the socioeconomically disadvantaged region of *Nishchindpur* village, which is linguistically derived from the concept of perpetual tranquillity, Harihar Roy faces significant challenges in ensuring the financial stability of his household, which comprises his spouse *Sorbojoya* and their offspring Apu and Durga. The story demonstrates the influence of seasonal fluctuations on both the physical environment and the individuals.

The atmosphere throughout autumn is characterised by the presence of dew and the intense fragrance emitted by the *chatim* flowers. The presence of white clouds against a backdrop of blue sky, accompanied by blooming *kash* flowers, signifies the commencement of Durga Puja, a renowned festival celebrated in the region of Bengal. With the advent of the spring season, the natural environment undergoes a transformation, characterised by the emergence of fresh foliage on the branches. The entire surroundings appear vibrant, with an

array of exquisite flowers. Spring is a season that encompasses various cultural and religious festivals. Festivals, being an integral component of human culture, exhibit a correlation with the changing seasons. In addition, the rural population engages in many rituals and pledges on a regular basis. *Kuluichandi* and *Senjuti* are among the traditional customs practised by women residing in rural Bengal. The ceremonies incorporate natural aspects such as fruits, flowers, agriculture, and birds. Mothers would often sing lullabies, including vivid descriptions of nature, in order to lull their children into sleep. Fairs occur with regularity in accordance with seasonal patterns, while folk plays and melodies are harmoniously aligned with the surrounding natural environment. Occasionally, there is a reference to the settlement of *Nischindipur*, the *Sonadanda* field, the *Ichhamoti* river, and their diverse characteristics.

The expanse of vegetation commencing from Apu's residence stretches towards the river on one side and the abandoned indigo factory on the opposite side. Apu, a young individual, lacks the ability to quantitatively assess the density of the forest that has captivated his attention since his early years. The verdant forest exerts a profound influence on children such as Apu and Durga, who traverse the woodland trail, encountering the fragrant herb *gulanchalata*, the vibrant *bonchalta* flowers, and the rejuvenating rain-kissed foliage. Apu visits the bank of the *Ichhamoti* river with the intention of fishing; however, the act of catching fish itself does not have significant appeal for him compared to the pleasure derived from simply exploring the area. The presence of various flora, such as *kadam-shimul* and *bonkolmi*, along with the *bamboo* groves and *ulubon* draping over the river, accompanied by the melodious songs of birds, collectively creates a captivating labyrinth that captivates the young Apu. He experiences a sense of enchantment as he immerses himself in an environment characterised by the presence of the melodious songs of birds such as *Papiya* and *Bou-katha-kae*. This feeling is further intensified by the radiant afternoon light that illuminates the forest, evoking a perception close to that of a mythical realm. The prevailing depiction of the expansive terrain extending beyond the visible horizon evokes feelings of delight and awe within his imaginative faculties.

The underlying suggestion conveyed by the title of the novel *Pather Panchali* is that life might be metaphorically understood as a trip. The road can be considered synonymous with life itself. "Panchali" is a devotional hymn typically offered to a divine being. The term symbolically embodies the perpetual flow of life's melody. The presence of nature is consistently observed in *Nischindipur*, a region characterised by tranquillity and enduring

aesthetic appeal. The initial segment of the narrative highlights the historical phenomenon of colonial exploitation, when farmers were compelled to engage in the cultivation of indigo. The British authorities initiated a campaign of severe torture against the unsuspecting inhabitants of *Nischindipur*. The place served as the headquarters of the Bengal Indigo Concern during the period of British colonial rule in India, also referred to as the British Raj. The region has been the host to several enterprises, whose architectural structures served as tangible representations of colonial hegemony. John Lermor, the manager of the *Nischindipur* factory, exerted significant influence over the entire workforce, akin to that of an emperor. Currently, the manager's cottage and office have been reduced to mere piles of debris, covered in dense vegetation.

The Roy family has poetically depicted the winter season as a harbinger of mortality. They were compelled to reside within the humid and densely populated region of Kashi. Harihar's health deteriorated significantly during the winter as the effects of mortality progressively permeated his being. The reddish hue of his eyes bore a resemblance to those of hibiscus flowers, serving as a symbolic indication of his imminent downfall. The unfavourable conditions of the surroundings contributed significantly to the unfortunate circumstances that led to the tragedy of the family. The ecological conditions of *Nishchindipur* village were comparatively more favourable than those of Kashi; yet, economic deprivation compelled the inhabitants to relocate from the village.

The author embodied the qualities of a devout priest who revered nature as a divine entity. Durga is depicted as the embodiment of Goddess Durga, the revered Hindu deity associated with strength and power. She exhibits remarkable energy as they navigate the woodland, procuring nourishment for their kin and engaging in recreational activities. The phenomenon of mobility is observed in nature when it undergoes spatial displacement, while a sombre demeanour is exhibited by nature during periods of distress, and occasionally, an absence of nature can evoke a sense of ferocity. Apu has a striking resemblance to the deity *Bisalaksi*, who is frequently observed traversing the terrain during nocturnal hours. The deity, in a state of displeasure due to the practice of human sacrifice, permanently departed from the temple located within the village. However, there are some who claim to perceive her presence and are compelled by her to offer vegetable sacrifices as a means of appeasing her anger. He made a prediction that an epidemic would occur within the village unless her conditions were met to her satisfaction. Indeed, this assertion was substantiated by the

presence of an actual outbreak. The entire woodland radiated with her elegant beauty and enchanting aura. However, Durga is subjected to mistreatment, leading to her premature demise even before the commencement of the Durga celebration, prompting an outpouring of grief from those around her.

The ability to detect the presence of his elder sister in the natural environment was a unique trait possessed alone by Apu, who held a deep and profound affection for her. She wanders gracefully, resembling a perennial young woman whose beauty remains constant. Individuals experience growth as they go through the course of time. However, it is worth noting that Durga perpetually retains her youthful appearance and does not experience the process of ageing. The enduring quality of her immaculate beauty remains unblemished over time. She consistently maintains a vibrant and radiant appearance. Durga appears to be engaged in a quest to locate certain white *gondhobhedali* leaves among the groves of *Nischindipur*, with the intention of aiding her ailing brother. During her search, she may be observed reciting a song that was passed down to her by her aunt.

One of the primary themes explored in *Pather Panchali* is the interconnectedness between children and nature. The forest, with its vibrant green hues and tranquillizing shadows, had enveloped both Apu and his sister, instilling a sense of serenity and solace within their hearts. He had possessed this knowledge throughout their entire existence. *Durga* and Apu gain considerable knowledge from their interactions with nature. They engage in the exploration of the diverse flora and fauna found within their area, finding particular delight in the refreshing rain. Additionally, they partake in the organisation of a feast amidst the lush surroundings of the forest. Bibhutibhushan, being a genuine representative of the local culture and environment, expressed this essence through his artistic works. Apu may also be characterised as an individual who possesses an innate connection with the natural world. Similar to Wordsworth, the protagonist, Apu, derives great satisfaction from immersing himself in the embrace of the natural world. He experiences a sense of bewilderment in response to the remarkable aesthetic appeal of the rural natural environment. Observing the expansive banyan tree through the window, his emotions are elevated as he envisions a boundless realm lying beyond the distant horizon. During his excursion to observe the blue-throated bird in the company of his father, Apu encountered a hare characterised by its notable auditory appendages. The young Apu observed the object within the pages of the book on alphabetical characters. However, he had never envisioned such a scenario occurring

in real life, nor did he anticipate the opportunity to witness it firsthand. The entity elicited a considerable amount of excitement within the individual, since it was not a mere depiction or a porcelain plaything; rather, it was an actual living hare that suddenly sprung up and swiftly scurried away directly before his eyes. Durga served as his companion and helped him learn how to establish a connection with the natural world. Hence, he displayed a lack of interest in engaging in other activities with the children residing in the vicinity. The author shows, “She knew exactly where and when the first of the tiny violet-pink baichi berries ripened, which were the sweetest jujubes growing in the middle of this or that clump of bamboos, and when the first tiny mango would have blossomed in somebody’s orchard” (Bandyopādhyāya et al. 47).

Durga is said to personify nature, and in her absence, nature appears to be incomplete. She shows deep affection for her village, appreciating every aspect of its natural elements, including the vegetation, bodies of water, and physical environment. Having been acquainted with them throughout her whole existence, it was only inevitable that she developed a deep and profound understanding of their character to the point that they became an integral component of her personal identity. Similar to the character of Lucy in Wordsworth’s works, she functions as a conduit that establishes a deep association between the realms of nature and humans. He has been nurtured by the natural environment and continues to be remembered by others even in the aftermath of their demise. Despite the impoverished circumstances of the Brahmin family, they endured the harsh realities of destitution and the indignity of living among more affluent neighbours. However, the children of the family managed to maintain an unblemished spirit, as their deep affection for the natural world served as a protective barrier against the prevailing societal inequities. Both Apu and Durga were equally affected by the forest, which exuded a sense of vitality and tranquillity with its lush greenery and captivating shadows.

Apu is an individual with a global perspective who possesses a desire to venture into uncharted territories. In spite of his societal obligations, he experiences a deep desire to reconnect with the natural world. He possesses a profound connection with nature, perceiving an array of countries as they pass before his eyes. At the outset, Apu’s experience was limited due to his young age. At the age of six, he accompanied his father to visit *Kuthir Math*. This marked his initial journey beyond his familiar homeland. Thus, the spatial limits of his environment have been defined by the adjacent dwelling of his neighbour on one side, and

the expanse of land extending from his own residence to the dwelling of Ranu Di on the other side. He envisioned that everything beyond the current location could only be attributed to the realm of mythical narratives, reminiscent of the stories spoken by their mother. He held a deep appreciation for enigmatic lands within the most ordinary elements of the natural world. Occasionally, it is situated in close proximity to the *Sankhari* pond; on other occasions, it is positioned behind the *kalmi*, resembling a concealed realm of riches.

Thus, the text explores the deep association between humanity and nature, emphasizing its fundamental role in our collective identity. The comprehensive examination of the natural world implies that Apu perceives nature from a deep philosophical perspective. The melancholic melodies of human existence resemble the flowing river *Ichhamoti* as it traverses the perpetual journey of life, encompassing the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. Apu's life adventure as he traverses the natural world enhances his ecological perspective. Throughout the passage of time, he encounters various challenges and difficulties. However, despite these obstacles, life ultimately emerges triumphant. The tale illustrates the capacity of nature to provide solace to humanity, especially in the face of challenging circumstances. The narrative concludes in a hopeful tone, despite the presence of negative undertones, as the protagonist, Apu, develops an ecosophic mentality. He exhibits a profound affinity for nature and maintains an unwavering connection with their rural surroundings. His imagination is consistently captivated by the unspoiled splendor of the natural world. His intimate connection with the natural environment serves as a source of sustenance, liberating them from the chase of material possessions and guiding them towards a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and virtuous contemplation.

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