

**Nature, Ecology, and Conservation in *Aranyor Chha-Pohor*: An Ecocritical Analysis of Soumyadwip Datta's Travel Narrative**

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### Abstract

The present study examines ecological consciousness in Soumyadwip Datta's nature travel work *Aranyor Chha-Pohor* ('Shadows and Light of the Forest') through the theoretical lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, an earth-centred approach to literary studies, investigates the relationship between literature and the physical environment. As a rapidly expanding interdisciplinary field, it has gained increasing relevance in the context of twenty-first century environmental crises driven by globalisation and industrial expansion. Despite the growing tradition of nature literature in Assamese, the systematic application of ecocritical methodology to Assamese literary texts remains limited. This study addresses that gap by undertaking a close qualitative analysis of Datta's twelve-essay volume, structured around four analytical dimensions: scientific, social, cultural, and aesthetic. The findings demonstrate that the work exhibits a comprehensive range of ecocritical concerns — including the interconnection of human beings and nature, anthropocentrism, environmental sustainability, deep ecology, eco-psychology, social ecology, cultural constructionism, and ecotourism. The study further identifies the author's explicit commitment to environmental advocacy, manifest in his critique of habitat destruction, his documentation of biodiversity loss, and his call for conservation action. The work represents a distinctive contribution to Assamese environmental literature and constitutes a significant site for ecocritical inquiry. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of ecocritical scholarship in Indian regional literature and to underscore the relevance of literary analysis to contemporary environmental discourse.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism; nature literature; Assamese literature; environmental consciousness; Soumyadwip Datta; *Aranyor Chha-Pohor*; deep ecology; ecotourism

### 1. Introduction

Literature and nature share an intimate and enduring relationship. Since ancient times, the representation of the natural world has occupied a significant place in literary expression across cultures. Within Assamese literature, from the Charyapada and Madhav Kandali's *Ramayana* through the compositions of Shankardev and the journals Arunodoi and Jonaki, nature has consistently served as both subject and setting. In the twenty-first century, amid growing ecological crisis, this relationship has acquired fresh urgency. The emergence of ecocriticism as a formal academic discipline has provided new frameworks for examining how literature engages with the environment.

Ecocriticism — the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment — developed as a distinct scholarly field in the Western academy during the 1970s and 1980s, responding to heightened awareness of environmental degradation. As Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines it in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ecocriticism 'takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies,' analogous to the gender-conscious approach of feminist criticism or the class-conscious approach of Marxist criticism. The field encompasses related terms including *Ecopoetics*, *Ecocritical Literary Criticism*, and *Green Cultural Study*. Its academic emergence coincided with the first Earth Day in 1970 and the growing recognition — articulated by Scott Slovic (2010) in *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* — that literary scholarship must place human creative work within a broader-than-human context.

Within Assamese literature, the author who has most significantly enriched the tradition of environmental writing is Soumyadwip Datta. Having travelled extensively across the world in connection with wildlife conservation, Datta has produced a substantial body of nature travel literature, investigative ecological writing, and wildlife documentation. His published works include *Aranyor Chha-Pohor* (2015), *Aparupa Arunachal*, *Namsanger Antahpur*, *Aranyat Ekhoj Dukhoj*, and many others. Navakumar Chamuah (2017), in *Asomot Seuj Sanrakshan Chetana aru Sahitya*, recognises Datta's nature writings as singular and unparalleled in their sustained engagement with forest environments, wildlife, and biodiversity across Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. *Aranyor Chha-Pohor*, the primary text of this study, comprises twelve essays grounded in the author's travel experiences across diverse natural environments. It may be characterised as 'nature travel literature' oriented toward environmental awareness. While Chamuah's study acknowledges the significance of this work, it does not undertake an ecocritical analysis of it. The present study aims to fill this gap by systematically analysing the ecological consciousness expressed in *Aranyor Chha-Pohor* through ecocritical methodology.

### 2. Literature Review

The theoretical foundations of ecocriticism have been elaborated across a rich body of Western scholarship. Glotfelty and Fromm's (1996) landmark anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* established the field's core principles, emphasising the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Greg Garrard (2012), in *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*, provides a comprehensive survey of the field's key concepts — including pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and deep ecology — and notes ecocriticism's distinctive relationship with the natural sciences, setting it apart from other contemporary literary and cultural theories.

Swarnalatha Rangarajan (2018), in *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*, edited by Scott Slovic, provides an accessible synthesis of ecocritical approaches suited to interdisciplinary application. Arn Naess's concept of 'deep ecology,' as discussed by Garrard, proposes an egalitarian attitude toward all members of the ecosphere and advocates for the intrinsic value of every living being — a framework directly applicable to the conservation ethics evident in Datta's work. Ratul Deka (2017), in *Sahitya Samalochana: Tattwa Parichoy aru Proyog*, provides an Assamese-language introduction to environmental literary criticism, identifying four analytical dimensions — scientific, social, cultural, and aesthetic — that inform the analytical framework adopted in this study.

In Assamese scholarship, Navakumar Chamuah's (2017) *Asomot Seuj Sanrakshan Chetana aru Sahitya* represents the most sustained ecocritical study of Assamese literature to date, identifying Datta's forest travel writings as uniquely significant contributions to the tradition. However, Chamuah's treatment of Aranyor Chha-Pohor is limited to a brief mention, without systematic ecocritical analysis. Jyotishman Das (2019), in an unpublished research thesis from Dibrugarh University, applies ecocritical methodology to Assamese novels; his work demonstrates the viability of the approach for regional literary texts but does not address Datta's travel literature. The present study, therefore, represents the first systematic ecocritical analysis of Aranyor Chha-Pohor.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in ecocritical literary theory. The primary text is Soumyadwip Datta's *Aranyor Chha-Pohor* (Banalata, Dibrugarh, first edition October 2015), consisting of twelve essays based on the author's travel experiences in natural environments across India, Colombia, and the United States. The analytical framework is drawn from Ratul Deka's (2017) formulation of ecocritical literary analysis, which identifies four dimensions of inquiry: (1) scientific, (2) social, (3) cultural, and (4) aesthetic. Within each dimension, key ecocritical concepts identified in the Western and Indian scholarship reviewed — including anthropocentrism, environmental sustainability, deep ecology, social ecology, cultural constructionism, eco-psychology, and ecotourism — are applied as analytical lenses to passages and themes in the primary text. Secondary sources include established ecocritical scholarship, Assamese-language critical works, and relevant Assamese literary history.

Textual evidence is drawn directly from the twelve essays comprising *Aranyor Chha-Pohor*, with supporting reference to Datta's other published works where contextually relevant. All Assamese-language quotations from the primary text are translated into English for the purposes of this study.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1 Scientific Dimension: Nature–Human Interconnection**

The scientific dimension of ecocritical analysis examines the relationship between human beings and the natural world as represented in literary texts. It draws on environmental science, ecology, and biology to evaluate how literature articulates these relationships. As Garrard (2012) notes, ecocriticism is distinctive in contemporary literary theory precisely for its close engagement with the natural sciences.

In *Aranyor Chha-Pohor*, the most immediate expression of human–nature interconnection appears in the essay 'Some Memories of the Shenandoah Valley of America,' where the author describes the enchanting effect of a cold, cloud-filled forest on the human senses: 'The extraordinary beauty of Mother Nature is what we felt' (Datta, 2015, p. 20). The episode in the same essay in which a bobcat emerges from the forest and regards the travellers with curiosity before retreating illustrates what ecocriticism characterises as 'Nature' in the broad sense — encompassing all non-human beings and their interactions with humans (Deka, 2017; Das, 2019).

The essay 'From Juku Valley to Khanma Village' raises questions about the connection between the Naga people and marine life, noting that the Nagas' traditional ornaments are largely made from sea creatures despite their landlocked location. This observation opens an inquiry into indirect, historically mediated relationships between human communities and distant natural environments — a dimension of human–nature interconnection that ecocritical scholarship identifies as important for understanding cultural ecology (Garrard, 2012).

#### **4.2 Scientific Dimension: Anthropocentrism**

Anthropocentrism — the belief that human beings are the supreme beings on earth — is a central critical target of ecocritical theory. Garrard (2012) and Rangarajan (2018) both identify the critique of anthropocentrism as foundational to the ecocritical project: ecocriticism advocates an egalitarian perspective that recognises the intrinsic value of all species.

*Aranyor Chha-Pohor* articulates a sustained critique of anthropocentric attitudes. In the essay 'In the Land of the Wakamaja,' Datta describes boys at the Guwahati Zoo tormenting caged Lion-tailed Macaques — one throwing a lit cigarette at a monkey's foot — and interprets this as an expression of human supremacist self-assertion: the self-centredness that positions humans as judges over other species. The essay concludes with the symbolic protest of the Wakamaja birds against a helicopter's noise: 'They seemed to say — this land is the land of the Wakamaja; humans have no right here' (Datta, 2015, p. 22), a direct challenge to the assumption of human dominion over non-human space.

The Shenandoah Valley essay also exemplifies the ethical alternative to anthropocentrism: when the travellers' car encounters five deer crossing the road, they stop entirely to allow any additional deer sheltering in the bushes to cross safely. This gesture, small in itself, embodies what ecocriticism calls 'egalitarian perspective' (Rangarajan, 2018, p. 172).

#### **4.3 Scientific Dimension: Environmental Sustainability and Deep Ecology**

Environmental sustainability, as an ecocritical concept, concerns the long-term viability of natural resources and the responsibility of present generations to conserve biodiversity for future ones (Deka, 2017). Deep ecology, as developed by Arne Naess and discussed by Garrard (2012, p. 24), extends this concern to an egalitarian attitude toward all members of the ecosphere, including rivers, landscapes, and species in their own right. *Aranyor Chha-Pohor* contains several exemplary instances of both concepts. The Smithsonian's National Zoological Park, described in the Shenandoah Valley essay as housing nearly five thousand animals and five hundred species, is presented as a model of conservation through institutional preservation. More significant is the artificially managed research breeding centre in the same valley, which captures endangered species from the wild, breeds them in controlled conditions, and releases them back into natural habitats — an institutional embodiment of environmental sustainability.

The essay 'From Juku Valley to Khanma Village' documents the community-based conservation of the Blyth's Tragopan, the endangered state bird of Nagaland, by the people of Khanma Village, who established a sanctuary and prohibited hunting. The same essay records the author's observation that in Nagaland, unlike in Assam, every hill retains its forest cover because 'people cut trees, but the process of planting trees equally has also continued' (Datta, 2015, p. 2). This comparison implicitly critiques the deforestation of Assam's hills.

The principle of deep ecology's opposition to deforestation finds its most direct expression in the essay 'In the Submerged Forest of the Western Ghats,' where the author observes the replacement of primary forest with Acacia and Eucalyptus plantations and states: 'How easy it is to destroy the original forest, but once the original forest is destroyed, how very difficult it is to restore it — only those who have tried to establish an original forest can realise that' (Datta, 2015, p. 57).

#### **4.4 Scientific Dimension: Eco-Psychology**

Eco-psychology examines the relationship between the human mind and the natural world. Scott Slovic, drawing on Sharon Cameron, argues that nature writing reveals how the mind perceives nature, and how the mind perceives itself through that act of perception (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 172). Ecocritical analysis thus attends to the psychological dimension of human responses to nature.

*Aranyor Chha-Pohor* is richly furnished with such psychological dimensions. In the title essay, the author describes his experience of forest life in these terms: 'It was a different life, a different person, a different environment. The freedom of this life brought to my mind an exceptional happiness that I had never before experienced' (Datta, 2015, p. 177). This passage reflects the therapeutic and transformative potential of immersion in nature. In 'Lost in the Buxa Forest,' the author notes that his love of nature and the experience of its beauty insulated him against physical hardship.

Datta also explores how human communities construct symbolic relationships with non-human species. In 'In the Land of the Wakamaja,' the author describes a cloth effigy of the Rainbow Macaw — 'a symbol of peace' in Colombia — hung in a community hall, and reflects: 'The symbol of peace and the combination of many colours, through the bird, seems to indicate the state of Colombians' minds' (Datta, 2015, p. 44). This passage demonstrates the deep entanglement of ecological and psychological meaning in cultural life.

#### **4.5 Social Dimension: Social Ecology and Eco-Marxism**

Social ecology examines the interconnections between social problems and ecological ones, attending to questions of resource distribution, environmental justice, and the rights of communities to access natural goods. It shares ground with eco-Marxism in its critical attention to class relations and the exploitation of nature by capital. Garrard (2012, p. 31) notes that 'Social Ecology and Eco-Marxism share the crucial insight that the notion of ecological limits is a kind of mystification' deployed to protect the interests of the powerful.

Several essays in Aranyor Chha-Pohor engage directly with social ecological themes. The title essay recounts the folklore of Shalkucha village, where a story of ghosts named Balaram and Jaduram keeps villagers away from a biodiversity-rich forest after nightfall. The author suggests this may be a deliberate conspiracy — false propaganda designed to clear the way for appropriation of the forest's natural resources under cover of social fear: 'Perhaps such a plan or false propaganda was carried out to instil fear in the local people' (Datta, 2015).

The essay 'In the Submerged Forest of the Western Ghats' documents the displacement of the Diboru tribal community whose valley villages were inundated when the Sharavati River was dammed. Government rehabilitation promises were not fulfilled. This episode exemplifies the intersection of socioeconomic inequality and environmental dispossession that eco-Marxism and social ecology seek to theorise. Similarly, 'With Experience of the Sundarbans' documents poor, ordinary people — like the character Phuleshwari — driven by economic necessity into the Sundarbans, where they must accept the daily risk of tiger attacks in order to earn a living, while wealthy operators like Rabidas profit from their labour and from illegal wildlife trade. The author reflects: 'It is amazing to think how, driven by the demands of the stomach, people do not hesitate to face even great danger' (Datta, 2015, p. 104).

At an international conference described in 'In the Land of the Wakamaja,' the author himself articulates the social ecological argument: 'The root cause of most of the world's conflicts is centred on natural resources; through the equitable distribution, conservation, and enhancement of natural resources, many of the world's conflicts and problems can be solved' (Datta, 2015, p. 28).

#### **4.6 Cultural Dimension: Cultural Constructionism**

Ecocriticism examines the relationship between culture and nature, attending to how cultural values shape and are shaped by natural environments. Cultural constructionism, as an ecocritical concept, investigates how social and cultural systems mediate the human relationship with nature (Rangarajan, 2018, p. 176). Cultural practices — food, clothing, habitation, ornament — are sites where nature is both represented and materially engaged.

In Aranyor Chha-Pohor, cultural–ecological interconnections are richly documented. In 'From Juku Valley to Khanma Village,' the Naga people's traditional ornaments — made from marine creatures, fish bones, teeth, thorns, and wild insects — are presented as cultural artefacts that embody a deep material relationship with the natural world, even one as geographically distant as the sea. In 'In the Deep Forest of Corbett,' the author observes that the town of Ramnagar is saturated with tiger imagery — on shops, vehicles, and hats — because the tiger's presence in the surrounding forest has shaped the town's entire cultural identity. The Diboru tribe, described in 'In the Submerged Forest of the Western Ghats,' prepare paint from the seeds of the Hallomara tree and use it to decorate their house walls with images, demonstrating the direct incorporation of local flora into cultural expression.

The essay 'From Juku Valley to Khanma Village' also illustrates how cultural practices can serve conservation ends: the people of Khanma Village, on their own initiative, established a forest and prohibited hunting, transforming a cultural practice (the hunting tradition) into its opposite. This initiative is identified by the present study as a significant example of culturally embedded conservation praxis.

#### **4.7 Aesthetic Dimension: Ecocritical Aesthetics**

The aesthetic dimension of ecocriticism examines how nature is represented in literary language — through imagery, metaphor, personification, and sensory description — and how such representations cultivate or hinder ecological consciousness in readers (Deka, 2017, p. 63). The aesthetic quality of nature writing is understood not merely as ornamental but as pedagogically significant: beautiful and affectively resonant descriptions of nature can cultivate environmental care.

Datta's prose in Aranyor Chha-Pohor is distinguished by its rich aesthetic engagement with natural environments. In one essay, he writes: 'The enchanting natural beauty, the gathering of flowers, the floating cotton-like clouds surrounding the mountains, the brisk wind, and the cold embrace touched my body and mind again and again' (Datta, 2015, p. 33). The distant villages are rendered through simile: 'The distant villages looked like beautiful pictures painted by an artist' (Datta, 2015, p. 18). The Sundarbans at night is evoked in terms of menacing aesthetic power: 'In the jungle there was no sound of a cricket, nor was there any mysterious sound of a nocturnal bird; only an unceasing sound of the waves of the river embracing the banks floated in the air, which made the environment of the Sundarbans even more fierce' (Datta, 2015, p. 103).

Most striking aesthetically is the passage evoking the experience of entering the forest at night: 'What a feeling, what a realisation, entering through that darkness into the heart of Mother Nature — as if in the wild call of thousands upon thousands of years, we have become one with the forest' (Datta, 2015, p. 142). This nostalgic, deeply immersive description exemplifies what ecocriticism identifies as the literary cultivation of ecological belonging.

#### **4.8 Ecotourism and the Author's Environmental Commitment**

A further dimension of ecocritical interest in Aranyor Chha-Pohor is its engagement with ecotourism — nature travel that is conducted with awareness of and respect for non-human environments. The essays collectively present a sustained reflection on the ethics and practice of encountering nature as a traveller. In 'In the Deep Forest of Corbett,' the author describes a foreign tourist who attempts to photograph a tiger from an elephant's back, shouting to attract it, and is nearly killed. The Corbett authorities had conditioned a tiger to associate the sound of a bell with food by tying a bell around a buffalo calf's neck, causing the tiger to lose its fear of humans. The author criticises both the authorities and the tourist, arguing that such exploitative practices — using wildlife as tourist spectacle — inevitably produce tragedy.

The commitment to environmental advocacy is perhaps the most consistent thread running through Aranyor Chha-Pohor. The author explicitly addresses readers: 'No matter how powerful human beings may consider themselves, in the face of nature's violent reactions, human beings are very helpless' (Datta, 2015, p. 123). In 'Lost in the Buxa Forest,' reflecting on the contrast between city life and forest immersion, he writes: 'In the routine life of the city, our anger, resentment, conflict, and jealousy towards one another are completely meaningless. Within the greater feeling, one's smallest feeling here is experienced as a matter for self-realisation' (Datta, 2015, p. 115).

The work concludes with a series of specific conservation recommendations — opposing the destruction of primary forests, supporting community-driven conservation initiatives, cooperating with forest departments, obstructing illegal wildlife trade, and building international awareness of Assam's rainforests. These recommendations demonstrate that Aranyor Chha-Pohor is not merely descriptive but prescriptive: it constitutes an act of environmental advocacy embedded within literary form.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Soumyadwip Datta's *Aranyor Chha-Pohor* is a work of substantial ecocritical significance. Analysed through four dimensions — scientific, social, cultural, and aesthetic — the work exhibits a comprehensive range of ecological consciousness: it critiques anthropocentrism, documents biodiversity loss, advocates for environmental sustainability, engages with deep ecological principles, explores the social dimensions of environmental injustice, traces the cultural construction of human–nature relationships, and deploys an aesthetics of nature that is both affectively powerful and pedagogically oriented.

The systematic application of ecocritical theory to this Assamese text reveals both the richness of Datta's ecological vision and the productive applicability of ecocritical methodology to regional Indian literatures. The study also underscores the importance of nature travel literature — a genre often undervalued in Assamese literary criticism — as a site of significant environmental discourse.

The findings carry broader implications for ecocritical scholarship in South Asia. As ecological crises intensify under the pressures of globalisation and industrial expansion, the study of literary texts that engage seriously with the natural world becomes increasingly important. Regional literary traditions, such as Assamese nature literature, represent crucial archives of environmental knowledge, ethical reflection, and aesthetic response that have much to contribute to global ecological discourse. Future research may profitably extend ecocritical analysis to other works by Datta and to the broader tradition of Assamese environmental writing.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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