



## ENCOUNTERING THE FOREST: RECALIBRATING SATYAJIT RAY'S ARANYĒRA DINARĀTRI (1970) FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DEEP ECOLOGY

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper re-examines Aranyēra Dinarātri (1970), directed by Satyajit Ray and based on Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel, through the theoretical framework of Deep Ecology. It argues that the film presents the forest not as a passive backdrop but as an autonomous entity that challenges anthropocentric assumptions regarding the superiority of humans. The journey of four urban men into the forests of Palamau becomes a site of ecological confrontation by exposing the limitations of shallow ecological consciousness. Drawing on theorists such as Arne Næss, the paper explores biocentrism, indigenous ecological wisdom, and cinematic techniques to show how the film dismantles human arrogance and repositions humanity within a larger ecological network.*

**Keywords:** Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Biocentrism, Indigenous Knowledge, Cinematic Ecology

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Aranyēra Dinarātri* portrays the journey of four urban, educated young men; Ashim, Sanjoy, Hari, and Sekhar, who travel from Kolkata to the forests of *Palamau* seeking relief from the monotony and pressures of urban life. Their journey, however, unfolds into a deeper philosophical conflict between anthropocentric modernity and ecological autonomy. The protagonists embody a bourgeois urban mindset shaped by capitalist and colonial modernity. Their engagement with nature is essentially utilitarian. Hence, the forest is perceived as a retreat to heal psychological exhaustion. This reflects what environmental philosophy terms shallow



ecology, where nature is valued only for its usefulness to human beings. In contrast to this notion of shallow ecology, Deep Ecology advocates biocentric equality. Hence, it argues that all forms of life possess intrinsic value independent of human utility (Næss 95). This paper argues that the film enacts a confrontation between these two paradigms. The forest emerges as an autonomous force that resists human intrusion and compels the protagonists to confront their ecological ignorance.

### **Deep Ecology and the Critique of Shallow Environmentalism**

The concepts of Deep Ecology and Shallow Ecology continue to shape contemporary debates in environmental ethics, ecocriticism, and sustainability studies. Shallow Ecology refers to a reformist and human-centered approach to environmental issues. It focuses primarily on solving ecological problems, such as pollution, resource depletion, and climate change, because they directly affect human well-being. In this view, nature is valued instrumentally; that is, its value is determined by its usefulness to humans. Conservation efforts under shallow ecology aim to manage natural resources efficiently so that humans can continue to thrive. For example, forests are preserved not necessarily for their own sake, but because they provide oxygen, regulate climate, and supply raw materials. Similarly, endangered species are protected often because of their ecological utility or potential benefit to humans. Thus, shallow ecology does not challenge the dominant anthropocentric worldview that is primarily responsible for the ecological crisis of the contemporary era.

In contrast, Deep Ecology represents a radical philosophical shift. It rejects anthropocentrism and advocates biocentrism, which recognize the “intrinsic value” of all living beings, irrespective of their utility to humans. According to Arne Næss, every form of life, human or non-human, has an equal right to exist and flourish. Deep ecology emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and calls for a fundamental change in human consciousness. It urges individuals to move beyond a narrow sense of “self” and develop what Næss terms an “ecological self,” a broader identity that includes all forms of life. Deep ecology is not merely a theoretical position but also an ethical and political stance. It advocates for reduced human interference in natural processes, a simpler lifestyle, and a restructuring of economic and social systems that exploit nature. Unlike shallow ecology, which often relies on technological solutions, deep ecology stresses the need for spiritual and philosophical transformation. It calls for respect, and a recognition of human limitations within the vast



ecological network. In *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (1989), he writes, “Plants and animals also have a right to unfolding and self-realization. They have the right to live” (165).

The difference between the two approaches can be summarized through their core orientations. Shallow ecology is concerned with environmental management, while deep ecology is concerned with ecological harmony. The former seeks to control and optimize nature for human benefit; the latter seeks to coexist with nature as an equal participant in the web of life. However, deep ecology has also faced criticism. Some scholars argue that its emphasis on biocentric equality may overlook urgent human needs, particularly in developing countries where economic survival is a priority. Others suggest that it romanticizes nature and indigenous lifestyles without addressing complex socio-political realities.

Despite these critiques, the distinction between “deep” and “shallow ecology” remains crucial. It highlights the limitations of purely utilitarian approaches to environmental issues and encourages a more holistic understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. In an age of ecological crisis, this shift from domination to coexistence is not only philosophical but necessary for the survival of the planet. “Deep Ecology” fundamentally challenges anthropocentrism by asserting that human beings are not superior to other life forms. Instead, it emphasizes interconnectedness and ecological balance. As Arne Næss argues, “the well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves” (Næss 96). In *Aranyēra Dinarātri*, the four protagonists initially operate within a shallow ecological framework. Their decision to visit the forest is driven by escapism rather than ecological awareness. They seek pleasure, relaxation, and temporary freedom from urban constraints by treating the forest as a consumable resource. However, the forest resists this instrumentalization. It refuses to conform to their expectations of comfort and control. The lack of electricity, the dust, and the unfamiliar rhythms of life destabilize their sense of superiority. This resistance aligns with the notion of “intrinsic value” as theorised by Arne Naess.

### **Nature as an Autonomous Entity**

Deep Ecology challenges the anthropocentric belief that nature exists solely for human use and instead asserts that the natural world possesses intrinsic value and it is independent of human interests. Within this framework, nature is not a passive object but a self-regulating, dynamic system that operates according to its own laws. This perspective is powerfully represented in *Aranyēra Dinarātri*, where the forest emerges as an active, resistant presence rather than a mere backdrop. In the domain of “Deep Ecology”, the autonomy of nature is



closely associated with the concept of biocentrism, which recognizes the equal right of all living beings to exist and flourish. As Arne Næss argues, human beings are only one part of a vast ecological network and do not possess inherent superiority. Nature, therefore, cannot be reduced to a resource or commodity. It exists for the sake of itself not for fulfilling the requirements of humans. This philosophical stance rejects the notion of human superiority over nature and instead emphasizes coexistence and respect.

This theoretical understanding finds a vivid representation in *Aranyēra Dinarātri*. The four urban protagonists; Ashim, Sanjoy, Hari, and Sekhar enter the forest with a deeply anthropocentric mindset. They perceive the forest as a site of leisure, a temporary escape from the pressures of city life. Their actions, bribing the chowkidar to secure the guest house, treating the environment as a playground, and attempting to impose urban norms, reflect a belief in human dominance over nature. However, the forest resists this imposition in subtle yet significant ways. It does not accommodate their expectations of comfort or control. The absence of electricity, the pervasive dust, the unfamiliar rhythms of rural life, and the unpredictability of their experiences highlight the limits of human authority. The forest operates independently by remaining indifferent to their desires. Hence, Satyajit Ray represents nonhuman agents as an autonomous figure by demystifying the notion of anthropocentrism.

The guest house in the forest itself becomes a symbolic space where this tension is enacted. It represents a fragile attempt to carve out a zone of “civilization” within the wilderness. Yet, this attempt ultimately fails, as the protagonists are unable to maintain their sense of order and superiority. The surrounding forest continuously intrudes upon and destabilizes their constructed environment. Moreover, the forest functions as a moral and psychological force that exposes the inner contradictions of the characters. Their urban identities gradually collapse as they confront discomfort, fear, and uncertainty. Sekhar’s loss of money, Hari’s physical punishment, Sanjoy’s moral hesitation, and Ashim’s emotional realization suggest that the forest is not merely a setting but an agent that shapes human experience.

This portrayal resonates with literary representations of nature as in the works of Ted Hughes, where nature often assumes a powerful, even punitive role. In both cases, nature is depicted as capable of responding to human actions by challenging the illusion of human supremacy. Importantly, the autonomy of nature in the film is also reflected through its indifference. The forest does not “seek” revenge in a human sense; rather, it simply continues



to exist according to its own rhythms. This indifference is perhaps its greatest assertion of power, as it reveals the insignificance of human concerns within a larger ecological framework. Hence, the film presents nature as an autonomous entity that resists human domination. They invite a rethinking of the human-nature relationship by dismantling anthropocentric assumptions of the central position of human. The forest, in this context, is not an object to be used but a living presence to be respected, an entity that exists beyond human control, yet profoundly shapes human existence. The film repeatedly foregrounds the autonomy of nature by challenging the desire of the protagonists for control. Ashim's attempt to secure the forest guest house through bribery symbolizes the imposition of urban systems of power onto a space that operates beyond such structures. The guest house itself becomes a symbolic enclave of civilization within the wilderness. Yet, it fails to provide the comfort and control the protagonists expect. The forest remains indifferent to their presence by asserting its independence. This idea resonates with literary representations of the agency of nature, as reflected in Ted Hughes's poem "My Own True Family", where nature assumes an interrogative role. The threat "the black oak bark will wrinkle over you", symbolizes nature's capacity to retaliate against human exploitation (Hughes). Similarly, in Ray's film, the forest acts as a silent but powerful agent. It exposes the vulnerabilities of the protagonists and dismantles their illusions of dominance. The illness of the chowkidar's wife may be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of ecological imbalance. Hence, it reinforces the consequences of human intrusion.

### **Subversion of the Anthropocentric Worldview**

"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" (Mallick 16). M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham argue that anthropocentrism privileges human interests over ecological balance (Abrams and Harpham 99). The film systematically subverts this worldview. From the beginning, irony pervades the narrative. As the protagonists travel to *Palamau*, Sanjoy reads from a colonial travelogue that exoticizes the landscape and its indigenous inhabitants. This reflects a continuation of the colonial gaze that objectifies both nature and people. However, the forest disrupts this gaze. The attempts of the protagonists to impose their cultural frameworks onto the environment are repeatedly thwarted. Their desire for comfort and control is met with resistance. The "memory game" scene serves as a powerful critique of



anthropocentrism. As the characters list names of historical figures, symbols of human achievement, they are surrounded by an ancient ecosystem that renders these achievements insignificant. The forest becomes a living archive that dwarfs human history. As darkness descends, the characters' facades collapse. Their insecurities, desires, and moral weaknesses emerge. The forest acts as a catalyst, stripping away their masks and revealing their true selves.

### **Indigenous Ecological Consciousness**

One of the most significant ecological dimensions of *Aranyēra Dinarātri* lies in its subtle yet powerful portrayal of indigenous ecological consciousness, particularly through the Santhal community. The film contrasts two distinct modes of relating to nature; the exploitative, anthropocentric mindset of urban modernity and the harmonious, integrated worldview of indigenous life. Indigenous ecological consciousness refers to a way of life in which human beings perceive themselves as an integral part of nature rather than as its masters. This perspective resonates strongly with the principles of “Deep Ecology”, particularly the idea of biocentrism, which recognizes the “intrinsic value” of all living beings. Unlike modern industrial societies, where nature is often reduced to a resource, indigenous communities tend to maintain a reciprocal relationship with their environment, guided by tradition, and ecological sensitivity.

In the film, the Santhal community embodies this ecological ethos. Their life is not separate from the forest but deeply embedded within it. The forest is not a “destination” or a temporary retreat for them, as it is for the four urban protagonists; Ashim, Sanjoy, Hari, and Sekhar, but their home, sustenance, and cultural space. Their daily practices, rituals, and rhythms are aligned with the natural environment by reflecting a sustainable mode of existence. This stands in stark contrast to the behaviour of the urban characters. The four men enter the forest with a sense of detachment. They treat the landscape as a site for pleasure by attempting to impose urban values onto a space that operates differently. Their inability to understand or respect the ecological balance of the forest highlights their alienation from nature.

The character of Duli serves as a central figure in representing indigenous ecological consciousness. She is not merely an individual character but an extension of the forest itself. Her presence reflects a form of knowledge that is experiential rather than intellectual, embodied rather than abstract. In contrast to Aparna, who represents urban sophistication and rationality, Duli represents a deeper, instinctive connection to the natural world. However, the interaction between Hari and Duli reveals the violence inherent in the anthropocentric and patriarchal



mindset of the urban male. Hari's attempt to commodify his relationship with Duli by reducing it to a transactional and physical encounter, mirrors the broader exploitation of nature by modern society. He fails to recognize her subjectivity and her ecological rootedness, treating her instead as an object of desire.

The film suggests that such acts of intrusion do not go unchallenged. Hari's subsequent punishment by members of the tribal community can be interpreted as a form of ecological and social retribution. It symbolizes the resistance of indigenous life against exploitation and underscores the ethical boundaries that govern their world. Moreover, the Santhal dance and music sequences offer a glimpse into a collective mode of existence that is synchronized with nature. Unlike the isolated, fragmented lives of the urban characters, the tribal community participates in a shared cultural rhythm that reflects ecological harmony. Importantly, the film does not romanticize indigenous life uncritically. Instead, it uses the contrast to critique the failures of modernity. The so-called "civilized" characters are shown to be morally and emotionally fragmented, while the "primitive" community embodies a form of balance and coherence.

Hence, the film presents indigenous ecological consciousness as an alternative to the dominant anthropocentric worldview. Through the Santhal community, the film articulates a vision of coexistence, respect, and sustainability. It suggests that true ecological awareness lies not in intellectual abstraction but in relationships with the natural world. By foregrounding this contrast, the film invites viewers to reconsider the values of modern civilization and to recognize the wisdom embedded in indigenous ways of life. The contrast between the urban protagonists and the tribal community highlights the limitations of modern ecological understanding. The Santhals embody a form of ecological consciousness aligned with the concept of "Deep Ecology". It promotes the notion of living in harmony with the forest rather than seeking to dominate it. Despite being known as "primitive" or "uncivilized," the Santhals demonstrate a sustainable mode of existence rooted in respect for nature. Their knowledge is experiential and holistic and it contrasts sharply with the superficial understanding of the protagonists. The character of Duli represents this indigenous ecological wisdom. Her relationship with the forest is integrated. In contrast, Hari's attempt to commodify his interaction with Duli reflects the exploitation of both nature and marginalized communities. Hence, it underscores the ethical implications of anthropocentrism by revealing how it perpetuates systems of domination and inequality.



### **Cinematic Ecology: Visualizing Deep Ecology**

Satyajit Ray's cinematic techniques play a crucial role in articulating the film's ecological vision. Through visual composition, sound design, and lighting, Ray decentralizes the human subject and foregrounds the presence of the forest. Wide-angle shots of the *sal* forest emphasize the vastness of the natural environment by rendering human figures small and insignificant. This visual strategy reinforces the principle of biocentric equality. The minimal use of background music allows natural sounds to dominate the auditory landscape. The rustling of leaves, tribal drums, and the silence of the night create an immersive ecological experience. Ray's reliance on natural lighting further enhances the realistic touch of the film. The shifting light conditions mirror the psychological transformation of the characters, while the use of shadows symbolizes the dissolution of identity.

### **CONCLUSION**

The film emerges as a powerful ecological vision that challenges anthropocentric assumptions and advocates a deeper engagement with the natural world. Through its nuanced portrayal of human-nature interactions, the film aligns with the principles of Deep Ecology. The forest, as an autonomous entity, resists human domination and exposes the limitations of shallow ecological thinking. The contrast between urban arrogance and indigenous wisdom underscores the need for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with nature. In an era of environmental crisis, the film remains profoundly relevant. It invites us to reconsider our place within the ecological web, not as masters, but as participants in a shared existence.

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