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(RE) READING BIBHUTIBHUSAN'S ARANYAK IN THE AGE OF ETHICAL DEFACEMENT, CLIMATIC CATASTROPHE AND HUMAN (SELF) DESTRUCTION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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Introduction:

“What do human beings really want: progress or happiness? Was it of any use making progress if no happiness came with it? (Bandyopadhyay 244)” Satyacharan *aka* Satya, the lead character of the novel *Aranyak*, asks this question to himself towards the closing pages. It explicates the inner conflict between a person's life experiences and his world vision. The novel takes the reader through the historical progression towards the loss of nature at the 'developing' hands of 'civilized' men driven by human greed and avidity, leading Satya to the learning of the natural philosophy of the life-nature duo: “Excessive indulgence had blunted the edges of their desires ... Life had become monotonous ... No stones shored their inner being; no sap flowed within” (244). It intervenes through varied patches from the past and tries to resurrect some of these in a conscientiously redressing mode onto the linear canvass of the man-nature faceoff in the present. These patches, now comatose into fanatically designed unvanquishable civilizational march with intimidating pace, embodying forlorn tribal society, an assaulted landscape, poverty stricken populace and an assorted debasement. Satya looks despairingly puzzled as he monologues:

I do not understand ... why some improve themselves as time goes by, and there are others who stay fixed in the same place for centuries ... The Aryan race who came as barbarians composed the Vedas ..., developed the sciences of astrology ... conquered the country, established an empire ... and invented the aeroplane ... all within a span of five thousand years, while the native of Papua New Guinea and the ancient aborigines of Australia, and the Mundas, Kols, Nagas, and Kukis of India have not moved on in these five thousand years. (Bandyopadhyay 82)

This article aspires to augment the appositeness of the novel *Aranyak* in our age of current discussion over sustainability, climate change and the related humanitarian crisis. Here, the guiding principle has been a frameless fluidity of non-disintegrated multiple interventions of argumentative cognition with a non-hierarchical paradigm. Here is an attempt to integrate this critical reading from myriad corners and concerns in a postcolonial environment amidst the present climatic crisis. The interdisciplinary accounts from history, environmental studies and literature provide the broader framework in which this re-reading and re-positioning of *Aranyak* has been attempted.

The Novel and its Setting:

Set in the colonial ambience, the canvass of the novel is spread in the spatial region of Bihar- Jharkhand (colonial India) with its abounded natural beauty of hills, flowers, trees, grasses, plants, plains, and rivers along with poverty, village life, colonial agricultural administrative setting and the cultural, economic and social practices of the largely illiterate masses remotely tied with the cosmopolitan Calcutta. Far from a crowded and clambering life of demented colonial Calcutta, Satya, the main protagonist, lands up in the mysterious and natural world of hills and forests to perform the job of a manager of a vast estate. Raising revenue by clearing forests and carving out more agricultural land for human settlements in a bloodcurdling colonial administrative system were, broadly the functions, he needed to perform. From an unemployed status in Calcutta to earning the popular title of “Manager Babu” was surely a personal advancement in his life. Finally, when he returns to Calcutta after spending about six years there, guilt of destruction to the nature in the name of human settlement, agricultural expansion and above all revenue generation, was to plague him: “The almost forgotten forestlands ... that had been destroyed by me...come back to haunt me with sadness like memories of dreams” (Bandyopadhyay 246). His own transformation as a reluctant agent of destructive change, forced by the vulnerability of his own existential condition, in no way undermines the role of the *Zamindars* (landlords) as government delegate who mainly dealt with revenue collection, executing through inhuman colonial mechanisms.

Bandyopadhyay's diary entry of February 12, 1928, as cited in Sen 1995, allows readers to gander into his objective in writing this novel. He states:

I will write something about the life in the jungle—rigorous and dynamic, radiant with courage—images of an outcast life. About riding in this lonely forest losing one's way in the dark paths, living a solitary life in a little shelter . . . the poverty of the people here, their simplicity, this Virile [sic], active life, these dense forests of jhau dark in the evening—all of it. (Introduction *Aranyak*)

It sails smoothly through the genre for which he vouches, viz., the vicissitudes of common human life in a rural backdrop woven into nature's web with its remote connection with the urban settlement. Some of his writings, like *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road), screened to global audiences by Satyajit Roy, and *Ichhamoti* (Restless Waters of Ichhamoti) are serious testimony to his type of portrayal of human decadence, taking along the force of nature. However, *Aranyak* as a novel, may transcend even beyond the avowed objective of the author if reasonably relocated in the present day reading of the degrading environmental conditions brought about through (in)human intervention.

His initial encounter with this land of natural beauty was quite frustrating as it lacked even a remote shadow of the cosmopolitan Calcutta, which he vividly expresses as “the loneliness of the forestland sat upon my breast like a stone” (Bandyopadhyay 14). However, a perchance in his life came an enchanting encounter with the visuals of a stunning moonlit night, which changed his perception of the place. What Satya recaptured was about his liberation and the ultimate realization of heavenly secrets through his unforgettable experiences of being “overwhelmed by the indestructible light of a full moon night” and feeling within himself “a sense of liberation, of being supremely detached, untrammelled”, thinking of entering into an “unknown fairy kingdom ... bereft of human beings” thinking “he who has not seen it will never come to know one of the most exquisite wonders of our earth” (Bandyopadhyay 21-22).

Thus intoxicated by the purity of nature, now and after, his deliberate entangling into the many mysteries of nature in its varied forms and shapes, helped to bring him closer to the locals and the locality, while his Calcutta bonding underwent a transient weakening. His explorations into the mysteries of nature lead him to unravel the naturally preserved world of plants, flowers, trees, forests, the sound of wind blow, hills, tribes, local culture, languages, cuisines and man-nature equilibrium etc. Many times, he shared his feelings of how he felt captivated by the paused serenity and timeless charm of the vernal forests against the backdrop of grown up hills:

... I rode off one day in the direction of Saraswati kundi ... Banks of earth, thick with tall kash and dense forests of jhau ... Purple flowers that looked like English cornflowers hung in clusters ... the vast forest above me had such a sombre radiance! The two came together in my mind: the dispassionate spirit of the half-dried blossomless forest above, and the youthful, almost barbaric zest of the wild flowers below. I felt it to be a moment of epiphany. (Bandyopadhyay 85)

Making his feelings enduringly illustrative, Satya expressed that what he saw was “the source of many dreams”, the region was “like a fairyland-- the moonlight, the wild flowers, the vegetation and the forests, the silence, the mystery and the people--all appeared mysterious”, bringing him “a strange joy as well as a deep sense of peace” which he had “never found elsewhere”. (Bandyopadhyay 80)

At the same time, the stark reality of the ‘modern’ progressing capitalist world gets expressively conjoined with the mysterious and beautiful nature to make us aware of the harshness of human agency over the life-sustaining nature. It is aptly described by Raju, a close companion of Satya, in his search for the secrecy of nature, that in the beautiful forest with flowers and singing birds, “the gods themselves have merged with the wind and have left their mark on the earth. But wherever there is money or transactions in cash, loans, or receipts, the air becomes polluted. Then the gods choose not to stay on any longer” (Bandyopadhyay 74). Thus *Aranyak* turns into an expositor of the resulting deprivation of spirit, aesthetics, and natural virtues.

Satya’s encounter with nature provokes him to ascertain the connection between the timeless specimen of nature and human deeds from the past in different time frames:

I sat there for long. The deep silence of the forest and of its rocky crown on the hill was accentuated by the gurgling of a nearby waterfall ... The forest and hills had been thus for many centuries. So must this forest have been there when the Aryans had crossed the Khyber long ago ... when Buddha had silently left home at night ... So it had been when Chandragupta first ascended the throne ... the night when the hapless Dara lost the battle of Samugarh ... when Chaitanyadev sang the sankirtan ... through all these episodes of history the peak and the forest of Mahilakharoop had stood exactly thus. Who had inhabited these forests in those distant times? (Bandyopadhyay 81)

Then he recalls a woman, whom he had seen frequenting the villages at odd hours, who was actually “the absolute embodiment of the poet Bharatchandra’s rendering of Ma Annapurna as an ancient and decrepit woman”. This old woman was none other than a “symbol of the civilization of the forest” living and doing in the forest exactly in the same way as when “Jesus had been put on the cross”. And so, the realization that “They had not moved forward an inch in their understanding of the world or god” (81-82). This romanticization leaps further, presenting a continuum of realization, where he imagines an ocean at the place where he was sitting then: “An ancient ocean whose waves must have fallen upon this sandy shore from the Cambrian age—what has since then been transformed into a huge mountain. I sat in the forest and dreamt the dream of that blue ocean from the past” (81). The unity of being with its creator nature appears consummate; the unmoved past acquires contentment.

In the lap of natural beauty, however, was the despicable irony of human poverty. Satya’s first encounter with the poor villagers came too early to give him a realization of that part of the world of which he was to be an integral part. On his arrival at a *sub-kutchehri* at Lobtulia for leasing out land, many non-concerned people kept coming only in the hope of getting rice. What he was informed was no less than the gravest embarrassing reality of human existence, which, though, he later became accustomed to living with. The *Patowari* (village accountant) informed him that the people were very poor and “never get to eat rice” and that “when they do get some rice, it’s considered a feast” and that the “entire lot was enticed by the thought” (17).

Poverty has been extensively figured out at different locations through different characters. The almost ubiquitous poverty of the region makes the author want to bring out the diverse characters, behavior and skills of the local people. The introduction of characters like *Didi* (Rakhal Babu’s widow), is one such character through which the transformation of a Bengali family, living in a non-Bengal region amidst utmost scarcity, into a fallen caste with fallen culture, language, and daily practices, provides the grim realities of the many socio-economic, cultural hardships and practices existing in those times. Marrying their daughters was like a Himalayan experience, hardly successful, as Satya thinks, “Who would ever marry a poor and aging rustic woman without a dowry and carry her home style in a palanquin?” (Bandyopadhyay 201-02). In the kingdom of natural abundance lies the misery of humans.

Human misery in the midst of a deep health crisis has been very realistically carried on through the stark descriptions of the cholera spread in the village, with almost no trace of the self-proclaimed benign governance. People living in the most unhygienic conditions were left to die with no medical facility, little food, little money, and contaminated water. The absurdity of human suffering in the most inhuman living condition finds a mournful echo when Satya forces the poor girl to throw her "uncovered bowl of rice" which was being preyed on by at least a "dozen flies", being kept at a mere distance of three feet from a cholera patient, who dies later in the same evening (77). Clearly, the 'burden' in 'white men's burden' was hardly attempted to be disembarked in human terms.

An analogy is discernible here through R. P. Dutta's *India Today* which quotes the Report of the Bengal Director of Health for 1927–28, who said that "the present peasantry of Bengal are in a very large proportion taking to a dietary on which even rats could not live for than five weeks" and hence they were unable to stand before the "infections of foul diseases" (45). This was the situation, contrary to the claims made by the British of their honest intention to improve India and to treat her as an equal. Dada Bhai Naoroji reminds the British in his *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* of their own "solemn pledges" taken through the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, "to administer its government for the benefit of all our subject residents therein" (Introduction, v). *Aranyak* makes vivid attestation to this historical reality of a hypocritical and unnatural rule over space and the soul of the 'others' as the colonial highpoint through his literary craft.

Aranyak Enters into Our Age without a Break:

Aranyak proffers a way to live in congruity with nature in her abounding beauty without enervating the vitality of nature. Written in the 1930s, it is a literary evocation of the human-nature-civilizational deficit of equilibrium, stirred through the march to the cult of a vacuous 'progress' towards modernity. As an extended inference, generation Z may draw a dour reminder of the existential fault line if this path of 'progress' continues, while nature remains a mute witness to its own despoilment and scourging. The stupefying celerity as laid out by the pre-baby boomer generations, received a shot in the arm through the cutting edge path of the baby boomers, and since then it has been underway at an even more appalling gait through the outrageous 'progress' of generation X, Y, or Z. Loss of culture, heritage, past, survival, ideals, values, relations, and nature all appear to have become inconsequential in the progression from colonial to neocolonial.

In its June 2021 issue, the Hindi edition of *Down to Earth*, an environment magazine, gives some horrific data on human cruelty to nature. Out of a total of one-third of the forest area on earth at present, about 42 crore hectares of forest have been cut between 1990 and 2020, as per the global FAR report 2020, and this number is only increasing. It also says, interestingly, that man is directly or indirectly related to forests at a social, psychological, material, physical, emotional, and economic level, yet he keeps damaging the forests. India is one of the 136 countries (for which data is available) to provide the maximum employment based on forests, but there is still little care to improve the situation of the forests in India (50). The financial cost of preserving and strengthening the existing deficit in nature is staggering. According to a United Nations Environment Programme Report 2021, *State of Finance for Nature: Tripling Investments in Nature-Based Solutions by 2030*, "By 2050, the total investment needs of nature will amount to USD 8.1 trillion and will be over USD 536 billion annually. This projected total is almost four times the amount invested today" (26). *Aranyak* establishes its prognostic value about caring for nature through a humanistic literary tradition in a dewy-eyed style.

The very spirit of the *Aranyak* as an embodiment of man-nature equilibrium can also be seen through the ancient literary tradition, from which both spiritual and classical literature can be adduced, for instance. The entire Indian Vedic corpus is rich in descriptions of nature in various forms. Besides mentioning gods carrying natural forces, like Varuna, Indra, Mitra, etc., the *Rg Veda* dedicates a hymn to the *Aranyani*, the goddess of forest, perhaps the first reference to such a female deity, presenting "a simple narrative, drawing upon happenings in the forest and the daily lives of people living in and around it" (Dr. R. Harish's blog in *Speaking Tree*, June 15, 2020; See also: R. T. H. Griffith *Hymns of the Rig Veda* Vol. 2 Hymn CXLVI, 1897, 539). Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, *inter alia*, espouses the harmonious relationship between man and nature. The entire Ayurveda, the key to the ancient Indian medical system, is based on the health advantages of plants and natural products. Kalidasa's classical play

Abhigyanshakuntlam makes a big reference to the adoration of forests, plants, and nature. Shakuntala's very first appearance has been referred to as tender 'Jasmine', a flower, by her friend Ansuya, and her father's strong emotional connection with the trees has been established (Somadeva & Vasudeva, 69). Human bonding with the trees and nature has found vivid emotional expression when Shakuntala is preparing to depart for her husband's home, her father seeks permission from hermitage trees for allowing Shakuntala to leave: "She who was not willing to drink first if you had not been watered, she who, though fond of ornaments, would not pick buds out of affection for you, ... / that Shakuntala leaves for her husband's house/ given permission by all of you" (199). King Dushyanta too, seem to be sensitive to the serenity of the forests (73, 93).

This appears to be in sharp contrast to the *Aranyak's* modern-day rulers and landed elites in a colonial structure exhibiting immense zeal in exploiting nature and fellow humans, shorn of all natural virtues, setting a new (ab)normal for a new future. Dushyanta's guilt of disturbing the forest is in some ways comparable to Satya's guilt concerning his role in nature's destruction.

In other ancient civilizations too, we find references echoing the concern for nature. *The Gilgamesh* epic, which largely deals with the question of death and the desire for immortality, is intricately interwoven into the web of a natural setting. Some of their prominent gods, either because of their abode or their creation or functions, were essentially connected to the forces of nature. For example, the supreme triad was made of the sky god Anu, Enlil with a base on earth, and Ea living in a freshwater ocean beneath the earth in the Babylonian civilization.

These early global literary manifestations of nature appeared quite natural as human habitation evolved within a natural environment. Such profundity of human-nature conformity remained naturally instinctive until the modern concept of progress began to bristle under a new age of Enlightenment, Empire, greed, expansion, hegemony, industrialization, technology, materialism, unrestrained economic freedom, and the loss of human virtues. In the early ages, life might have had other struggles to cope with but was less affected by the destruction of the earth. An imposing foreign regime, thus forces Satya to be contemplative of the philosophy of life, posited inwardly, and mull over "progress or happiness" and the use of "progress" without "happiness" (Bandyopadhyay 244). In our own age, when there is a greater surge for minimizing skidding peace, enriching happiness, and striking balance in life, *Aranyak* appears to be salvaging the lost virtues. Engaging the readers in self-critical mode, the text converges on the larger canvass of the readership as a suggestive, sustainable, and futuristic text.

In November 2021, the UN Climate Change Conference COP 26 (Conference of the Parties) took place in Glasgow, United Kingdom, with the broader aim of correcting environmental damages (*COP 26 Explained*, UN Climate Change Conference 2021, 12). The growing concern to protect the environment and work for a sustainable climate has recently become a priority issue for almost all major responsible countries. Andrew Freedman et al. (1 Jan 2020), graphically depicts in the *'Washington Post'* under the caption "Climate Change in the 2010s: Decades of Fires, Floods, and Scorching Heat Waves", the havoc that the climatic changes have bestowed on the human species in recent decades. The moral culpability and guilt of a delinquent past appear to loom large over the faces of the modern nation states being exhibited through various global meetings and objectives. The world as it stands today need a myriad of *Aranyaks* to be circulated and read non-discriminately across the human settlements.

The onset of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century and its subsequent follow-ups have been notoriously acknowledged as the beginning of the adverse climate changes in modern times with machinization and exploitation of human and natural resources to the *ad infinitum* excitement with accelerated demonic hegemony, unfathomable financial gains, and a wicked scientific quenching. Some of these destructions find a powerful exposition through the life experiences of Satya as an agent of destruction, both aesthetic and physical. It was only in the later part that his puissant yearning for endearment to nature, striving for the restoration of forest life and the natural world by coordinating a synchronism with nature in unbridled form emerged.

Extending slightly the scope of discourse through the intervention of Amitav Ghosh at this juncture may draw things onto a larger canvas. In his critically acclaimed non-fictional work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, he provokes the readers by explaining how the "improbable" natural phenomenon has now turned into a more frequent affair across the globe at different times:

It appears that we are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normality, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spell of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from the breached glacial lakes and, yes, freakish tornadoes. (32)

Nature was read in the midst of the new spree of development since the Enlightenment age with a bureaucratic "comfort" that hinged upon the idea of an "orderly" and "moderate" pattern of nature under the "Gradualist" canopy, which could be dealt with at any moment. Taking a dig at this complacent slide, Ghosh informs, "There is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway" (35). Thus, contextualizing climate change in a bourgeois modern context, the role of human agency has not gone unnoticed. In this enterprise, both Ghosh and Bandyopadhyay appear to be naturally trussed through unity of purpose, making the differences in the works of the two, explicit innumerable at the level of magnitude of coverage, spatial outlet, and genre, seem inconsequential. The scaly structure of climate change, deliberated in a humongous universe of detail, has not at all been domineering when read alongside the *Aranyak*. Both operate expansively in their own conceived world, real or appearing to be real, which respects harmony, fluidity, and transcendentalism. The *Aranyak* sets in motion a procedural pattern of what Lord Byron's 'climate despair', as quoted by Ghosh, brings, "The world was void/The populous and the powerful-was a lump/Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless ..." (91). While Ghosh's work has a grandeur and global setting, Bandyopadhyay operates at a more topical, native, and regional level. This makes the reading on climate change more sustainable and sweeping, where the twain, in conjunction, work for a historical-contemporary literary ecology of non-discontinuous concinnity, soliciting for a more democratic, serene world of nature.

Bandyopadhyay also assails the predilection to acquire more and the wastage of resources, which brings up the issue of achieving conformity between human nature and their creator nature. When Satya visits the house of Rasbihari Bose, a Rajput feudal lord and a symbol of terror amongst the local folks, keen on impressing Satya, the estate manager, the latter develops a disapproving impression by the structural visuals of his house, interior, and ostentatious exhibition of his unabashed wastage of food. The walls of the rooms of his house lacked any attraction, had no beautiful image, and the children wore unclean clothes, lived dirty lives, and did not even go to school. The purpose of having *plenty* gets a shocking setback. So it was natural that he asked, "Of what use then was this barbaric plenty? Was it advantageous for anyone to have acquired this wealth...?" (Bandyopadhyay 90). Albeit, the *Rasbeharis* are always incisively sincere to capitalize on capital making, but the other benefits that the British brought in the name of justifying the *white men's burden*, remained mere atrophied potential.

Rashbehari Singh represented the rural power structure, or rural bourgeoisie, who owed his rise to the lending of government lands, fed on the "blood of the poor gangotas", and also played banker to the poor peasantry. He was the "overlord" of Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and a "sham from beginning to end" (7). His rise exemplified one of the most atrocious and unnatural paths, *inter alia*, by mutilating the soulful forest land through what was laid out as a just, progressive, and legitimate creed to modern success and glory in a colonial setting. Anand A. Yang, in his article entitled "Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the 'Anti-Cow Killing' Riot of 1893", written in a different context, remarks with pellucidity on these rural lords that:

... the pattern of agrarian violence and collective action in Saran was a function of its "limited Raj" system, in which the landholders were the effective rulers and administrators. As "connections" or links to the local levels of society, they ensured the authority of the British rule, and in return their position as local controllers was sustained and nourished by the powers of the state. (4)

This historical discernment finds its literary attestation through *Aranyak* where the socio-legally largely impregnable and unshackled landlordism defied all basic natural and human virtues, defacing nature through vandalizing its creations.

Besides, his questioning the appropriateness of acquiring such wealth through violence and exploitation is quite germane. The implicit, i.e., the loss of human virtue, prods through the close web of the colonial network, with the *Rashbeharis* providing the critical web lines. Both the loss of human virtue and the loss of nature experience the same fate of ethical and physical casualties on a common platform of imposing modernity. In a veiled message, this unity of loss gears up the fault lines of modernity for an apocalyptic future. At this stage, the scriptural architecture of the novel becomes more empathic. The unnatural and inhuman means get re-infused at the centrality of the narrative amidst the backdrop of the depleting natural virtues as a clue to self-meditation on the whole idea of progress.

The feast that was offered to Satya was an affront to humanity, particularly in a land of extreme inequality. While he had scores of items to eat leisurely, outside the house only were the poor gangotas with their "beaming faces" who offered to eat just two items of basic rural food, which they took quite gladly (Bandyopadhyay 90). Vandalism of resources was no less marauding than the marauding of nature. While the poor gangotas carried the ancient Indian maxim of *santosham parmam sukham* (contentment is the biggest happiness) through praxis, for the privileged, such lofty idealism was meant to be torn asunder and remain practically absurd.

The colonial model of development had upset man-nature harmony too. Tribal communities, as a major example of that harmony, also, felt the shock of colonial development. "We are of the solar dynasty, descendants of the Surya clan. These forests and the hills, all the earth, was once our kingdom. I have fought against the company ... We lost our battle. Now there is nothing left" (Bandyopadhyay 152), when the poverty dipped, politically outstripped tribal king introduces his present world with nostalgic historical roots. This manifestation was soaked in chivalry, pride, bravery, and mourning for the loss of everything. Satya could sense his detached condition ironically in a colonial world of ever-spreading networks. This mourning of loss was the world of reality for him, dispossessed of his value, prestige, authority, culture, age, and many other intangible senses of emotions.

The architectural-spatial description of the royal palace, huts, and tribal village was a grim reminder of the changed conditions of life in a colonial world. When the king admitted that he had now nothing, it was a literal acceptance of the reality to which he and his clan were now accustomed. Destitute of all power, it was just the memories from the past that acted as succor in the king's solitude.

Das & Patel in *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* notes, "The accumulation of wealth in modern society contrasts strongly with the ethic of many tribal societies, where traditionally, to possess was seen as an aberration ... similar to the ideal of traditional India, where an individual moves beyond the life of a householder to renounce wealth and social status" (649). When Satya asked the king if he had farmland, the king replied with some pride that these things were "forbidden to his race" (Bandyopadhyay 152). Tribal societies in many places across the globe believe in giving rather than possessing, the very antithesis of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century economic principles of the 'civilized and developed' nations and one of the reasons for modern individualism, imperialism, and the immortalized hankering for creation and possession of wealth among the 'civilized' world. Possession as a modern creed relies on disdain for nature, whereas not possessing is spiritual and natural. The tribal societies opted for the latter for their natural concerns, while the Enlightenment led colonial new world took to controlling measures to make possession absolute and everlasting, controlling everything from men to places to ideas to resources.

The move was to treat the Empire as a universe. The Postmodernists hold this as an Enlightenment effect. Callum G Brown in *Postmodernism for Historians* shows that the Postmodernist accuses how in the name of Enlightenment, "men ... developed intellectual, scientific and medical justifications, positions and prejudices that we today abhor". These positions, *inter alia*, include "free possession of the world's environment (that accepts the resources of the world as broadly at humankind's free disposal)" (24).

From the middle of the nineteenth century, forests in India provided the British with yet another source of revenue generation and a silent provider of raw materials. From 1865 onwards various forest acts (1865, 1878 and 1927) were introduced which not just controlled the forest resources but also imposed restrictions and regulated the tribal lives. Tribal as the most trusted companion of the world of forests was now 'criminal', 'intruder', 'cheap labour' and a 'hindrance' in the development process under these regulations. The "scientific management" of forests reduced the tribal to "an appendage to colonial interests" (Ruchas Ghate 30–40). Leila K Blackbird, a historian working on the Aztec world, in "How making space for Indigenous peoples changes history" (jointly with Caroline Dodds Pennock) in *What is History Now*, informs that the indigenous people as 'primitives', 'incapable of 'civility', modernity or self-governance' became the justification for the colonial rule (248). The defeat of *Raja* (the tribal king) in *Aranyak* was symbolic of the accomplishment of imperial control over the forests, the forest dwellers, and all that formed part of the human-forest cosmos.

Taking the tribal quandary further, Bandyopadhyay rues the fact that the Aryans who subjugated the non-Aryans neither bothered to write about them nor understood their way of life. The decrepit non-Aryan "vanquished wretched tribes continue to be ignored, shunned, and disdained". It was again the natural forces that impressed them through "secret mountain caves", "darkness of forests" and "in the lines of the calcified skeletal remains". Their absence from the mainstream history books has been a major reason for a poor and often distorted social perception of them. Mahasweta Devi says they bravely fought against the British, yet they were outside the Indian narrative of the freedom struggle movement. Conversing with Gayatri Spivak, she raises the issue of the non-representation of tribal communities logically by citing an innocent question from a tribal girl. The little girl wanted to know why in school, she learns about Mahatma Gandhi but not about any of the tribal heroes, "Did we have no heroes? Did we always suffer like this?" (Devi xi). A similar experience of the 'little girl' has been expressed recently by Leila K. Blackbird, when in her childhood history books, she was told tales of "vanishing Indians" and "courageous frontiersmen", of "happy slaves" and "kind fatherly enslavers". So she naturally asks rather disapprovingly, "In their pages, I could not find my truth or that of most of the people I knew and loved" (Blackbird & Pennock 254). Writing in a colonial environment as an Indian fictional writer, Bandyopadhyay not only precedes Mahasweta Devi and others by many decades but also provides fodder for historians and others to balance their task in their enterprise of knowledge production.

The pathos of their present was described in the cyclical turn of events when the protagonist Satya, along with his companion, as proud representatives of the Aryans, and the "defeated, poor, disdained king of non-Aryan origins" stood together as two races, "one facing the other, in the dark evening". The distinct contrast between the two diametrical world views, located historically, was a revealing testimony of the long persistence of the imperial domination, from 'masculine' Aryans to the 'civilized' British, over the rustic, simple, natural non-Aryan tribe, "I, with the pride of the Aryans, was looking upon Dobru Panna of royal lineage as an old Santal, Princess Bhanmati as a Munda coolie woman, the royal palace that they cherished and were so proud of, as an ill ventilated, ill-lit cave, a den of spirits and snakes" (Bandyopadhyay 156).

In different parts of the world, the physical and political maps were constantly altered, invaded, and exploited by the powerful 'civilized' men of modern times. Both the lesser-powered communities and the creator nature, fell prey to the unsatiated avarice of the idea of 'development'. The space and societies of the 'timeless' and 'unchanging' natives of Asia, Africa, and America, became a natural claim for the developed Europeans. They could own and develop and not just 'occupy space' unlike the natives. Therefore, writes Patricia R. Wickman in her book *The Tree that Bends: Discourse, Power and Survival of the Maskoki People*, "Control of the land is thus tacitly assigned to those who can best employ it—the Europeans—for whom use reaffirms rights". Natives became the "imaginary anti-thesis of progress and civilization" (2). The colonial system became the introducer of the idea of progress in the colonies, close to the central value of the Enlightenment, which "in turn legitimates imperial conquest under the guise of the civilizing mission, while the celebration of reason disqualifies other belief systems as irrational or superstition" (L Festa & D Carey 8).

Amitav Ghosh said in an interview entitled "Planetary crisis is a kind of bio-political war akin to those of the past", to Mr. Amit Baruah of *the Hindu* (18 November 2021) that "violence directed at people, ultimately becomes violence directed at the environment to create a process of extraction. And these processes of extraction are, in fact, incredibly violent." This violence needs to be understood as the most potent weapon by the powerful against the lesser powerful species and the mute nature to exercise control. Bandyopadhyay through *Aranyak* too, exemplifies the process of violence against nature and her creation under the pretext of 'development'.

In fact, even a sparse gaze at the working dynamics of power relations within the Anthropocene societal complexes will inkle sufficiently how the powerful have intruded on the 'weaker' with their might and violence as a tool to hold control over them. The entire history of imperialism and colonialism in different forms and at different levels echoes the same, from Spanish America to British India to Americanism in recent years. Noam Chomsky, in one of his interviews, entitled, "The Future of History" in *Understanding Power: the Indispensable Chomsky* cited the example of Nicaragua, a Central American country, where the felonious intervention of a powerful U.S. against hapless Nicaraguans led violently to a deep crisis of humanity, subsequently leading to an environmental crisis. The Nicaraguan people were starving in the aftermath of the U.S. attack in the 1980s, and so they were forced to go to the hills, cut trees, and find land to work on. This "eliminated forest cover", lakes dried up, and there appeared a "drought" (400). Bertrand Russell rightly observes in his *Power* that men have amassed mechanical/technological power in the modern days through science and "become devils". The world stands gloomy "unless power can be tamed, and brought into the service... of the whole human race... for science has made it inevitable that all must live or all must die" (20–22). *Aranyak* becomes a potent agent to expose the absurdity of power mechanics and their disastrous effects on the environment within the colonial structure.

However, much to the dismay of the neo-colonial sovereign governments, they are only extending the colonial residue of the development model in a post-colonial world. The current policies of governments across the globe are leading the earth towards a 'hotter planet'. Just to take one example of "forest dieback" from David Wallace-Wells' book *The Uninhabitable Earth* in order to understand how valuable forests are and how the constant destruction of forests may turn out to be an eye-opener:

... forest dieback—the decline and retreat of jungle basins as big as countries ... means a dramatic stripping-back of the planet's natural ability to absorb carbon and turn it into oxygen, which means still hotter temperatures, which means more dieback, and so on. Higher temperatures means more forest fires means fewer trees means less carbon absorption, means more carbon in the atmosphere, means a hotter planet still—and so on'. (22)

The forest may not be the sole safeguard against climatic upheaval, but the relationship between government policies and forests' sustainability is definitely minutely linked to the well-being of the planet Earth and its species. The domination, colonization, and brute extraction of natural resources have all the potential to produce backlash in the most savage manner.

This is also true that so far, there have been five mass extinctions on planet Earth. All these happened when there was no human agency to pervert nature. Then what's the fuss this time? It is acknowledged that in all previous times, it happened under pure cosmic forces, but this time it may happen under unnaturally aggravated human forces. Instead of procrastinating any eventuality of earth destruction and human annihilation through harmoniously networking with nature, the present power-steered doctrine of material development is only accelerating the pace for a quicker end. *Aranyak* emerges at such a critical juncture as the gospel of harmony with appreciation for surrounding and human values, enmeshing the past with the present and extolling the virtues of sustenance. Satya's friendship with the tribal princess Bhanmati had taught him lessons from the "civilization of the forest world... the forests and the hills had liberated their minds, expanded their vision with generosity, and in like manner, their love was deep, generous, and liberating". (Bandyopadhyay 178)

It may be worthwhile to put *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, one of the finest American literary works dealing with multitudes of environmental and human issues amidst the backdrop of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, on the same pedestal despite certain inherent contrasts with the *Aranyak*. What makes the parallel more intriguing and reasonable is the realization of the difference between the two distinct living worlds of Bandyopadhyay and Steinbeck, while one wrote in a world captivated, hegemonized, and violently led

by the form and spirit of the white man's burden', the latter wrote in a world that had already yoked off the 'burden' and was symbolic of world power, freedom, optimism, aspiration, and dreams. In this divergent realism, the production of commonalities in their works, in preparing a broader theme and in finding sub-text, particularly over technological over-dominance, greed, human expansion at the cost of environmental loss, and human crises, is significant. In the introduction to *The Grapes of Wrath*, Robert Demott writes, "Wherever human beings dream of a dignified and free society in which they can live in right relationship with the environment and other humans and harvest the fruits of their own labor, *The Grapes of Wrath's* insistent message is still applicable" (xlv). *Aranyak*, too, appears quite familiar on this account. In fact, it leaves the reader more surprised as it asks for a more equal and harmonious world, despite the fact that the author himself hails from a world fettered under a colonial regime with primitive, savage, non-civilized, and the like tags. It produces a literature of "real people in real place".

Somewhere deep in the contemplative thought for a better world, *Aranyak* agrees, inadvertently though, with Tim Flannery in his foreword to Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate, Discoveries from a Secret World*, who finds the social trait of the trees as *astonishing* and their intense care for each other in forest through communication and "Wood Wide Web" for the reason that they need each other for 'tree growth and sustenance' whereas "the isolated trees have far shorter lives than those living connected together in forests" and as such the plants "enslaved" for agricultural purpose have "lost the ability to communicate" and are "thus rendered deaf and dumb" (viii). Can we, too, have a human wide web to support and care for each other in the natural spirit of collective responsibility? *Aranyak* earnestly underpins the fine tuning of human coalescences with the planet Earth.

Conclusion:

Dipankar Roy wrote, in an effort to reposition *Aranyak*, in an article entitled, *Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Aranyak (1939): the "Modern", the "Non-modern" and the Nation State*, in the *Daily Star* (September 29, 2018), that we should "try to look beyond the clichéd romantic angle in order to find the text's continuing relevance for today's world—a world plagued by technology and "development.". *Aranyak* emerges strongly as a guide to rescue the world from turning every day into 'Black Sunday' of the era of the Dust Bowl, to rescue the environment from multiple fractures perpetually received at the hands of human agency, and to bring the discordant, discriminating, and dissected human world on the empathic line of genuine human progression. It questions the incivility of the 'civilized' world, their right to perpetrate vandalism and torture, both in space and in being, and their inhuman model of human development. It contextualizes the space for contentment and happiness in the worldview of human progress. Rimli Bhattacharya, the translator of the novel *Aranyak: Of the Forest*, makes a compelling reason to choose 'Oahu', one of the seven Hawaiian Islands, as the place to stay where the "translated *Aranyak* branched into notes and glosses":

The Pacific was one of the many distant regions loved in the imagination by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. The islands are inscribed with continuing histories of migration, settlement and colonization and decolonization of plantation economy, nuclear and tourist colonization and the more recent indigenous sovereignty and land claim movements; to experience these histories in everyday life was to recognize *Aranyak* as a planetary metaphor. (Translator's acknowledgment)

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