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Abhishek Kumar

**Unraveling the Echoes of Environmental Colonialism and Ecological Resistance in
Anandamath**

Abstract

In the contemporary milieu characterized by burgeoning environmental apprehensions and the imperative quest for ecological equilibrium, the domain of literature emerges as a formidable instrument for shaping perceptions of climate change and nurturing a symbiotic rapport with the natural world. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's seminal opus, "Anandamath," assumes significance with its complex fabric of ecological allegories and narrative discourse, proffering profound elucidations on the interplay between nature and anthropogenic societies. Set against the backdrop of famine-stricken Bengal during the 1770s, the novel vividly delineates the Sanyasi uprising against the colonial dominion of the Mughals and the British. While renowned for its espousal of nationalist ideals, the work has hitherto eluded ecocritical scrutiny. Therefore, this paper endeavors to scrutinize the novel through an ecological lens, elucidating the symbolic significance of the forest within the rebellion and delving into the nuanced relationship between the Sanyasis and the land, reverently hailed as the 'goddess.' The veneration for the land intricately interweaves with nationalist fervor and camaraderie as they unite to confront the exploitative endeavors of the oppressive colonizers.

Keywords: Environmental Colonialism, Ecocriticism, Ecological Resistance, Sanyasi Rebellion, Nationalism and Nature

The contemporary milieu is marked by escalating environmental apprehensions, necessitating a concerted effort to address pressing ecological concerns. Amidst this, literature emerges as a potent vehicle for engaging with these issues, offering meticulous reflections on humanity's relationship with the natural world and serving as a catalyst for environmental consciousness. In this context, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's "Anandamath" assumes significance as a seminal work that intertwines historical narrative with ecological allegories. Set against the backdrop of famine-stricken Bengal during the 1770s, the novel depicts the Sanyasi uprising against colonial domination by the Mughals and the British. Despite its renown for espousing nationalist ideals, "Anandamath" has been largely overlooked in ecocritical discourse, representing a notable gap in existing scholarship. Thus, there is a compelling need to explore the environmental themes within the novel, examining its ecological nuances and shedding light on the interplay between nature and anthropogenic societies. This paper endeavors to fill this gap by scrutinizing "Anandamath" through an ecocritical lens, uncovering the colonial exploitation of Bengal during the 1770s and the significance of the natural landscape within the Sanyasi rebellion, elucidating the nuanced relationship between the Sanyasis and the land they revered as the mother goddess.

Bengal, endowed with abundant natural resources, served as the habitat for various tribal communities such as the Mundas, Oraons, Hos, Bhuiyas, and more. The River Ganga was pivotal in nurturing the fertile soil of Bengal. Historically, Bengal flourished as a prosperous province until, as Vinita Damodaran says, the "collapse of the Mughal Empire (which) resulted in a decline in agricultural productivity that was reinforced by a devastating climate shift and a steep upward trend in a frequency of droughts." The failure of the monsoon further aggravated the already dire situation, resulting in acute food scarcity. Neither the East India Company, who had the Diwani rights, nor the then Mughal ruler took effective steps to address the crisis.

On the contrary, the company had increased its revenue demand simply to fulfil its profitmaking motive, disregarding the suffering of the starving populace. This callousness is underscored by Chatterjee in his novel, when he says, “The harvest of the year 1174 (according to Bengali calendar) had been poor, consequently in the year 1175 rice was a little dear; the people suffered, but the Government exacted its revenues to the last fraction of a farthing.” The lack of adequate administration disrupted the ecological balance, paving the way for recurrent famines in the subsequent years.

The lack of food had driven people to extreme measures, resulting in the 'selling of their wives, daughters, and even their sons'. Many individuals began abandoning their villages in search of sustenance, often perishing during the arduous journey due to starvation. The dire circumstances led some to resort to 'cannibalism' or consuming deceased flesh. In the novel, Kalyani narrowly escapes becoming prey to one such group, and she is ultimately rescued from her perilous situation. The famine had devastated both human and animal populations, with a staggering 'one-third of the population' succumbing to death. David Arnold notes in his essay that “the famine was not a "natural" but a "man-made" disaster, and as such one of the most damning episodes in India's experience of colonial rule.” He further says that the death of so many people during the famine in 1770 in a province known for its productivity, had reduced the conditions of the “prosperous people to penury.” Consequently, impoverished, starved, and outraged by colonial neglect, peasants across Bengal took up arms in defiance, marking the inception of the first freedom struggle during British rule - the Sanyasi Rebellion.

At the core of the thematic weave of 'Anandamath' lies the symbolic importance attributed to the forest and the land. The forest, often portrayed as a sanctuary and a vital source of

sustenance for the Sanyasis, embodies notions of freedom, spirituality, and the intrinsic bond between humanity and the natural realm. Not only did the forest provide the Sanyasis with nourishment, but it also served as a refuge, shielding them from British troops intent on quelling the rebellion. The Sanyasis' reliance on the forest for sanctuary, which was beyond the reach of colonizers, underscores their defiance against colonial authority. It functioned as a protective haven, safeguarding both the Sanyasis and the indigenous fauna from the harsh realities of the outside world. Chatterjee highlights that "millions of birds, beasts, insects, flying things have their dwelling in the forest." Other than that, in the jungles of Bhairabipur, sufficient resources were available for sustenance which is showcased as, "The jungles grow varieties of human food, and the village people could somehow manage to keep body and soul together by gleaning food from the forest."

The land, revered as the mother, embodied the sacredness of the earth and also served as a space for spiritual revelation. It symbolized peace, where the sanyasis meditated and carried out their chores. Ascetics often praised the rich and varied resources of the land through songs. Bhavananda, a prominent character in the novel, sang praising the land's richness, the lines of which are: 'Mother, I bow to thee!

Rich with thy hurrying streams,

Bright with thy orchard gleams,

Cool with thy winds of delight,

Dark fields waving, Mother of might.'

These lines highlight the significance of the motherland for the Santans. Chatterjee paints vivid descriptions of the forest and the harmonious relationship between the sanyasis and the forest in the novel. For example, when Santi sings in praise of Lord Murari and the sound of a Sarang plays in the background, then all "voices mingled together in the song and the creepers vibrated

with it.” The reverence for the land's beauties and bounties, intertwined with nationalist fervor, makes the Sanyasi revolt remarkable. However, when the final battle took place in the forest, it led to huge-scale destruction. The firing of guns and cannons disrupted the serenity of the forest, causing the loss of lives and property. The scene was so intense that “the forest and hills echoed back that fearful din.” Following considerable disruption in the ecological balance, the sanyasis emerged victorious over the British forces, effectively challenging the prevailing colonial authority and, for that period, restoring tranquility.

Within the literature, an ecocritical perspective holds immense importance, providing a lens through which to examine environmental justice or injustice inherent in narratives. 'Anandamath,' when viewed through this perspective, becomes particularly significant, illuminating a historical event often overlooked, revealing colonial oppression and exploitation and their lasting repercussions on the environment. Through its portrayal of ecological exploitation, resistance, and reverence for nature, 'Anandamath' emphasizes the urgent need for sustainable practices and environmental stewardship amidst global ecological crises. Understanding the lessons from 'Anandamath' is crucial as it parallels ongoing struggles for environmental justice. Initiatives like the Save Soil Movement and Mission LiFE exemplify contemporary efforts to address environmental degradation and promote sustainable living. Additionally, in popular culture, cinema and media play a vital role in raising awareness about environmental issues. For instance, the web series “Kaala Pani” by Sameer Saxena and Amit Golani poignantly showcases the devastating consequences of greed and environmental destruction. These initiatives and cultural representations serve as reminders of the importance of preserving our environment and mitigating the impacts of climate change. And, as the saying goes, 'We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.'

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