

The Struggle and Transformation of the Tripuri Community in Ajay Bhattacharya's Aranyani

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Abstract

The Tripuri tribe, an indigenous people living in Northeast India and Bangladesh, has experienced sweeping socio-political, economic, and cultural transformations over time. Historical forces such as displacement, state policy, economic marginalization, and cultural assimilation have profoundly shaped their collective identity and livelihood. Ajay Bhattacharya's *Aranyani* (1883) is a critical examination of these challenges with a sympathetic eye to the vulnerability and resilience of the Tripuri people. In its action, themes, and characters, *Aranyani* traces the battle between tradition and modernity, the effect of development policies, and the evolving face of Tripuri identity under external pressure. The novel is simultaneously an historical analysis and a critique of the forces that have eroded indigenous heritage. In projecting struggles of resistance, accommodation, and survival, Bhattacharya points to the community's dogged efforts to hold on to cultural moorings even while it rides socio-political waves. This essay does a literary and historical analysis of *Aranyani*, placing it in the broader framework of indigenous literature and identity politics. It examines how the novel documents historical injustices, resists colonial exploitation, and illustrates the impact of industrial expansion on marginalized communities. By situating the struggles of the Tripuri people in postcolonial and indigenous studies, this research makes a contribution towards a greater understanding of their struggle for self-determination and cultural survival in an era of rapid change.

Keywords: Tripuri Identity, Cultural Assimilation, Socio-Political Struggles, Modernization and Resistance

1. Introduction

Native peoples across the world have long struggled against the injustices of history, political isolation, and loss of culture, through colonialism, forced migration, and modernity. The situation of the Tripuri people is not different either.

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They are an indigenous ethnic group of the Indian state of Tripura and surrounding Bangladesh. In past centuries, they have struggled against displacement, state policies, and socio-economic isolation, significantly displacing their way of living. The political reorganization of the region, industrialization, and cultural integration policies have also added to their struggle to hold on to their identity.

Literature usually provides an effective avenue of documentation and questioning of these struggles, providing a platform through which indigenous voices and histories can be recorded and examined. Ajay Bhattacharya's novel *Aranyani* is an engaging account of the experience of the Tripuri people, raising themes of displacement, resilience, and formation of identity. In the backdrop of colonial imperialism and industrial intrusion, the novel depicts the tensions between tradition and modernity, both symbolizing the vulnerability and uncompromising spirit of the Tripuri people. *Aranyani* documents the struggles, accommodations, and negotiations of an indigenous community struggling to hold on to its cultural heritage in its characters, themes, and narrative approach.

This study tries to explore how *Aranyani* functions as a historical document and literary representation of resistance. This study explores how the novel narrates indigenous struggle, resists socio-political transformations, and participates in broader debates over self-determination, cultural heritage, and identity politics. Situating this study within postcolonial literature, indigenous studies, and socio-political history, this paper attempts to analyze the role of the novel in representing and resisting the erasure of Tripuri heritage.

The text lines and translations used here are either the author's own translation or are borrowed from other scholarly translations, with proper attribution being provided wherever required. This ensures accuracy and fidelity to the original language and cultural depictions of the text.

Through close reading of the literature and history, the present study hopes to shed light on how *Aranyani* is a useful testimony to the perseverance of the Tripuri people and their struggle to survive culturally in a rapidly evolving socio-political context.

2. Literature Review:

The Tripuri community, indigenous to the northeastern state of Tripura in India, has passed through decades of immense socio-political turmoil and transformation. This literature review endeavors to synthesize whatever is available

in terms of research insights concerning the historical, political, and cultural contexts that have marked the struggle for autonomy and identity preservation of the Tripuri community. A review of the role of Aranyani as the cultural symbol of resistance and transformation of the community is also undertaken. As an ethnic identity, the cultural heritage of the Tripuri people identifies them with the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. This fact makes their identity typical of having a much-accentuated religious, linguistic, and traditional outlook. Their identity, developed through folklore, rituals, and inimitable practices from their indigeneity, has enabled their community's socio-political battles (Mukherjee, 1990:18). All relate that the cultural identity of the Tripuri community is attached to the land of their ancestors and their respective traditions that form the foundation in their resistance against the political forces of others and their cultural assimilation.

Displacement and Migration: Historical displacement and migration of Bengali settlers into Tripura and resultant demographic shift have been particularly affecting the native inhabitants of the State, viz. Tripuris. (Verma, 2003:12) She gives an overview of the pattern of migration in Tripura, with a focus on demographic changes related to the indigenous populations, especially the Tripuris and highlights the issues the Tripuris face, especially how the inclusions of settlers since 1947 changed the region's demography and uprooted the indigenous people from their traditional areas. **Autonomy and Land Rights:** Most poignantly, the political struggle for autonomy has been inextricably linked with preserving land rights at the core of Tripuri identity politics. The inclusion of Tripura into the Indian Union in 1949 significantly reduced the Tripuri community's political influence and access to resources. Scholars describe how the leaders of Tripuri since their demand for autonomy through movements like the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura and the Indigenous Progressive Party of Tripura have remained politically marginalized (Saha, 2017: 34). **Ethnic Conflicts and Violence:** ethnic tensions between the indigenous Tripuri people and the Bengali settlers have often resulted in violent conflicts. Mahapatra (2004) and Desai (2008) explore the roots of these tensions, pointing to competition over land, resources, and political power as having produced considerable violence over time. The resultant insurgent movements, like the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, bespoke a deepening ethnic divide and the desire within the Tripuri community for a safeguard against further marginalization.

Political Integration and Marginalization: In the greater scheme of Indian political structure, from the post-independence period itself, Tripuri voices have remained marginalized on basic issues like land rights, rehabilitation of refugees, and political representations. It is observed that policies of the state only diluted the strength of the Indigenous group and could not secure their rights in front of the increasing settler population. (John, 2009: 120). **Aranyani as Cultural Symbol:** The

goddess of the forest, according to Tripuri mythology, is an essential symbol in establishing a relationship between land and natural environments for the people of Tripuri. In political and cultural discourses of the community, Aranyani represents the goddess of land protection and protection of culture. The invocation of Aranyani by political movements underlines the people's attempt to reconnect to their roots and claim ownership of their native land. Reviving the Indigenous: Over the last two decades, the world has seen a revival of the traditional and indigenous religious activities. Quite often, this goes hand in hand with political mobilization and how Aranyani serves as a unifying force within the Tripuri people to join political causes as one, entrenching further in their resistance to cultural onslaught and socio-political pressures. (Shil & Jangir, 2022: 139) Ajay Bhattacharya was from the lineage that included the royal families of Tripura since his great grandfather Harish Chandra Bhattacharya was the 'royal' scholar of Tripura in the mid-18th century. (Choudhury, 2015: 230) The Tripuri community's resistance can be understood through the lens of postcolonial theory, which addresses the issues of colonialism, cultural hegemony, and identity formation. (Bhaba, 1994: 28) This book is a classic in the field of postcolonial studies. Bhabha's work talks about issues of cultural hybridity and identity in negotiating cultural space, offering theoretical insight into Indigenous resistance's (1994)'s theory of hybridity offers a framework to explore how the Tripuri community negotiates its indigenous traditions with the demands of the post-colonial state. The work of Spivak (1988) on subaltern voices provides a useful perspective in understanding how the Tripuri people have been silenced within national political narratives. (Spivak, 1988: 271) Because of his significant involvement in the Marxist movement and his desire to create an ideal society where everyone has equal rights, Ajay Bhattacharya understands the suffering of the Aranyani people. This is why the main character, Laxman, escapes from contemporary civilization at the end and uses his power to repopulate his tribe.

3. Research Methodology

This study applies a qualitative research design, synthesizing literary analysis, historical research, and ethnographic observations to examine Aranyani and how it portrays Tripuri identity, resistance, and socio-political struggle. The research design is as follows:

Research Design

The study employs an interdisciplinary design with the following elements:

- Textual Analysis: Close reading of Aranyani for literary critique of its themes, narrative structure, and symbolic articulations of Tripuri socio-political realities.
- Historical contextualization: an examination of the historical events, policies, and socio-political transformations that affected the lives of the Tripuri community.

- Theoretical Framework: Use of postcolonial theories like Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory to account for the marginalization of the Tripuri people.

Data Collection

The research relies on:

- Primary Sources: The novel Aranyani and other literary works of Ajay Bhattacharya.
- Secondary Sources: academic books on Tripuri history, identity politics, and resistance by scholars, academic journal articles, and historical documents related to Tripuri history.
- Archival Materials: Government documents, reports of migration patterns, documents of land policy and political movements affecting the Tripuri people.

Analytical Framework

- Thematic Analysis: Charting key themes of displacement, cultural assimilation, rights over land, and resistance in Aranyani.
- Comparative Analysis: Comparison of Aranyani with other indigenous texts to arrive at a greater understanding of indigenous patterns of resistance and cultural assertion.
- Critical Discourse Analysis: Discourse analysis of political narratives of Tripuri marginality and identity formation in state policy and literature.

Limitations

- The study is largely reliant on literary and historical sources, with limited scope for ethnographic fieldwork.
- Archival records and first-hand oral traditions of the Tripuri may be restricted.

This research framework ensures a comprehensive and critical analysis of Aranyani within the socio-political and cultural history of the Tripuri.

4. Historical Context of Colonialism and the Peasant-Worker Movements:

Various mass movements began to take shape in British-ruled India from the middle of the 19th century onwards against colonial oppression. There were the Partition of Bengal, 1905, and uprising of tea-plantation workers in Sylhet. With increasing exploitation by the second decade of the 20th century, workers on the tea plantations of Sylhet turned to rebellion. Most of these laborers were from indigenous communities like Santal, Munda, Kol, and Bhil, forcibly brought from different parts of India under the British "Girmit system." These indigenous communities were bound to work in tea estates under harsh conditions. In 1938, the

leftist political activists helped to establish the Sylhet Cachar Tea Garden Labor Union, one of whose key organizers was Ajay Bhattacharya. Inspired by Marxist ideals, he developed a deep sense of solidarity with workers, peasants, and marginalized ethnic communities. This political consciousness is vividly reflected in his novel *Aranyani*, which depicts the struggles of the Tripuri ethnic community.

Since the novel is a comprehensive artistic form that encapsulates the multidimensional experiences and realities of social life, it naturally turns out to be an apt medium for representing individual and collective consciousness in their various complexities. Rafiqullah Khan says: "As the novel is an inclusive form of art, its chief function is the sculpting of multi-dimensional experience pertaining to both the inner and outer spheres of social life. It is conditioned by the fact that individual consciousness—filtered through the socio-economic realities of any age—had necessarily to look for self-expression and socialization. (Khan, 1997: P 24)

5. Discussion and Analysis:

Ajay Bhattacharya (1914–1999) was a historian and both entrepreneur and leader of the historic Nankar Rebellion that broke out in Greater Sylhet from 1947 to 1948. Although he was born into a feudal landlord family, he had spent all his life in the struggles and movements of the peasants, laborers, and working class. Due to his simple lifestyle and wholehearted support for the depressed masses, he was highly praised by the followers:

Guided by the Marxist spirit, Bhattacharya was in deep solidarity with the proletariat, workers, peasants, and ethnic tribesmen. His contributions to the peasant uprisings in British and Pakistani-ruled East Bengal gave him a lineage among legendary communist leaders like Comrade Moni Singh, Comrade Ila Mitra, and Romel Mitra. His activism and literature for the grassroot level people bear testimony to his concern for social justice, especially the struggle of indigenous people, reflected in his novel *Aranyani*: Ajay Bhattacharya's name is equally important in the history of peasant rebellions in East Bengal under British and Pakistani rule alongside Comrades Moni Singh and Ila Mitra. (Chowdhury, 2015: 229)

After the Sepoy Rebellion in 1858, various movements and protests against the then-colonial imperialist British rulers began in this country during the mid-19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the partition of Bengal in 1905 spread the anti-British movement across the entire country. Tea garden workers of the Sylhet region in Bangladesh revolted against the British imperialist rulers in the second decade of the 20th century. Those tea garden workers were the poor and distressed laborers of various provinces of India. British businessmen

brought them to this country under the 'Girmit system' with various temptations. According to the 'Girmit system,' a laborer was bound for his lifetime to work for the owner. Smitten by oppression and exploitation, they revolted to return to their homeland, and this movement is recorded in history as the 'Mulluki Movement.' During the 1930s, farmers, workers, and tea garden laborers in the Sylhet region started movements to demand their rights.

In 1938, leftist political activists of the Congress created the Sylhet Cachar Tea Garden Labor Union, which was instrumental in establishing rights and dignity among the Santal, Munda, Kol, Bhil, and other indigenous laborers bound under lifetime contracts in the Sylhet tea gardens. One of the foremost leftist political leaders to help in the formation of this union was Ajay Bhattacharya. His involvement in communist politics led him deeply into the lives of working and lower-class people. He was especially drawn to the plights of various indigenous communities working in tea gardens. Thus, he got deeply interested in the lifestyle of the Tripuri indigenous people of Tripura and wrote his famous novel Aranyani.

The main theme of Aranyani is the disruption of the natural life of small indigenous communities by the advancement of civilization. The novel is based in a deep forest at the foothills of the Lushai Hills, which was inhabited by the Tripuri indigenous people. They can feed themselves through farming and hunting, but their traditional life has been fully disrupted by the advancement of modern civilization. The novel depicts the life and history of the indigenous Tripuri people of the state of Tripura in British India. Ajay Bhattacharya, influenced by Marxist ideology, portrayed the struggles of the working-class Tripuri indigenous people and their historical relationships within their own community in Aranyani. This novel mainly focuses on how the gradual progress of civilization has hindered the small indigenous communities living in the Lushai Hills. "Loyalty to time is essential in a novel; no novel can be written without acknowledging time." (Roy, Alok (edited), 2002: 27)

The protagonist of Aranyani, Laxman, does not only think about his own liberation but also about national freedom. Through the lives of central characters Laxman and Savitri, the author vividly portrays the struggles, livelihood, and fate of the Tripuri indigenous people. The Tripuri tribal people lived in the deep forest at the foothills of the Lushai Hills. They take out everything required to maintain their livelihood from the same forest. Many calamities and challenges have confronted them, yet they struggle hard to keep their customs alive. Even living in deep forests, the people of the Tripuri tribes are not naturally violent; instead, they are peaceful and gentle. At the outset of Aranyani, the following quotes describe the life and environment of the Tripuri people:

"The Tripuri people do not fight for the sake of maintaining peace; the more the increase in population and the decrease of land, the deeper they retire into the woods. As a worn-out cloth, the old residence is quitted and without the slightest scruple." [Aranyani, p. 11]

Laxman and Savitri had spent almost two years happily without any turbulence in such a deep forest. The two worked extremely hard to prepare the land for cultivation and therefore could grow crops for food throughout the year. Seeing a new crop in that hard-earned area completely filled them with joy, yet they were cautious to save the fields from wild animals.

"It was to save the field that they had to work incessantly. Laxman sat on a stage he had made with tree tops and hardly slept a wink during the nights. Savitri guarded the field during the day. In order to keep wild boars away from their crops, they had to beat bamboo sticks incessantly during day and night." [Aranyani, p. 11]

However, out of fear of wild boars and elephants, they harvested their crops before they were full-grown and ripe. Tripuri people were cultivators, but hunting was in their blood. Laxman did not want to spend his whole life in agriculture; through his conversation with Savitri, he showed sorrow for the troubles and deprivation of their fellow tribesmen. They were living deep inside the forest, but other people of the Tripuri clan were deprived of land and the chance to hunt because of dense settlements.

That is why Savitri and Laxman thought of deceiving the other tribesmen in the hope of hunting because they knew well that the people of Tripuri could not survive without it. It was on this aspect of hunting that Savitri raised with him:

Laxman becomes thrilled when it is about hunting. Not only Laxman but every Tripuri would get similarly excited if a hunting plan cropped up before him. Having got the hint that there was adequate scope for hunting here, it sounded incredulous to Laxman that none would turn up to stay here. This passion for hunting among the people of Tripuri knew no bound, as if this enthusiasm was flowing in their veins [Aranyani, p. 15-16].

Although they lived deep in the forest, Laxman and Savitri felt deep affection and connection with their fellow tribesmen. Knowing that they could not carry the entire deer's meat, Savitri felt sad and wanted to take as much as possible. Alongside their personal concerns, they also thought about national freedom.

Although the Tripuri people lived in deep forests, their lives were not uninterruptedly peaceful. They had to struggle incessantly to save their lives and crops. When the wild elephants attacked the fields and cottages, they did not provoke them initially. But when a child fell prey to a furious elephant and was trampled to death, the Tripuri people, in a state of rage and vengeance, burned the forest. Even after crops were ravaged by the wild elephants, they continued farming with perseverance:

Laxman and Savitri began to work on the crushed land again. Everybody joined hands. The sweat of the Tripuri people moistened the mountainous soil once again. These hardworking people spread their arms to snatch life back from the claws of disasters." [Aranyani, p. 20-21]

However, this serene existence was short-lived. A few months later, the vengeful and angry elephants returned and waged another sudden attack. They first thought it was an earthquake, but then, when lightning flashed, they saw the horrifying sight. For example,

"A streak of lightning flashed across the stormy sky, illuminating the surroundings. In that brief moment, the true cause of the earthquake was revealed—the massive elephants were pushing against their cottages with their trunks, swaying their massive bodies. Those who saw this with their own eyes felt their blood run cold." [Aranyani, p. 24]

They ran for life to save themselves from the attack of the elephant, knowing that fighting an atrocious elephant was impossible. The desperate fleeing Tripuri tribesmen ran into bushes, thickets, and jungles, stumbling over water, land, and stones; everybody ran with all their might. They had stayed in their self-established settlement for two years but had to flee due to this sudden attack of the frantic elephant. Hence, Laxman and Savitri were in search of a new place to stay. Their search of a new dwelling place, the people they came across, deception, and finally, liberation are the leading themes of the *Aranyani* novel.

Even though the Tripuri tribe was deeply inside the woods, they shared a healthy relationship with people belonging to other tribes. The trek to a new home, to escape the silent night attack by the elephant herd, gave novelist Ajay Bhattacharya ample scope to dwell on various aspects of Tripuri life. Having crossed the craggy, uneven landscape of forest-covered hills, Laxman and Savitri reached a Tripuri village to be cordially received by Dasharath Tripura. As soon as it was found out that the ancestors of Laxman were related to the family of Dasharath, he accepted them as his own relatives. The news of their arrival spread

and people of the village started going to them hoping to hear something about the outer world. Day-to-day life struggles rarely allowed the Tripuris to consider anything other than their village and so they always remained anxious for any visitor to narrate his tales. Through this, the novelist delineates the simplicity and hospitality of the Tripuri people, which are reflected in the following passage:

This is how it is in the scattered settlements of the forest; when a stranger from another village comes, the villagers are overwhelmed with joy. Those who struggle hard for survival almost for twelve months in a year hardly get any time to maintain rapport with the outside world [...] Those who live in this huge forest generation after generation, staying near or staying far, are never strangers to one another (Aranyani, p. 33).

In the Tripuri village, Laxman and Savitri came to know from Dasharath about the "Beggar Settlement." The dream of a safe home in the "Beggar Settlement" haunted them.

The people of Tripuri lived in deep forests in their own way, away from the world and had never shown any interest in learning about the world beyond. So, the first time when Laxman and Savitri heard of the government forest estate, widely known as Bon Mahal, they were utterly astonished. People brought up in the wild became content with an uncomplicated lifestyle. While heading to the Bon Mahal from the Tripuri village, Laxman gets to know the neighboring villagers about the government's laws and orders. He remains baffled as he hears for the first time about such a law:

"Who is the king, who is the subject? Who knows what the government is? Those born in the forest and destined to die in the forest—what do they need to know about all this? Why should they bother with government laws?" (Aranyani, p 38). In Aranyani, Ajay Bhattacharya portrays the life of the forest-dwelling Tripuri tribe, which is indifferent to the political masters or the change of guard. According to them, since the emergence of their tribe, the Maharaja of Tripura was their master and would continue to be so. They did not see any reason to think otherwise. The novelist projects the simplicity in the lives of the forest-dwelling people.

People claimed to be civilized but succumbed more often than not to the urge to occupy this virgin wilderness through exploiting the forest. The government and states have come forward time and again to assist in doing so an imbalance created by man in the natural functions of the forest environment. Historically, this state machinery supported individual opportunists of profit to disrupt the life of forests for an expansion of wealth and power, particularly during the British rule

over India. Kissing the Earth's floor by breaking jigsaw-like boulders, planting tender shoots, and constructing villages—all have been done since time immemorial by aboriginal forest inhabitants, whereas so-called civilized people deceitfully exiled them from their homes, as portrayed in the life of the Tripuri tribe in Aranyani. The government estate Beggar's Settlement was reached while leaving the village of Tripuri, by Laxman, accompanied by Savitri. On the way, they gained many experiences and learned a great deal about the Bon Mahal. By the time they arrived there, many settlers had already begun to clear portions of the jungle and had already built homes. Laxman and Savitri labored hard to make their land tillable and immersed themselves in newer dreams. This dream of house-building thus got fulfilled – no, at least for some time:

"Laxman and Savitri thought that though they lost all, today they regained all. The search for a home by them, like that of a bird whose nest was destroyed, was over and had been fulfilled." (Aranyani 38)

However, this dream was a short-lived one, as the so-called civilized people's bearable torture, being on the government land, without any documents, they could be removed anytime, without any claim or rights.

The government had given them the land of the forest without any tax, rent, fees, but this was only a trap. Their toiling in the fields never earned them any wages. While they were exempted from taxes on land allocated to them, no formal document showed ownership. This was an intentional deceit to keep the peasants as unpaid workers- beggars. Taxes, rents, bribes, interest, and tribute had first been waived as an incentive but proved to be a cruel subterfuge. The Tripuris did not possess the perception capability to see through this fraud.

Every male Tripuri had to work in the houses of all the officers of the estate without receiving any remuneration. The work was compulsory and without any time limit, and refusal or protest was met with severe punishment. The Tripuris never knew that those who settled on the land by mere verbal agreement would have to flee from it in the same manner. Sweet words and tall promises paved the way to reduce them to slaves devoid of dignity and rights. Laxman and Savitri, like other beggars, came to know of the shocking laws of the Bon Mahal. The law was:

"If people grow on forest land, the forest ceases to be a forest. So, it is the forest, not the people, that must be allowed to grow. The law says that if the forest needs the land, people must vacate it. Once the work in the forest is done, those who have toiled relentlessly to develop it must leave their homes. The forest will reclaim the land. No one except the forest has any right over it. In the law of the forest,

human claims are invalid – only wilderness is acknowledged." (Aranyani, pp. 41-42).

Yet, even in this sylvan haven, a moment of crisis struck. The quiet of forest life was disrupted by waves of disturbances. The various officials of the Bon Mahal arrived, and through their eyes, the novelist portrayed the view of forest-dwelling "wild savages."

As days turned into weeks, Laxman, like all beggars, had to toil for the forest officials. He toiled all day without wages, leaving all farm work to Savitri. The toil and sweat of the Tripuri people enriched the forest soil. And their relentless toil changed all that was fertile. Thus, the forest wore a look of economic opportunity. The townsfolk, traders, senior and junior officials, forestry department personnel-people of every other class, began to flock to the forest, altering the environment. In this backdrop, Sahadev, the chief of the Beggar Settlement, said: "The government's abandoned forest has suddenly become a treasure trove."

Yet, with all these changes, nothing changed in the lives of the beggars. They continued running behind the officials, running tiger hunts for them, or doing other odd jobs as commanded by the authority. Laxman and Savitri found this world bewildering. Their peaceful forest life was lost. Laxman passed away his days obeying the commands of officials, and all farm work had to be managed by Savitri alone. Their married life, quite normal earlier, became lost.

The work in the forest was almost over, and as it happened with every other person in the beggar settlement, Laxman was called to work as a coolie at the house of the forest officers. Appalled to the core, Sahadev leads Laxman with the other beggar workers into the forest office. The position of the forest office in the forest reserves the novelist gives vividly here:

"The forest office is at the very edge of the forest, where the wilderness first encountered civilization. It stands at the point where wilderness and civilization meet. The office has been set up in the boundary of the forest, but the place itself does not have any trace of forest now. Civilization has shoved the wilderness aside and advanced a step ahead to occupy the space. The office bungalow, the warehouse, and the guards' residences are the latest gifts that civilization has bestowed upon the periphery of the forest. The shadowy hills wear now the insignia of civilization like a medal hanging and shining like the guilt ornament of a nose ring in the dark-skinned housewife" (Arannyani, p. 57).

Laxman and other beggar workers without wages started to live as slaves at the forest office. The total life of the inmates of the forest office depended upon the mercy of forest officers. All had to work gratuitously at the houses of the officers in

rotation. Ajay Bhattacharya depicts the life of the Tripuri tribal people, oppressed and deprived by the civilized world, through the experiences of Laxman in his novel *Arannyani*.

In *Arannyani*, Ajay Bhattacharya does not only depict the life of the Tripuri tribes but also that of modern civilized people. The novel shows the complexities of modern domestic life through the family life of Rameshbabu, a senior officer in the Forest Department, and Shashitara. Rameshbabu, a forest department officer, is portrayed as disliking the people of the forest, though he loves the forest itself. His wife, Shashitara, living in a place surrounded by forests is educated in all modern knowledge, but because of her husband's vocation, she had to live in a forest. To her, life in the forest felt like living in hell. To her, therefore, the people of the forest were only "wild people" or "forest dwellers."

So, when Sahadev brings Laxman to her, Shashitara likens him to a buffalo. No beggar was ever good enough to court her love since she looked upon the people of the forest as uncivilized. This tension continues through Laxman when he finds it difficult to settle into life in the forest office. His jungle instincts are out of place in the civilized environment, and he goes on committing mistakes in his work continuously, which further disappoints Shashitara, who cannot bear him. The lack of understanding of Laxman about the modern household tasks frustrates Shashitara, and she keeps on threatening to commit suicide.

In modern civilization, the lives of forest dwellers and wandering tribes are devoid of respect. They are victimized and exploited by the civilized world. The two, Laxman and Savitri, run to the government forest settlement for shelter, but they do not find refuge. They were lured by promises into becoming servants, and Laxman is unable to meet the expectations of Shashitara and the modern world. Finally, when he is lost in the city, he can't answer the police's questions and is subjected to humiliation and torture.

Ajay Bhattacharya has presented the inefficiency of the government and the administrative machinery through the mistreatment of Laxman. The suspicion-driven forest officials torture an innocent man without rhyme or reason. Laxman, who has been living in the forest and is a man with a conscience, is unable to express his pain. After the police torture, Laxman goes further into his shell, only to vent his frustration later in the wilderness, feeling trapped in a world which does not understand him.

The escape of Laxman from the forest office is symbolic of his quest to free himself from the shackles that bind him from the oppressions and exploitations

caused by the civilized world. However, upon returning to the forest, he is chased down by the authorities labeling him as a thief. This final rebellion against such oppressive forces was symbolic of the fight for justice and freedom. The villagers finally flee into deep forest to save themselves from such relentless persecutions.

Ajay Bhattacharya has painted in colors the life of the peaceful community of the Tripuri tribe and their continuous struggle against the exploitation and cruelty of modern civilization in the forest. The novel, through Laxman and Savitri, spoke of national liberation and the quest for freedom transcending personal liberation to reflect larger desires for social change. And despite this endless suffering, the rebellion of Laxman is defiance against the tyranny of the civilized world. The tortured body of Laxman and Savitri's reaction to it underlines the brutal realism of their lives but at the same time the indomitable spirit to survive.

The poor tribal people, represented through Laxman in the story, could not shout at their tormentors out of fear of more violence even when extreme oppression was perpetrated upon them. When the rebellion of Laxman reaches to the forest office, the officers and police come with full force, but the beggar workers have already fled deep into the forest, leaving everything to save their lives.

The last abandoned image of beggar settlement is without life and poignantly reflects the sheer destructiveness brought about by the colonial and the forces of oppression. The fleeing Laxman-Savitri stands as a gesture to the resistive resilience of the subaltern while pointing to irreconcilable differences between the world of civilized society and the world of nature. The story poignantly closes on the sumptuous lives of the leading class against the lead in the lives of the people of the tribe-a fact that clinches the theme of resistance and survival.

"The novel's search is not society, not the time, not even history. The novel's search is for the individual human being. It is society, time, and history that problematize this relationship of the individual, compelling us to re-evaluate at each step this concept of 'man.' It is in search of man; therefore, we must search out society, time, and history. Society, time, and history are all basic elements that constitute society." (Roy, 2003:P 10)

Ajay Bhattacharya, who emerged in the post-1950 generation of writers, came out with an altogether different sense of individualism amongst them. His taste and perception made him come out as a rare artist. The First World War accelerated the feelings of despondency, futility, loneliness, and alienation in people, and a highly relevant question came to the forefront regarding the positive advancement of civilization. The arrival of the Russian Revolution in 1917 brought

a new message: initiating a bold, optimistic, and hopeful new worldview that gave signals to a completely new era. Novelists began to focus on the eternally neglected, exploited, and marginalized people. It dawned on me that the role of hardworking people was crucial in the construction of civilization. This new awakening also came to realize that, in order to build a decent society, the exploitative structure of the state had to be changed, and the collective strength of the working people had to be applied appropriately. The novels were filled with the songs of the underprivileged. "In a class-fragmented society, even amidst deprivation and neglect, the characters of the novel are elevated to a divine royal stature. A new reality was created in the novel – the social reality and its higher form, socialist reality." (Haque, 2017: 16)

Ajay Bhattacharya writes fiction marked with socialist realism, and his writings visualize the life of the proletarians. His way of constructing of novels is quite different. In his Aranyani novel, he pictures the lives of the people in the forests in an artistic way. This novel reveals the life of the indigenous peoples of Tripura in the forest areas of the Tripura state. Aranyani is important in the sense that in it, the entire experience of his political life and the quintessence of his novelistic thinking are hidden. This novel represents different dimensions and colors of life, context, society, and environment. Social reality is a perpetual subject in human life. In literature, social reality is represented in different forms. With the passage of time, the political, economic, and social changes start reflecting in the literature of that time too. (Moniruzzaman, 1974: 19)

Though the storyline of the novel is kept upon the backdrop of the life of the primitive Tripura community in the forest, the application of the novel goes beyond that, portraying the lives of the landless, poor, and oppressed people in society. Ajay Bhattacharya, in this novel, raises the issue of exploitation and oppression of working-class people by the ruling classes. The followers of Marx believe that artists should adopt a clear stance. As sensitive individuals, they should be moved by the sufferings of the people. They should come forward in the fight to lessen the agony of the people. (Rahman, 2011: 31)

Ajay Bhattacharya has been creatively successful not only in the diversity of the subjects and the style of narration but also in the artistic approach that this novel represents. "Every part of the novel, characters, descriptions – everything forms part of a certain artistic work, and vice versa, the whole artistic work can assume the shape of an indivisible whole, which can intensely reflect the thinking of the novelist on life." (Bandopadhyay, 1995: 34)

Aranyani depicts the projected life of the indigenous Tripura people living in the deep forests of the state of Tripura. The Tripuras, in the depths of the forest, lived in

their own way, unmindful of the outside world. But they could not live in peace in their tranquil environment as wild animals, especially elephants and wild boars, disturbed their homes and ruined their crops. Nature plays a major role in the backdrop of this novel. Though the author gives some descriptions of the city, they do not play a major role as the backdrop. Since 'backdrop' refers to the place, time, prevailing social life, and natural surroundings behind the events and characters, nature plays the central role in the backdrop of Aranyani. Based on this backdrop, the author has perfectly and authentically depicted various characters, events, lifestyles, and ideas. "The events of Aranyani novel are not bounded within any definite period. Although the geography of Tripura hills and forests is indicated as the place of happening, geographical boundary remains unexplored in the novel." (Choudhury, 2015: P 231)

The unity of place, time, and events in conventional novels is an important condition. Ajay Bhattacharya, a great politician and keen observer of time, has not specified any time in Aranyani. On the contrary, through the portrayal of an indomitable, resolute mentality in the people of the Tripura tribe, he has extended the spirit of struggle and victory to all the oppressed, backward, and persecuted peoples of the world. It is a novel, the universal appeal of which crosses time, place, and society-and this might have been the reason behind the author not wanting to bind the novel within the confines of a particular geographical and temporal background. (Choudhury, 2015: P 231)

Ajay Bhattacharya's great artistic skill was rooted not in technical mastery but in believing in human strength and potential over artistic beauty. This is perhaps the reason why his novel lacks indulgence in beauty or internal conflict of faith and beliefs. Despite various limitations, as a political leader and organizer of humanitarian sentiments, in his novel Aranyani, he vividly portrays the struggle of the Tripura tribal community, their suffering, and the signs of their future victory. This portrayal has earned a permanent place in the hearts of readers as a unique and poignant piece of literature. Ajay Bhattacharya, probably deliberately, avoids the concrete time frame in his work but rather tries to expand the struggle for the rights of the Tripura tribals among all the exploited people of the world. It is nowhere; the delineation of human pain due to personal flawed lines or societal compulsion has been portrayed with such empathy and feeling that the reader gets merged with them, and at times even shares a glimpse of those poverty-stricken and pained faces in the faces known to him. (Bandopadhyay, 2002: 548)

Ajay Bhattacharya's Aranyani represents the lives of Tripuri people, who are staying in the forest of Tripura. The storyline centers around Laxman and Savitri marital life. He projects their life in the house along with various happenings within the forest as the main plot of the story. To create diversity and variation within the

story, subplots have been used but they are not overpowering the main storyline between Laxman and Savitri. The story is about the lives of Laxman and Savitri, who dwell deep in the forests of Tripura. Because of the wild animal raids and the elephant herds that consumed crops and human life, they had to leave their village in the forest. They migrated to a far-off village in Tripura, but could not settle either because of acute shortage of agrarian land and hunting sources. They soon hear of a government forest bungalow in the vicinity and, with hopes of finding safety and a new home, move there. But soon, the oppressive rule of civilized humans leads them to rebellion, and they are pursued with inhuman and brutal persecution. Finally, Laxman, in a defiant revenge against the bungalow authorities, puts at risk the lives of all the inmates of the labor colony. Fearing for their lives, they again flee into the forest to dream of a new beginning. Subplots in the novel depict the marital life of the bungalow head, the "Boro Sahib," and his wife Shashitara, and the interactions between the bungalow authorities and the Tripura tribals. These subplots have been very essential in fully depicting the lives of the tribal people in Aranyani. Ajay Bhattacharya has shown special dexterity in the skillful construction of narrative style through a variety of plots. Although a Marxist writer, he is more concerned with matter rather than form.

In Aranyani, the principal characters, Laxman and Savitri, are representatives of the most rustic people of Tripura tribe. Ajay Bhattacharya, as an author, depicts the life, struggle, beliefs, customs, and future of the Tripura tribal community in his writings based on his personal experiences and observations. It is shown in the story that the people of Tripura live in a very remote area amidst dense forests. Laxman and Savitri, like others of their tribe, work hard to make the land arable, working day and night ceaselessly. While Laxman works the land, like all men of his tribe, he is a hunter. There is no lack of game in the woods, but Laxman is prey to irritation at finding that with so few people in their village, he cannot engage in a hunt. Even though he lives in the woodlands, Laxman is engrossed in the interests of the deliverance of his people and their wretched lot. When Savitri proposes a visit to her mother, Laxman thinks of taking his people to the forest to save them from their distress. Whereas in the bungalow of the government, Laxman is compelled to work as a coolie. Though he decides to take revenge on the authorities of the bungalow, at first, he cannot protest. When the oppression increases, Laxman becomes a rebel. Savitri always stood by Laxman through thick and thin and shared every experience in his life. However, when they are put to work as laborers in the bungalow, Savitri longs to be taken back to the forest. The portrayal of Savitri in the novel is that of a hardworking, chaste, patient woman who always supports her husband through thick and thin.

Ajay Bhattacharya has taken a different pattern of narration in Aranyani

through an omniscient point of view, apart from the conventional methods of narration at times when the story is narrated through the dialogues of the characters. It gives the three-dimensional aspect of the struggle of the tribal people and their life in the forest. "Since the novel is an all-encompassing art form, it is the portrayal of society's multifaceted experiences and their expression through the medium of literature," (Khan, 1997, p. 24).

Ajay Bhattacharya himself narrates the whole story and events in the novel, as the inner soul of the author is reflected in the narrative. It is the story of the exploitation and oppression of forest dwellers by civilized modern people. Aranyani delves into the trials and tribulations of the Tripura tribal community; Bhattacharya rightly wishes to portray their lives in a new dimension. The people of Tripura are continuously oppressed by the so-called civilized humans of the world, and instead of getting destroyed, they go deep into the forests for shelter and continue dreaming about survival. In describing this struggle, the author employs the omniscient point of view shown in the search for safety during the elephant attack:

"The night passed; the dawn came; the songs of the birds sang through the woods. Laxman and Savitri did not stop. Morning turned into noon, yet pressed by their need they went, never halting. When at length they saw an open riverbank before them, many miles were left behind."

In Aranyani, several voices fill out the narration, giving to the story its fuller, completed utterance. The use of collective voices presents the same theme in different ways and allows the same theme to be viewed and presented. Character dialogues and diverse depictions of people's lives are the ways through which the author has used multiple voices to enhance the societal picture. The use of joint voices in the novel plays a significant role and aligns with the author's Marxist ideology of advocating for the working class and ending class exploitation and division. Through Laxman's character, Bhattacharya critiques class rule and oppression that are presented in the incapability of Laxman to put on with a city environment immediately after traveling with "Boro Sahib" and his subsequential physical abuse by the police. While Laxman could avenge this injustice, his failure to act against the authority speaks of the helpless situation of the lower class in a capitalist society.

Ajay Bhattacharya was a communist political thinker and human rights activist who was deeply related to the struggles of the working class and the oppressed. Aranyani poignantly depicts the oppression of the people of Tripura, with Laxman emerging as the icon of exploited masses. In this novel, Bhattacharya denounces the

oppression of the tribal community by the colonial masters and provokes the collective spirit of resistance among the downtrodden.

In *Arannyani*, Ajay Bhattacharya's deep observation and sharp outlook are reflected. He introduces the concept of elephants as a major factor in the story. In this novel, elephants are projected as a special character. While the Tripuras are living a peaceful life in the forest, their life is disrupted by the arrival and attacks of elephants. It is the lot of lands cultivated by Tripuras day and night getting ravaged by herds of wild elephants. Knowing their nature of being dangerous, they do not wish to cause any damage to the wild elephants, but from experience, they understand it all. However, when patience has crossed the limit, Tripuras no longer remain quiet. They do not attack the elephants when the latter destroy their crops, but when a child falls under the elephant's feet, the wild Tripuras get together and attack the infuriated elephant, even burning the forests. Though at times they manage to defeat the elephant herd, months later the elephants come back for revenge and attack the village of the Tripuras. The villagers at first consider this as an earthquake and then realize in flashes of thunderclouds that the elephants are pushing the huts with their trunks. Fearing for their lives, the Tripuras abandon everything and flee to the jungle in the dark of night. The attack by the elephants is described:

A thing seen by them with their very eyes-the flow of blood became ice in the veins. What was an earthquake that had shown its terror before now seemed small. A hundred earthquakes could not match the terror clutching their hearts. Should the elephants begin to attack mankind? Fear unsurpassed.

The elephant herd as a metaphor in the novel is the creation of Ajay Bhattacharya's tremendous imagination. There lies a corresponding relationship between the herd of elephants and the exploitative mentality of the ruling class. Elephants in Bengali literature are unique and symbolic depictions. Bhattacharya depicts the forest-dwelling Tripura tribe through his use of nature in its entirety. The use of nature in *Arannyani* by Ajay Bhattacharya can be compared with the use of nature that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay has affected in his writings. Bibhutibhushan gave voice to nature and spoke about human life through it. As in his novel *Aranyak* (1939), nature itself appeared as a character. Similarly, in *Arannyani*, Ajay Bhattacharya uses nature as a backdrop to human life, and nature plays an important role in the story. He has pitted the forest-living Tripuras against the rich backdrop of nature, describing vast expanses of the Lusai hills and ever-flowing rivers and forests that enrich a narrative.

This use of the novel brings vividly into live action the correct identity and means of livelihood associated with the primitive Tripura tribal group. The same

technique found in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay to make nature inherent in the life of humans finds an echo here in Ajay Bhattacharya.

Ajay Bhattacharya has used the colloquial style in language use in *Arannyani*. The selection of language is a critical basis of the artistic success of this novel. The relation of the world and perspective viewed by him is closely related to the language, and in constructing sentences, in the use of words, in narration, imagery, the wide imagination of the writer can be seen. Language is appropriately used concerning the theme of the novel, and through the dialogues of his characters, he reflects the classes and their stand. The language of *Arannyani* is also smoother and clearer compared to the earlier works like *Eghar-Oghor* and *Kuli Mem*.

Dialogue plays an important role in portraying the story of *Arannyani*. Through dialogue, we tend to get a close view of the characters, and the story can be made more dramatic. "Through dialogue, the story progresses, and primarily it introduces the readers to the everyday lives of the characters."

The emotions, actions, and reactions of the characters are expressed in dialogues and for that special focus, which the novelist wants. Ajay Bhattacharya has presented natural dialogues wittily regarding the character attributes. In this novel, his natural colloquial dialogue presented the daily activities of the tribe of Tripura. For an example, take the following talk between Laxman and Savitri who remained hungry and fled away from the elephant herd:

Savitri: "But my stomach feels like it's burning inside." Laxman: "But this fire can't be put out with sand, Savitri." Savitri: "Are there any fruits here?" Laxman: "Why wouldn't there be fruits? But is there a forest where we can search for them?" Savitri: "Then where should we look? Which way, which forest? Which path should we take? My body can barely move."

These dialogues form the basis for depicting struggles and life in this novel about the Tripura tribe.

Ajay Bhattacharya has depicted the life, culture, struggle, and conflicts of the Tripura tribe through metaphors and imagery in *Arannyani*. The metaphors have been used to describe life in the forest and the exploitation by the bourgeois ruling class. Imagery, metaphors, and expressions have given a higher dimension to the novel's artistic quality and brought balance to the narrative structure.

A few examples of the figurative languages used in the novel are:

- "The scattered huts can't be called a village; it's like the nests of forest birds on

the tree branches."

- "After the chaos of destruction, the elephant herd returned as if from the waves of a great deluge."
- "The office, bungalow, warehouse, and the guard's quarters by the forest—this new creation of civilization looked like a picture. On the shadowed mountains, it seemed like the civilization was hanging like a guilty necklace on the nose of a dark-skinned housewife."

Ajay Bhattacharya has enriched the story of flight and return of the Tripura tribe with mythological elements in the last part of Arannyani. The characters from Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other folk tales are integrated into the emotions of the non-Aryan people to create a new mythical resonance at the end of the novel.

It is when Laxman gets caught by the forest guards and hurls a sickle at them, wounding one of the guards, that the whole village of Bega suffers persecution. Beginning from the forest superintendent, police, and forest guards participated in this attack. Bhattacharya writes about it in the novel:

"Unless the village was surrounded in haste, the guilty would certainly escape. Savitri would run away. Ram, Ravan, Yudhishtira, Dasharath, Sita, Damayanti, Nalini, and Damini—all would run away. None of them would remain idle. The rebellion had to be suppressed; silence was inevitable.

While Laxman, Savitri, and Dasharath are figures from folk tales and non-Aryan mythology, Bhattacharya uses these mythological figures consciously to infuse an added depth—a symbolic meaning—within the narrative. And when the police and the forest guards cannot arrest even a single person among the villagers, the novelist insists:

"There are no signs of life in the Beggar Palli. There is no Laxman, no Savitri, no Ram, no Ravan, no Yudhishtir, no Dasharath, no Sita, no Damayanti, no Nalini, no Jamini, no Kamini."

The use of mythology in Arannyani brings depth and an artistic elegance into the novel.

6. Conclusion

Marxism plays an important role in Bengali literature. The conflict of the bourgeois and proletariat classes is depicted in Marxist literature. The philosophy of "art for art's sake" has been discarded, and instead, it presents an artistic

representation of human struggle and life. Ajay Bhattacharya, in *Arannyani* focuses on presenting the struggle of the working class under the exploitation of the bourgeois class. Bhattacharya has used the character of Laxman to reflect a protest against the ruling class through the plight of the workers and their determination to survive. Laxman not only fights for his freedom but also fights for national liberation. Bhattacharya reflects his ideological commitment to communist philosophy and the fight against exploitation through these characters.

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