

Forest Whispers: How Jharkhand's Nature Shaped Bengali Poetry

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Nature

The forests and hills of Jharkhand inspired Bengali poets in the mid-20th century to write some of their best works

 Palamu boasts rich biodiversity and dense foliage

Palamu boasts rich biodiversity and dense foliage Shutterstock

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Shakti Chattopadhyay was missing. His friends had no clue where he was. This was not unusual—Shakti liked taking off. But this time, he did not return for months. At Coffee House, the legendary hangout of poets and artists near Calcutta University, rumours started floating about his whereabouts.



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Some said he was visiting his friend Samir Roychoudhury at Chaibasa in Jharkhand. Others said Samir did not live there anymore; Shakti was imprisoned at the local jail. “This seemed possible,” writes Bengali novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay in his autobiography *Ardhek Jibon* (Half a Life, 2002). “How come they were not sending us any letters?”

Fearing the worst, Sunil and his friend, novelist Sandipan Chattopadhyay, decided to embark on a rescue mission. But they did not even know how to get to Chaibasa.

They took the train from Calcutta, as Kolkata was then known. “We knew that jail food was terrible, you did not get cigarettes behind the bars,” writes Sunil. “So, we took a few packets of cigarettes, biscuits, and tinned cheese for Shakti.”

Arriving at their destination late in the afternoon, they decided to get a lay of the land before trying to meet their friend in the prison the next day. They walked to Boro Nadi, a small rivulet near Chaibasa. The pleasant landscape and the weather inspired both Sandipan and Sunil, and they started to sing songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore.

But their duet was interrupted as a young, bearded man emerged from a house nearby and demanded in a loud voice: “Who sings Tagore songs here but me?” It was Shakti.

“Chaibasa was a picnic spot for the poets of the Krittibas group,” Bengali poet Pradip Choudhuri told me when I interviewed him in 2016. “Samir was a great host, and all his friends who were poets and writers stayed with him for weeks.”

Sunil also acknowledges the hospitality of Samir and his wife, Bela, in his autobiography. He recollects visiting the Roychowdhurys at several places in Jharkhand—Daltonganj (Medininagar), Dhalbhumgarh—where Samir would be posted as a government employee in undivided Bihar. He also recollects their adventures like drinking mahua, a local brew derived from the eponymous tree.

“These places had a significant influence on Shakti’s poetry,” writes Sunil. “They also influenced Sandipan’s work. But these experiences did not leave much of an impression on me. Rather, I could not use them much in my writing.”

This self-appraisal might be accurate for Sunil’s poetry, but it was, in fact, his experience of a spontaneous trip to Dhalbhumgarh along with friends that served as the material for his novel “Aranyer Din Ratri” (Days and Nights in the Forest). First published in 1968, it was adapted into a film with the same title by Satyajit Ray in 1970.

This film was a departure for Ray, from adapting works of more classical writers such as Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, or Rajshekhar Basu to younger novelists such as Sunil or Shankar. It was probably inspired by the socio-political upheaval in Calcutta, like the far-left Naxalbari movement.

But what prompted Sunil, Shakti, and their friends, who grew up and worked in Calcutta, and were embedded in the city’s literary landscape, to seek inspiration in the hills and forests of Jharkhand?

Stills from Aranyer Din Ratri

City Poets

Sunil, Shakti, Sandipan, and Samir were the first generation of post-Independence Bengali poets, as much a product of the hopes of a newly minted post-colony as the violence of Partition’s cartographic cosmetic surgery. They would be eventually known as the Krittibas group, thanks to the eponymous literary magazine named after the 15th-century Bengali poet.

The others in the group were Ananda Bagchi, Dipak Majumdar, Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Shanka Ghosh—exclusively male, till Nabaneeta Dev Sen joined them, occasionally, much later. Coffee House, which was a hangout for writers, artists, actors, film and theatre people, also served as the temporary office of Krittibas.

“In this initial phase, most of the editorial work of the magazine was done by Sunil,” writes Bhaswati Bhattacharya in her book “Much Ado Over Coffee.”

“One table at the Coffee House served as the office of the magazine.”

Bhattacharya’s book, an analytical history of coffee drinking in India, centred around the Indian Coffee House chain in cities like Calcutta, Allahabad, and New Delhi, also claims that such places catalysed the development of a literary bourgeoisie like the coffee houses in 18th-century Vienna, or 19th-century London.

Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay describes the first edition in his essay “Krittibas-er Ramayan (Krittibas’s Ramayana)”: “The first edition was published with great care. Thick art paper, 44 pages printed beautifully, proper borders—it would be difficult to guess from these that the people included in these pages, and their friends, were capable of anything explosive later on.”

Besides hanging out at the Coffee House, their other activities included getting drunk at country liquor outlets like Khalasitola and Chhota Bristol in central Calcutta, visiting the red light district in Sonagachi, or roaming the empty streets at night.

The urbanity of these poets is perhaps best expressed in Sarat Kumar’s short poem, “Matta Obsothay Rochito (Drunken Poem).”

After midnight, four young men through a crematorium-empty Calcutta

Ride from Chowringhee, Bhawanipur to Shyambazaar

Only the insomniac hear their horses’ hooves, whistles of their whips,

Mongrels are startled by the sparks they make on deserted tramlines

A handful of red-capped police heads are scattered all over

They are startled on hearing the horses

As the sound fades, they bend their heads to collect scattered coins

None of you have seen this scene, only the sex workers have seen it at midnight.

The twin forts of Palamu are fine examples of Mughal architecture

Going West

But the city was not the only source of inspiration for the Bengali poets of the 1950s. The forest beckoned them. The happy coincidence of Samir working at different places in the Chhotanagpur Plateau region acted as a catalyst.

The Chhotanagpur Plateau covers an area of about 65,000 sq. kms in Jharkhand, and its neighbouring states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. When the East India Company obtained the right to collect taxes from Bengal in 1764, “the Grand Trunk Road which ran east-west along the Chhotanagpur Plateau was dilapidated and without bridges,” writes poet Mihir Vatsa in his book *Tales of Hazaribagh*, which was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2022.

“This road was notorious for theft and dacoities... Quietly aptly, the region was dubbed the ‘Junglebury district’ by the British. It was a mysterious province of many myths... home to sneaky tigers, exotic rituals, and primitive tribes. Here, the tigers were more cunning.”

Over the 19th century, the region attracted both colonial officers and Bengali babus, who wanted to escape the heat and dust of the Gangetic plains, and enjoy the salubrious climate of the hills and forests of the Chhotanagpur region. Small towns such as Ranchi, Hazaribagh, and Netarhat were called “hill stations”, though they were at a much lower altitude than the hill stations up north.

In the film *Aranyer Din Ratri*, as the four young men from Calcutta travel to Palamu in a car, one of them, Sanjay, reads from a memoir of Sanjib Chandra Chattopadhyay: “Accustomed to flat landscapes, Bengalis marvel at the sight of the smallest heap of earth. Naturally, I was dazzled by the hilly landscapes of Palamu.”

Sanjib Chandra was the elder brother of Bankim Chandra, the author of *Vande Mataram*, and one of the key figures of 19th-century Bengali literature. His book, *Palamu*, “was one of the earliest in a long line of texts containing accounts of the Bengali bhadralok’s journeys to Paschim,” writes Ahana Maitra in her paper “Old Landscapes, New Babus.”

Paschim—literally meaning “the west”—referred to regions west of the Bengal Presidency, now in Bihar and Jharkhand. The Kritibas group’s travels to the region in the 1950s and 1960s were within the well-rehearsed literary and cultural framework of the metropolitan centre of Calcutta and its “other”—the hills and forests of Jharkhand.

A Pastoral Space

The film explores this dichotomy quite consciously, a theme that Ray would continue to explore in later works. In films such as *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished, 1956), *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959), or *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963), Calcutta is a source of inspiration and opportunity. However, the city turns increasingly belligerent and claustrophobic after *Aranyer Din Ratri*.

The films of the Calcutta trilogy—*Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited, 1971), and *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman, 1976)—depict in some way the social upheaval in the city, especially the violent far-left Naxalbari movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Historian Rochona Majumdar in her book *Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures* writes that unlike Ray's earlier films, which depicted a transition from a feudal or colonial past to a modern present, the "city films... are bereft of this sense of historical movement along any clear-cut, prognosticable trajectory. Despite the tremendous contemporary upheaval that all three films register, the present they depict is not a time of transition."

Even in his last film, *Aguntuk* (The Stranger, 1991), Ray explores this dichotomy through the character of a Calcutta-born anthropologist, played by Utpal Dutta, who spends decades in various First Nation communities across the Americas before returning home and rejecting urban civilisation altogether as barbaric and hypocritical.

Film scholar Darius Cooper draws upon Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and finds Ray employing carnivalesque techniques in *Aranyer Din Ratri* to find a resolution to the anxieties and tensions of its urban characters in the unfamiliar landscape of the forest. Their drunken merrymaking allows them to abandon the personas they assume in the city and connect to their atavistic desires.

For me, however, the film has always been a pastoral, as described by scholars such as Terry Gifford, who show that the urban characters might leave the city and relocate, albeit temporarily, to a rural/forest setting, but they are never able to abandon their personas and to which they eventually return. Some resolution of the urban tensions might be possible in the pastoral setting, but it is not essential.

The twin forts lie in ruin inside the forest

Fact To Fiction

In his autobiography, Sunil writes about some of their strange experiences: "Once when we were in Daltonganj, we heard the news that hills were being auctioned nearby. I ran to watch the auction. People were buying denuded hills for two-three thousand rupees...Of my

friends, I was the only one from a refugee family. We did not have even a patch of land anywhere.”

Sunil felt tempted to buy one of the hills, but where would a young, impecunious poet get the money for it?

“After that, for several days, I built a cottage on the peak of a small, lonely hill in my imagination and lived there,” he writes.

His novel condenses many of these experiences.

“Four of us — Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Bhaskar Dutta, and I— set off for an unknown destination,” writes Sunil in his autobiography. “We boarded a train without buying tickets and disembarked at Dhalbhumgarh on the advice of a co-passenger. At that time, Dhalbhumgarh was a solitary area, with a forest nearby, a village of Adivasis, and a government-sanctioned watering hole that sold only *mahua*.”

In the novel, too, four young men arrive at Dhalbhumgarh one morning, getting off a train and embarking on their adventures. In the film, Ray changed the setting to Palamu, about 370 km northwest.

Using personal experiences for fiction was not a remarkable innovation, but Sunil learned the technique from American Beat novelist Jack Kerouac. The two met when Sunil was at the Iowa Writers’ Residency in the early 1960s.

He remembers Kerouac telling him: “I don’t have to go looking around for plots. Before starting a novel, I try to recollect some of my experiences. What was I doing that month of that year? When I remember, I start writing from there. The writing progresses on its own from there.”

Sunil’s first novel, “Atmaprakash” (Self Expression, 1964), is written self-consciously in this technique. Even the name of the protagonist remains unchanged as Sunil. While he changes the names of the characters in “Aranyer Din Ratri,” little else is altered.

The City Becomes A Hill

Shakti Chattopadhyay also acknowledges the influence of Chaibasa in his poetry. “The good time for writing in my life was in Chaibasa and other places around it,” he writes in an essay titled “Jangale-Pahare (Forests and Hills, 1985).”

“Sandipan showed me the way. Samir took the responsibility of feeding and housing me like a brother. I would write 15-20 poems in a day, exhausting myself completely. Most of these are lost. But that’s no loss.”

These experiences not only inspired several poems in his second published collection “Dharmey Achi Giraffe-eo Achi” (I am in Religion, in Giraffe Too, 1965), but also his novels “Kinnor Kinnori” (1976). In a later poem, “Paharia Kolkata” (Hilly Calcutta), included in his book “Jetey Pari Kintu Keno Jaabo” (I Could Go, But Why Should I?, 1982), he creates a synthesis between the urban landscape and the hilly one:

The earth dug out for the underground railway has made hills.

The Maidan has changed into the Santhal Parganas!

On the hilltop are trees, pine forests. At the foothills

Harvest festivals take place each year. County liquor festivals

Each evening, the beats of the drums intoxicates

The days and noons of Kolkata with hilly music!

The poem shows that the hills and forests need not necessarily be a counterpoint—the “other”—to the city. A synthesis is possible.

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