ILN JOURNAL:
INDIAN LITERARY NARRATIVES

https://doi.org/10.70396/ilnjournal.v3n2.a.09 | Volume 3, Issue 2, June 2026 | ISSN: 3048 6920

The River, the School, and the Future: Education in Abdus Samad's *Herai Puwa Prithibi* (The World Found Again)

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Note on Translation

All translations from Abdus Samad's *Herai Puwa Prithibi* are the author's own. The novel has not been published in English translation. All quotations cited in this article have been translated directly from the original Assamese edition by the author of this article. All page numbers refer to the original Assamese text.

Abstract

This article argues that education in Abdus Samad's Assamese novel Herai Puwa Prithibi (The World Found Again) does not constitute development in that it does not act as a tool for economic mobility, but constitutes a transformation in the environment of the char chapori community. In the following discussion based on textual clusters such as Naji's self-aware epistemic wound and the lost land lease, Adili's romantic-educational consciousness and the geographic boundary represented by the Champavati river, and the community's collective housing of Mozammel and the construction of a school in two days, this analysis proposes that in Herai Puwa Prithibi, education constitutes what this paper would like to call 'subaltern educational futurity', i.e., a uniquely environmentally situated educational desire that is grounded in material practices at once collective and local. This educational desire that this study is referring to is distinct from the dominant developmentalist model in which literacy and education function as instruments for individual economic mobility. Using the concepts of Paulo Freire's conscientization, Elinor Ostrom's commons management, and José Muñoz's notion of futurity as a political act, the paper argues that Char Chapori novels have presented a vision of educational aspiration that remains unexplored within the South Asian literary tradition and the field of education studies.

Submitted: 19.05.2026 Revised: 10.06.2026 Accepted: 26.06.2026 Published: 30.06.2026

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Keywords: Subaltern Futurity, Ecological Intervention, Education, Conscientization

Introduction: The School that the River Would Not Allow

"Had there been a school!" (Samad 112)

It is hard to overestimate the political significance of these words, felt by Naji, and repeated throughout Abdus Samad's *Herai Puwa Prithibi* ("The World Found Again"). They are not the idle words of childhood disappointment; rather, they are the epitome of the epistemological trauma experienced by this community, an acute realization that their geographic separation from education makes them a marginalized community in their own right, as displaced as if the Brahmaputra had washed them away.

Herai Puwa Prithibi is Abdus Samad's ongoing attempt at chronicling the experience of Char Chapori communities of the Brahmaputra river in Assam. This is a world of chars (shifting sands) and chaporis (settled floodplains), ephemeral landscapes, appearing and disappearing with the seasonal changes of the river, rendering land unstable and making survival contingent on a complex understanding of the dynamics of the Brahmaputra's flow and movements. The novel traces the gradual destruction of this world through ecological dispossession and administrative apathy, and, in this destruction, it finds one particular desire, which this essay describes as subaltern educational futurity.

This article argues that the education in *Herai Puwa Prithibi* cannot be conceived of in terms of the dominant developmental discourse wherein education is conceived as a means to escape poverty, as a means for economic mobility, and as a way of bringing modern knowledge to backward people. Education here is conceived as an ecological process that makes possible a transformation of the environment of this community, where the environment can be defined in the char chapori sense of the environment as the totality of social, physical, and epistemological elements within which humanity comes into being. When Naji asserts that "the fault is the environment of the village," and that education will serve to transform it, he makes an argument about the nature of education in ecological terms. Such an approach is uncharted territory within the study of South Asian education and literary texts. This paper aims to map out this territory by developing the argument within the context of Freire, Ostrom, and Muñoz, using Samad's text as its foundation.

The Self-Recognized Epistemic Wound: Naji, the Forgotten Lease, and Conscientization

One of the most profound and philosophically sound articulations of educational need is made by none other than Naji himself, the char chapori farmer whose growing consciousness about his community's lack of education forms one of the most important elements of the story:

> Yes, even though we have eyes, we are blind. Black letters are nothing but meaningless marks to us. If only we could educate our children a little! Times are changing, and becoming more complicated as well. In the future, it will become very difficult for educated people even to make a living. We will stumble at every step. And why speak only of the future- even now we can understand how difficult life becomes without education. One has to remain small and inferior before just anyone (Samad 112)

It is in the char chapori context that the expression "blind even though we have eyes" serves as the clearest metaphor for lack of education, and it emerges precisely from within the sensory language of the community's ecology and environment as opposed to any externally imposed developmental narrative. To be endowed with eyes that do not see letters is to have access to the full sensory experience of ecological literacy but to lack its modern, bureaucratic manifestation. This community can read the river, the sky, the soil, and the season; it cannot read its official relationship to the very land upon which it lives.

The practical implications of this form of blindness emerge quickly through the example of the forgotten land lease. Ghazibar's family possesses six bighas of land in a field near Kharchimari land that, at this point, has been swallowed by the Brahmaputra. However, it remains registered administratively, and there is still an obligation on its part to pay rent. Naji cannot, however, find the document that relates to the six acres of land because "Naji remembered something from about a year ago. They had six bighas of land on the side of Kharchimari." (Samad 112) Because of this, there is a threat to their land 'otherwise it will be auctioned'.

That is what this paper considers to be the unique kind of educational need of the char chapori community; literacy as defence against administrative dispossession. The constant threat of losing one's land owing to the ecological behaviour of the river and administrative indifference by the state government creates a vulnerability in which one can never be too safe. Not being able to understand the legal documentation regarding one's land tenure is thus not just a minor difficulty; rather, it is a major structural issue wherein ecological precarity is made worse by legal invisibility. For the char chapori community, literacy is essential because they do not need jobs in the cities. Literacy is important for them in order to secure the lands they currently occupy through leases and rents, voter list inclusion, etc.

This naming of the community's blindness in Naji's own language is what Paulo Freire terms "conscientization": the point at which the oppressed society names its oppressive state using its native language (Freire 17). According to Freire, the oppressed need to name their world before they can change it; the very act of naming is a form of political engagement. The line "We are blind, even though we have eyes," spoken by Naji, is this naming. It is followed in the novel by the journey towards the schoolhouse, the housed teacher, and the children moving eastward.

Geographic, Inverse Geographies and Educational Inequalities Across the River Champavati:

The Champavati River that runs through the region is much more than just a body of water. It serves as an epistemological boundary and marker for education within the char chapori world as a geographic delineation of area where education is available and not available. This is evident through Adili's story in the narrative when it states:

> Only the Champavati River flows in between. But the mindset of the people on the Northern bank of the Champavati is different. Even if they cannot keep pace fully with the changing times, they at least understand somewhat which way the world is moving. That is why schools have been established in their villages, and educated boys and girls can be found in almost every household. (Samad 37)

The reason why schools are located on the north side of the river is that communities in those areas had enough contact with the rest of the world to understand that education is necessary for survival in the modern economy; while communities located on the south side of the river, isolated from the rest of the world by the river, have not received the same basic signal of education as a necessity. The isolation to the south of the river is not a result of cultural backwardness; rather, it is caused by the structural exclusion of the char based on a river that the state's infrastructure has not been able to create bridges for and the state's education system has not been able to reach the char. In the "school" in Bhadrashimla, which serves the char chapori community as a very nominal and not particularly reliable or structurally sufficient way of accessing educational provision from the state, the words Samad (37) uses to describe the "school": "'school' is a name only; if it has walls, it has no roof; if it has roof, there are no walls; the teacher appears like a comet" highlight the poor condition of schooling for the char chapori community within this context of sustaining systemic educational deprivation.

In this context of continuing systemic educational deprivation, Adili's awareness of Nazi's illiteracy and her anger about it provide an alternative dimension of educational aspiration that has not yet been theorized by the dominant discourses of educational development: literacy as a romantic and relational possibility. Primarily, Adili wants Nazi to be literate so that they can have an emotional relationship with each other. Her desire for Nazi to learn to read is thus rooted more in her affection for him than in any economic considerations.

Adili and Nazi are emotionally involved with each other. Adili's desire for Nazi to be literate, while he is physically close to her, demonstrates that their future can be limited because they will not be able to share their emotional feelings and thoughts verbally, because he is not literate. Through her anger, which initially targets Nazi's illiteracy and then is redirected at Nazi's father, Adili tracks the social mechanisms through which systemic educational deprivation will close their future together in the char chapori context. The closure of futures resulting from illiteracy is

not limited only to the economic domains of their futures; it also includes the intimate dimensions of their life as a couple. In short, the closure of futures resulting from illiteracy will limit Adili and Nazi's development as a couple, and will preclude having any future together as lovers.

According to José Muñoz, future possibility is inherently derived from affect before politics that is, the feeling of longing is the first step in preparing for and pursuing to fulfill the horizon of potentiality before being organized into collective political activity (Muñoz 1). For example, in the narrative of the book concerning Adili and her desire for the education of an ideal Nazi and her use of the affective register of a subaltern educational future, the desire she has to be able to read and write in a person she loves becomes a reason for the community to begin a collective political investment in educational infrastructure over the course of the story. Within the context of the novel, the pathway by which Adili accesses education (by moving away from the char to live with her uncle on the north bank of the river) provides insight into the only educational models available to char chapori children up to this point in time: through kinship networks by way of extracting from the area of the char. To obtain an education, the child must be separated from their community. A child from the char must leave their ecological and social areas in order to be able to obtain formal knowledge required by the emerging demands of the dominant economy. The limitations and structure of this model are clearly traced through Ramisa's trajectory, Adili's cousin, who obtains her high school education through the extraction model and never completes high school education due to having failed the ninth grade three times before dropping out of school to marry.

Ramisa's educational limits represent neither a personal choice nor failure but instead reflect the limits on individuals' ability to extract from educational systems (individual-level), which are structured with sufficient support and resources from the state and community (institutional-level). This structural mismatch the collision of two trajectories allows Ramisa's ceiling to fall, thereby permitting a new way of thinking about how education can be provided collectively by the char chapori community. After two days, the construction of the schoolhouse demonstrates a shift away from individual extraction. It declares that there is now a school in the char that will provide educational opportunities to children not through outward migration but through engagement in the local educational system. "Migration acts as a growth driver for urban agglomerations, posing a difficult methodological task of its statistical accounting as well as further assessment of migration's impact on the economy of agglomerations" (Chernyshev et al. 374).

Badi and the Limitations of Accidental Literacy:

The character of Badi serves as an illustration of how vulnerable (unstable) accidental physical literacy can be when used as a substitute for a systematic community education system and co-ordinated community action; and the community's realisation of its educational need and its collective response to it. Badi did not learn to read through any formal school; rather, he attended the Balajani

madrassa for three years because his father hoped this was the best way to curb his son's mischievousness.

As a result of Badi's functional physical literacy he becomes an integral administrative representative of his village within the written form of administrative presentation of laws that represent the 'legal' existence of his village; thus, Badi does not have to attempt to provide the written record of the written, legal existence of his village as could be accomplished with the written collective participation of the villagers as a created document through their collective agreement.

Badi's pride in being the only person to represent the entire village in communicating with the written world of administrative documentation is very genuine and is also structurally enlightening. Badi is the only person in his village who has three years of unintended education (i.e., madrassa individual educational accidents), thus Badi is the only individual in the collective village with the capacity to connect the entire village to the written world of administrative law that supports the village's legal existence.

As Badi leaves to rent a house in Chapar for seventy rupees barely surviving in what is now considered a backwater, the community loses its last administrative intermediary. His exit is the subtle crisis that makes apparent the structural instability of the individual literacy model. According to Elinor Ostrom's work on common pool resource governance, when the only resource custodian holds the single administrative authority for the resource, the common pool resource is exceptionally unstable (Ostrom 90). Thus, Badi's literacy is a common property resource efficiently governed by the community through only one custodian. Once that custodian becomes urbanized, the resource has been lost to the community. Badi's trajectory also illustrates the tension between the two available educational aspirational models, Naji's model of guarding the community's ecological world through literacy, and the dominant model of extractive development discourses using literacy as a means to facilitate a migration from the community to the urban economy. "Rural-urban migration is the most adopted strategy in rural areas to overcome the risk associated with subsistence economy and to diversify income" (Kumar and Sati 3685).

Badi selects the extractive model. His literate ability provides the vehicle (Hercules bicycle) to obtain employment as a security guard and rent a house. When Badi leaves the village, the village becomes poorer for having depended on him, although temporary benefit was afforded them through mediating Badi's literacy. They become more conscious of the need for and attain awareness of the consequences of educational system failure.

Naji develops the most original and theoretically novel argument related to education based on his growing awareness from the time he saw the children using obscene words in the village streets; through the following adult conflict associated with such words.

Naji argues in conclusion that the quarrels, the children's foul mouth, and the adult fights are a result of the environmental conditions of the village rather than a personal moral failure. This statement is Naji's most sophisticated argument involving the ecological/educational aspect of development. Naji does not claim that if a child is educated, he will be able to secure a job in Chapar, or that he will be able to achieve greater mobility economically, or that through literacy he will have an opportunity to develop modernity in the char. Instead, Naji maintains that education will enhance the environment within the village; this suggests that the social chaos Naji sees in his village is a reflection of the environmental conditions, as opposed to the failure of the individual.

The author is using the term "environment" to refer to two different yet related aspects of the char chapori context. Environment, as it relates to the char, has both a social definition (the absence of any educational structure) as well as an ecological definition (the environmental factors of geographic isolation and flooding, and the social factors created through these ecological conditions). The novel features numerous examples of how the social and ecological environments of the char are inextricably linked. The river is the driving force behind social order. The ecological conditions of the villagers' environment produce the social dysfunction that is inherent in the community. Thus, it is apparent that an educational institution is not simply a location for individual students to receive reading and writing lessons. An educational institution should be seen as an ecological intervention in the environment to alter the nature of social interaction through the reorganization of the Taskscape, the structuring of time, and the introduction of different forms of knowledge and discipline into some part of the daily routine of char chapori living.

In using the ecological model of educational impacts, Tim Ingold uses the phrase a "Taskscape Intervention" to describe the taskscape as being a phenomenon of the environment (Ingold 195). Char chapori villages without schools have a taskscape based on the performance of agricultural labour and unstructured leisure activities. The setting up of a school in a char chapori village reconfigures the taskscape by providing children with structured and purposefully defined tasks, setting out an appropriate structure for children's time, and introducing new forms of social discipline into the daily activities of char chapori villages. This form of educational intervention is viewed not as delivery of educational content to individual children, but rather as an altered form of the community's environment in which children develop.

The obscene language that shocks Naji, which is used by 5- and 6-year-olds using adult sexualised language in public on the streets of the village, indicates they are not morally depraved, but rather, a product of an environment that lacks a structured education, and generally gives children unstructured idleness or can't formulate the educational goal as their primary task. "Until now, the focus has been on the integration and socialization of refugees, with very little attention paid to the education of refugee children in early childhood education settings. The education of refugee children and the opportunities to provide it globally became more

important in 2022 when Ukrainian refugees were forced to flee their homes because of the war" (Lunina and Jurgile 1).Halima's act of covering her face with her arms, and stepping back from the space made publicly uncomfortable by the children's language, is the clearest visualisation of how women's access to a public sphere has been diminished by boys' unstructured use of a public space. The visualisation of this aberration is that the lack of education to the children can be seen in one act and is a direct connection between the educational argument of the novel and the gendered ecological argument regarding women's access to the public sphere.

The Collective Response: Political Action Through the Subaltern Educational Future

The collective response to Mozammel's inability to go to school because of the flood season is the clearest enactment of subaltern educational futurity the conversion of individual aspiration into collective political action: "On the plot of land given by Hafiz, the villagers worked continuously for two days and built a house about twenty cubits long. The school began in that house" (Samad 161).

The story of the creation of the school-house actually begins with Naji's daughter Ajiran and the longing she feels for her teacher's return. In that sorrowful moment, she expresses to her father, Naji, at supper, "They can teach us in our homes." At that point, she does not mean it logistically; she articulates a principle: The flood should not take the future of the children of this village. Naji takes this personal principle and makes it into a collective political action by stating its importance at Jabrali's store, the site of the community meeting. All the doubts that were expressed by individuals (e.g., "Will he leave his home on the highway and stay with us at Kalapani?") are overcome by a community commitment: "Can't the teacher be accomodated in someone's house in our village during the few months of the monsoon?" (Samad 176).

All that follows the establishment of the school-house and the direct involvement of community members (Hafiz donated the land, all contributed labor, building materials were obtained locally, Mohibul built the school in a partition of his house, and Mano provided rice and fish daily) were produced with the resources of the community, without help from the government, institutions or development agencies. Ostrom's framework of commons-based resource management applies here: where formal channels of governance have failed communities, self-governed and collectively binding agreements take their place. Muñoz's ideas of communal futurity as a form of political practice also apply. This form of communal organisation constitutes a resistance to the dominant model, allowing for tangible, community-generated alternatives to exist within society. The community's collective support of the teacher providing housing, food, and a stable environment ensures the continuity of education for the children of the char.

Conclusion:

This article argues that in *Herai Puwa Prithibi* (The World Found Again) education is represented differently than as a tool for upward social mobility. Rather, in this case, education represents ecological development. Educational development is ecological development; it is an extension of the relationship between the char chapori community and the Brahmaputra River, their indigenous system of knowing, and the community's collective aspirations for a sustainable future. The author argues that there should be recognition of the concept of 'subaltern educational futurity," which this article proposes, it has made distinct contributions to both South Asian literary scholarship and educational scholarship. This paper relates to the way the char chapori community has instantiated their aspirations for education through processes of self-motivated (internal) development, by virtue of their cognizance of their own vulnerability; therefore, what they desire in terms of educational aspiration comes from within their own consciousness. Examples of this self-generating (internal) process of keenness for education from within the community would include Naji's conscientization; Adili's romantic (educational) yearning; and Ajiran's embodied yearning for specific types of knowledge. Therefore, the basis of educational aspiration in the char chapori community is not derived externally from a developmental discourse or through state provision. The educational needs of the char chapori community differ qualitatively from the dominant development model in that they are more environmentally protective; they are geographically specific to each community and do not follow a universal model; and they are a collective experience as opposed to an individual one. The community provided their response to the disruption of education during the flood season through their collective responses, which included housing a teacher and building a schoolhouse in two days.

Their collective responses to the disruption of education during the flood season represent an ecological model of providing education that does not operate under a governmental system that created this vulnerability and has failed to solve it. The author's last image of Ajiran stepping eastward toward the dawn rising over the river embodies the subaltern's educational future in its entirety: a girl progressing through the ecological system of the char to formal education made possible by the collective efforts of her community, holding the lessons learned from both the school and the river at the same time.

Abdus Samad's *Herai Puwa Prithibi* (The World Found Again) is not a story of illiterate people waiting for the developmental state to provide them with an education; rather, it depicts a community that has developed its own understanding of the need for education, identifies the conditions of its environment, and develops an educational infrastructure from within its ecological and social knowledge base, i.e., building schools in less than 48 hours, providing temporary housing for their teachers during flood periods, and allowing their daughters to go east toward the sun. The South Asian educational discourse has not yet fully theorized this sort of educational ambition. This article contends that it is necessary for it to do so.

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