

Rivers, Memory, and Subaltern Ecologies: Reimagining Rajbanshi Identity in Debesh Roy's *Tistaparar Britantta*

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Abstract

*Literature emerges in regions that have been marginal to dominant literary histories. While their works are lesser known, they create highly complex representations of memory, ecology, and power. One such example is the writings of Rajbanshi from North Bengal. This study analyses Debesh Roy's *Tistaparar Britantta* (1990) to understand the complex interrelations of Rajbanshi life-worlds as they sit with respect to river ecology, agrarian life, displacement, and collective memory. This paper does not treat the novel as Roy's attempt to craft a rural regional literary representation. Rather, it argues that Roy is forging what I call an ecological-subaltern archive. Roy constructs this through the experiences of rural marginalised groups who challenge the dominant constructions of history and modernity.*

*The study combines subaltern studies, ecocriticism, cultural memory studies, and regional identity studies to analyse the Teesta River as a landscape, as a historian, and as a community memory. The river should not be viewed as an external setting; rather, it plays an active and important role in shaping social relationships and strategies of living and belonging. Roy's representation of land-based groups and the struggles of daily oral traditions and practices shows how groups survive and engage with the dynamics of changing ecology and politics. The article argues that Ramabanshi literature broadens Indian regional literature. It not only documents the lived experiences of historical exclusion and ecological trauma but also addresses the cultural absence. Roy's *Tistaparar Britantta* situates Rajbanshi memory within land and ecology in the context of contemporary Indian literary studies and the subaltern.*

Keywords: Rajbanshi literature, Debesh Roy, *Tistaparar Britantta*, subaltern studies, ecocriticism, river humanities, cultural memory, regional identity

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Introduction

Major linguistic traditions, metropolitan centres, and major nation-centred literary movements define the outlines of Indian literature in its historical sequence. Although these outlines have been useful in shaping literature, they have created gaps that have left several regional and community-based literary traditions unexplored. In recent decades, Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, and Environmental Humanities have focused on the geographical periphery. These studies have argued that peripheral regions hold literary value, and that marginalia is often a site of alternative epistemology that contains the history of a community's survival, belonging, and struggle.

The study of peripheral literature has intensified in recent decades. Rajbanshi literature is an example of such value-centred work. The material and rapport with Rajbanshi literature have been linked to the socio-cultural narration of North Bengal (India), Assam, and Bihar. The issues of language, land, agriculture, folk culture, and collective consciousness interrogate the Rajbanshi literary text. The cultural tradition of Rajbanshi has been studied very selectively in mainstream Indian publications. This absence has little to do with academic work. It indicates the historical processes by which marginalised communities and regions have little presence in dominant cultural discourses.

Tistaparer Britantta (1990), by Debesh Roy, offers a new perspective on the region. Roy engages with the people, landscapes, and histories of the Teesta River. Although it is recognised as a major work of Bengali regional fiction, the significance of the book for Rajbanshi Cultural Studies still needs to be articulated. Roy's writing is not concerned with rural reporting, but rather with how a region's identity is defined by a community's relationship with land, water, memory, and the continuous mutability of history.

This article argues that *Tistaparer Britantta* is an example of an ecological-subaltern archive. Here, one must think of subaltern experiences absent from state archives and from the hegemonic version of history that is written. Through its river-based vision of life and its representation of agrarian struggles and cultural memory, the book redefines history outside the state's institutional power. The Teesta River is emblematic and material in the book. Unlike the usual backdrop, Roy's river is a constant active force. Elsewhere, geographical phenomena can be described as forces that create and determine a region's parameters, social relations, and cultural identity. Floods, migrations, rivers, and changing geographical conditions create vulnerabilities.

This representation aligns with contemporary thought in the environmental humanities, which argues for the inseparability of ecological systems and human histories. Lawrence Buell points out that environmentally conscious literature acknowledges connections between human culture and the non-human world (*Environmental Imagination* 7). Cheryll Glotfelty also defines ecocriticism as an approach to literary study of the connection between the literary work and the

environment (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xviii). In this regard, Roy's novel can be read as an ecological narrative in which transformations in the environment and society are inseparable.

However, the novel calls for a subaltern reading as it prioritises communities who have historically been silenced. Ranajit Guha claims that most mainstream histories write the narratives of the elite and leave no space for the consciousness and lived experiences of most people (*Elementary Aspects* 4). Roy's narrative does the opposite by focusing on figures like peasants, workers, and rural folk.

This paper discusses three interrelated issues. First, how does *Tistaparar Britantta* formulate a Rajbanshi identity through relations of land and river? Second, how does the novel convert ecological experiences into historical memory? Third, how does Roy's representation of marginal communities change dominant literary and historiographical narratives?

Answering these questions will enrich Rajbanshi studies and show that regional literature can contribute meaningfully to debates on identity, ecology, and justice.

Research Gap and Scholarly Intervention

While considerable scholarship exists on Indian regional literature, environmental narratives, and subaltern histories, Rajbanshi texts have been examined far less in English academic circles. Much of the work in Rajbanshi studies has engaged with ethnicity, political identity, language movements, and folklore. These studies have merit, but they often neglect the ecological dimension of the Rajbanshi people's historical experiences.

More discussion is needed on the interrelationships among river, land, and identity. For many marginalised folks, environmental experience is co-temporal with cultural experience. The environment is a storehouse of memory and the basis of community. However, literary critiques have rarely analysed how Rajbanshi narratives articulate ecological challenges and cultural sustainability.

The ecological-subaltern archive is a term coined to describe such literary narratives. In *Tistaparar Britantta*, the river archives memories of displacement, survival, and social transformation. This article moves away from the regionalism debate on the novel and places it in the framework of discussing:

- environmental justice
- indigenous and marginal identities
- alternative historical frameworks
- cultural memory
- and postcolonial ecologies.

Theoretical Framework

Subaltern Studies and the Question of Historical Visibility

This study is grounded in Subaltern Studies. It begins by asking: who is authorised to historicize? It is well known that the histories written and recognised

will come to represent the dominant narratives of a region. The Subaltern Studies collective, an important part of this argument, is particularly indebted to Ranajit Guha. He argues that within the annals of colonial India, the work of historians leaves much to be desired. He alludes to the fact that the histories of colonial India have only the political life of the coloniser to offer. The working-class and rural layers remain unexplored. For Guha, the consciousness of the oppressed people exists (*Elementary Aspects* 4).

This ideology is applicable when reading *Tistaparar Britantta*. Roy's novel is not about history as told by the colonial administrators or the makers of the state. Rather, history has its place between the lives of people and their agricultural labour and migration, and amid the uncertainties of the ecology and the community. Hence, the novel's imagination of history is outside the centre. It derives its significance from lives that official historical records tend to relegate to the periphery.

The essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other things, addresses the complexities of representation. She focuses on the challenges of representation that emerge from the inverse relationship between subalternity and voice. Spivak instructively adds that subalternity, by extension, does not simply mean oppression. Rather, it is the epistemic failure of the dominant systems of knowledge to recognise alternative forms of expression (Spivak 28). In this sense, *Tistaparar Britantta* is important, for it does not try to celebrate marginal existence. Rather, it lays bare the struggles of the rural community for existence, visibility, and identity.

The novel not only captures the experiences of the Rajbanshi people but also points out the historical structures that make such communities disappear. By transforming local experiences into literary narrations, Roy creates an alternative archive of memory and belonging.

Ecocriticism and the River as a Living Archive

The second major theoretical framework is ecocriticism. Traditional literary criticism often portrayed nature as a symbolic background to the human drama. Ecocriticism challenges this view by examining how literature considers interactions between human societies and the natural world.

Cheryll Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). This definition allows literary scholars to analyse how distinctive elements of the natural world impact the cultural, social, and historical origin of a given people.

In *Tistaparar Britantta*, the river defines the Teesta region. The river has the power to shape the social and emotional structures of community life. It enables agriculture and sustains the community's livelihood. However, it can be destructive and displace the community.

According to Lawrence Buell, literature, which is significant as an aspect of the environment, presents the environment as a force to be reckoned with (*The Environmental Imagination* 7), and that is how Roy represents the Teesta. The river is historically active; it alters landscapes, influences movements, and engraves its presence in the collective consciousness.

The novel provides an alternative view of history beyond human-centric accounts. The history of the Rajbanshi community cannot be recounted without the history of the river. Ecological restructuring brings about social restructuring.

There is a parallel between the environment and marginal communities that connects to Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence." Nixon points out that environmental slow violence is invisible because of its gradual damage (2). Vulnerable populations bear the impact over time. Examples from Roy's novel illustrate this type of slow violence and ecological vulnerability. Insecurity and displacement occur over time with the interaction between human settlements and tempestuous environments.

Cultural Memory and the Preservation of Regional Identity

Memory studies offer another way to analyse Rajbanshi identity in the novel. Communities preserve history not only through records; they also preserve it through memory, stories, landscapes, and traditions.

Jan Assmann examines memory at both the individual and cultural levels. He argues that cultural memory, through the preservation of symbolic systems and narratives, is a society's identification (*Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation* 37). In *Tistaparer Britantta*, memory serves as a cultural bond with ancestral landscapes for the communities. The Teesta River becomes a material site for memory. Village sites become obsolete; landscapes transform; and communities scatter, yet memories stay intact. The river, therefore, serves as the collective experience of memory.

Pierre Nora's theory of "lieux de mémoire", or sites of memory, is applicable in this case. Nora claims that the sites of memory become the storehouses for all the memories of a community when the memories of the community are transformed by the vicissitudes of history ("Between Memory and History" 7). The Teesta region is such an example of a site of memory.

Roy's narrative illustrates the comedy of error that regional identity is not based on the boundaries of regional politics or ethnically divisive frameworks. Identity is characterised by the emotional and historical 'bonds' with specific places.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Indian regional literature has stressed the role of locality and has linked regional literature to alternative histories. For instance, Sisir Kumar Das argues that India should be mapped on multiple linguistic and cultural grounds, rather than on a single national entity. Such an approach allows us to examine marginal literary traditions.

Regional writing has also been studied as resistance to cultural homogenization. Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City* that rural spaces should not be seen as passive holders of tradition, but as places where economics and politics combine to create sophisticated social spaces (119). This argument rests on a more critical reading of rural literature, like that of Roy's novel, against romantic literature.

In North Bengal, regional identity has developed over time through interactions among diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural groups. For such a region, Identities are more negotiated than assimilated.

Borderland culture studies often suggest that, through negotiating various historical influences, regional and peripheral cultures develop distinctive ways of expressing themselves. North Bengal is definitely such a space.

In contrast to existing studies, this research focuses on the Rajbanshi identity and the ecological context. The ecological component of Rajbanshi identity and cultural experience remains underexplored. This study adds a new dimension to existing studies by focusing on culture and consciousness. This study also contributes to the growing discipline of river humanities by examining rivers as social, political, and cultural constructs. Many scholars are beginning to see that it is inadequate to consider rivers as solely natural resources. They must be studied as part of the human legacy.

Rajbanshi Identity Beyond Ethnicity: Land, Labour, and Belonging

A crucial element of *Tistaparar Britantta* is avoiding the easy delineation of Rajbanshi identity as purely ethnic. *Tistaparar Britantta* frames identity as a dynamic process shaped by land, occupation, memory, and ecology.

For Stuart Hall, cultural identity is a product of history and representation and thus continually evolves ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 222). This is Roy's representation of Rajbanshi communities. Identity is not the product of dogmatic definitions; it is the sum of the activities one performs daily.

One of the central elements in the novel is the practice of agricultural labour. Land, in the novel, means the ability to survive, the tie to one's roots, and the preservation of one's cultural identity. The loss of land for the community is not merely a loss of a means of livelihood; it is a disruption of one's existence itself. The novel shows us that communities that reside close to rivers live with constant uncertainty. Realities are continuously reshaped by riverine movements, as well as by environmental changes and the frequent occurrence of floods and erosion. Such communities develop flexibility and resilience.

This representation shifts the focus away from the stereotypical representation of marginal communities as being passive and totally victimised. The communities represented by Roy are portrayed as fully engaged in the constantly shifting circumstances with their wealth of existing knowledge, memory and communal practices.

The Teesta as Character: River, Agency, and Ecological Consciousness

One key characteristic of *Tistaparar Britantta* is the river's transition from one setting among many to a fully functioning character in the narrative. In *The Teesta*, it is not merely a setting against the backdrop of human lives; it is a player in social structures, emotional relationships, economic activities, and collective memories. With this representation, Debesh Roy goes beyond regional realism and develops an ecological imagination that merges human history with the processes of nature.

In traditional literature, the landscape is often peopled with human activities and events. It is background. However, contemporary environmental criticism has challenged the people-centricity of such interpretations. Ecological concern can only be achieved when we recognise the relationship between humans and non-human existence, with a focus on the latter. The river in Roy's novel clearly represents ecological consciousness.

The river has a dual nature in the book. On one side of the duality, the river is the source of life and nurture, and the continuity of that life. For agricultural communities, the river provides livelihood, transport, and subsistence. It nurtures relationships. It is the backbone of regional life. On the other side of this duality, the river disrupts life and represents change. Flooding and erosion can quickly change the landscape and cause great disruption and loss to a community.

The Teesta represents the difficult interconnectivity of ecological and human systems. A constant dialectic runs between ecological and human systems. It is the trade-off in the relations that form human existence. The movement of the river makes territory more fluid and less definite. Lines on a map, no matter how deliberate, aren't always arbitrary, as rivers change the configuration of a space. This is important when considering Rajbanshi identity because, instead of the possession of land, they define their relationship to a place through memory and flexibility.

According to Yi-Fu Tuan, the meaning of a place is derived from human connection and emotion (*Space and Place* 6). In Roy's novel, the Teesta becomes important, not just because of its location, but because of the memories and associations with the many generations of people who have related their identity and told their stories and memorised it.

For Roy's work, the Teesta is a part of the story. It is there and has a role and a history. She believes the figure matters because it illustrates real-life issues in the field of river humanities.

Displacement, Environmental Justice, and the Politics of Development

Tistaparar Britantta depicts displacement as involuntary and ongoing. Communities who reside near the Teesta River live each day with the burden of losing their homes, farms, and ways of life. While Roy shows the loss of place through embodiment, displacement for Roy's characters is far from physical mobility. Displacement can be shown through memory, belonging, and identity, as

well as loss of cultural place.

Environmental justice studies have pointed out that environmental crises often do not affect everyone in the same way. Marginalised populations often suffer most, because their livelihood is directly tied to the environment. For understanding this situation, the theory of slow violence is especially resourceful, since environmental degradation happens in a slow and gradual manner (Nixon 2).

The communities in Roy's book suffer from slow forms of violence. Disruptive environmental changes, uncertainty, and the slow erosion of livelihoods and social order come from sustained environmental change and uncertainty rather than shock. Roy's book challenges development narratives that prioritise economic growth at the expense of local populations. Development interventions and projects treat local landscapes as resources and lack historical and cultural contexts.

Appadurai shows that the local is not a given; rather, it is constructed socially and experientially (*Modernity at Large* 178). The Teesta region is a prime example that shows that the meaning of place is constructed through relationships among people, environment, and memory. Roy demonstrates that environmental justice demands an understanding of the cultural bonds with the environment. Protecting communities includes more than just preventing physical relocation; it means preserving histories, memories, and the ability to belong.

Folk Culture and Oral Memory as Counter-Archives

There are multiple aspects to the Rajbanshi representation in this novel that include folk culture. Orally preserved memories and practices develop alternative systems of knowledge, and as such, maintain the records of knowledge that history has intentionally left out.

In relation to *Tistaparar Britantta*, oral traditions often function like counter-archives. Songs and tales not only preserve the memories of people and their environment, but also knowledge of social relationships, agriculture, and the landscape. Where history and archives have intentionally been neglected by colonial and post-colonial structures, the presence and importance of oral legacy and culture provide a system of remembrance like a safety net and maintain people's collective memories. For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, cultural and linguistic preservation are crucial for the survival of the collective conscience (*Decolonising the Mind* 15). Roy writes in Bengali; however, his use of regional dialects shows his support for cultural diversity. This allows the novel to defy and go beyond language rankings. Regional dialects do not become lower orders of standard language; instead, they gain linguistic and cultural richness, depth, and history.

Language, Identity, and the Politics of Representation

Language in *Tistaparar Britantta* functions beyond communication. It helps to create and preserve identity. The novel's linguistic world shows that North Bengal's cultural environment has a variety of languages, and so several linguistic traditions overlap there.

For Benedict Anderson, language helps create a sense of belonging in an imagined community (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* 44). For the Rajbanshi community, language is the repository of memory and belonging and is the essence of cultural existence. Language also connects to power. Standardised literary languages get greater support from the institutions of the State, while regional speech forms are neglected. Therefore, the region's literary voice becomes a political statement.

Roy subverts this hierarchy and offers local voices and local expressions pride of place in the purely literary. The novel demonstrates that regional language practices can have profound philosophical and historical significance. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity offer further insights into this. Cultural identities cross, conjoin, and interact (*The Location of Culture* 37). The Rajbanshi identity in the novel results from these ceaseless cultural interactions.

Discussion: Rajbanshi Literature as Ecological-Subaltern Knowledge

The analysis shows *Tistaparar Britantta* goes beyond being a regional novel. It presents a form of Ecological-Subaltern Knowledge that shifts both literary and historical paradigms.

The novel is significant for three interconnected reasons. First, it historicizes from below, meaning Roy moves away from mainstream politics to central social communities and their lived experiences, which provide alternative interpretations of regional histories. Second, it provides an ecological framing of identity. The novel shows that cultural bonds and belonging cannot be dissociated from ecological relationships. The river, land, and human communities are interconnected. Third, it maintains cultural memory. Through narratives of place and oral tradition, the novel preserves lived experiences that risk being lost to historical oblivion.

This novel works well to elucidate Chakrabarty's argument that contemporary historical thinking must engage critically with universal modern narratives and attend to different experiences of modernity (*Provincializing Europe* 8). Rajbanshi literature provides precisely such an alternate viewpoint. The novel shows that for some marginalized communities, modernity's news means being uprooted, becoming ecologically vulnerable, and culturally adjusting. It is in literature that these experiences can be brought to light.

Major Findings of the Study

Placing Debesh Roy's *Tistaparar Britantta* within subaltern studies, ecocriticism, and cultural memory paradigms harbours useful insights.

1. Rajbanshi Identity and Ecology

Rajbanshi identity in the novel is not presented as a closed ethnic group but, instead, as a relational formation of the intertwining of people, land, river, labour, and memory. The novel argues against essential constructions of identity and shows that belonging to a culture is an experiential process.

The community's realisation of identity through the Teesta shows that the environment should not be thought of as external to identity formation. Rather, the environment should be thought of as an active participant in cultural psychology. The river serves as the medium through which a community remembers its connection to its ancestors and its responsibility to future generations.

2. The River as a Historical Archive of the Margins

This research shows that the Teesta is an alternative historical record of the margins. In contrast to mainstream official records of state- and elite-centric focal points that dominate the political field, the river preserves the memories of ordinary people.

In the novel, Earth's experiences with the environment become history. Floods, migrations, erosion, and landscape shifts define and leave their imprints on historical records of transformations in social relations. Therefore, the river serves as a repository of collective memory. This research extends existing interpretative frameworks of regional literature by showing that a place's ecological environment can serve as an archive of history.

3. Regional Literature as a Form of Resistance

This study supports the argument that regional literature is not inferior to national literature. In fact, texts from peripheral regions often resist central dominance by offering diverse perspectives. *Tistaparar Britantta* counters the marginalisation of rural and indigenous communities by placing rural and ordinary communities at the centre of literary creation. The novel illustrates how the daily struggles and memories of survival and work possess historical and philosophical value.

4. Environmental Vulnerability and Social Inequality

This study argues that environmental instability in the novel is connected to social inequalities. Communities that rely on nature face more severe consequences of environmental change because their economic and cultural well-being is bound to the environment. The novel anticipates modern environmental justice debates by showing that ecological concerns reflect crises of identity, livelihood, and cultural integrity.

5. Folk Culture as a Knowledge System

This study concludes that Rajbanshi folk practices are unique knowledge systems. Oral stories, customs, and regional expressions remember histories that are absent from institutional archives. Far from treating folklore as simply entertainment, this novel shows that folk culture can restore history.

Conclusion

Tistaparar Britantta earns its place in Indian regional literature by presenting a specific local experience through identity and historical inequity, as well as memory and ecology. Regional narratives include and describe more than just local life. They are more complex in that they include the web of community survival and belonging

as they are framed and addressed.

It has been my goal to show how this novel is an ecological-subaltern archive. Roy, in his creation of the Teesta River and the narratives of the communities, has made a space of narrative/environmental history where the river remembers the Teesta communities' displacements, adaptations, resistance, and resilience. The river holds the community's cultural memories that social and ecosystem changes threaten.

The novel's post-subaltern criticism makes clear how it reworks history "from below." This ecocritical reflection shows that the natural world is not a passive background to social life. Collective memory makes the landscape hold group identity.

The value of Rajbanshi literature lies in its local-to-global reach. The narratives in *Tistaparer Britantta* are of North Bengal, but their focus uncovers other global problems concerning ecological displacement, the preservation of cultures, and the problem of social acceptance.

In this period of rapid climate change, ecological instability, and rising conversations about indigenous and regional identities, these texts take on new significance. They let readers know that the less central communities possess extraordinary knowledge about the relationship between people and the environment and have perspectives on sustainability and adaptation.

For these reasons, Rajbanshi literature should be more recognised within Indian literary studies and international discourses of regional, indigenous, and ecocritical narratives. Debesh Roy's novel shows that the margins are not blank spaces; they are places where alternate stories, cultural and ecological knowledges, histories, and futures are continuously imagined.

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