

Reclaiming Indigenous Environmental Wisdom: An Eco-critical Analysis of Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*

Mr. Priyansu Sekhar Routray

Guest Faculty

P.G. Department of English

Kendrapara Autonomous College

Kendrapara, Odisha, India

chakrabartipriyansu@gmail.com

Abstract

Aranyer Adhikar by Mahasweta Devi can be counted among the most renowned historical novels, even though it narrates the struggle of the Adivasi leader Birsa Munda in late nineteenth-century Chotanagpur. The novel transcends the standard boundaries of a political novel; it is also profoundly ecological. Devi's writing conveys a strong sense of urgency about present-day environmental crises, including climate change. She constructs a narrative in which land, people, and survival are inseparably linked, while also condemning the violence that emerges when these relationships are disrupted by colonialism and consumer capitalism.

This paper discusses *Aranyer Adhikar* as an eco-critical work within the broader discourse of environmental justice. It foregrounds the lived realities of India's Adivasis, whose identity and survival remain deeply tied to land and forest ecosystems. Drawing upon eco-critical theoretical approaches such as ecofeminism, deep ecology, and postcolonial ecocriticism, the study suggests that Devi's narrative allows indigenous cosmologies, forest ethics, and ecological knowledge systems to emerge and flourish. Devi avoids romanticising the tribal world; instead, she reveals the intricate balance that sustained it, the rituals and practices that held it together, and how it was systematically dismantled by the state and corporate forces.

Central to this interpretation is the figure of Birsa Munda, whose vision of revolt combines political liberation with ecological renewal. His uprising becomes a rebellion of land and people against erasure. His life is not only a human tragedy but also symbolic of ecological devastation.

By re-reading *Aranyer Adhikar* eco-critically, this paper proposes that Devi's novel serves as an exhortation to reclaim indigenous environmental wisdom. It calls for an ethic of reciprocity and care, transforming the novel into not merely a historical document but a living manifesto for sustainable and equitable futures.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Wisdom, Ecofeminism, Colonialism, Capitalism

Introduction

Mahasweta Devi spent her life documenting the suffering of India's most marginalised communities, including the Munda tribe. Although the novel has often been interpreted as a political rewriting of Birsa Munda's late nineteenth-century insurgency, it also deserves to be read as an ecological text at its core. The narrative is not only a chronicle of rebellion against colonial authorities, but also a profound reflection on the close interaction between human life and the natural environment.

A key element of the novel is the character of Birsa Munda, whose vision involved a different world based on justice, reciprocity, and ecological balance. His movement was not only a denunciation of political oppression under colonialism and its feudal allies, but also a protest against the destruction of nature caused by systematic deforestation. The forests, which had long been central to the Munda community both economically and spiritually, were being dismantled under colonial exploitation. Through this lens, the text encourages readers to rethink resistance on both micro and macro levels, demonstrating that resistance is not merely political—it is also a struggle over ecological life.

The ecological themes in Devi's writing can be analysed through the framework of ecocriticism, a field concerned with the relationship between literature and the physical environment. As Cheryll Glotfelty notes in her foundational definition, ecocriticism asks how literature relates to the physical world, moving beyond a purely human-centred discourse to include rivers, forests, animals, and landscapes.

This eco-critical approach also situates the novel within global discourses of environmental justice. Indigenous authors and communities worldwide insist that land is not a commodity, but a living reality that defines identity, ethics, and existence. Devi's representation of Munda cosmology aligns with indigenous writings across nations that challenge dominant notions of ownership and exploitation. In placing the novel within this comparative framework, the paper examines how Devi's narrative crosses national boundaries and joins a global chorus denouncing colonialism as both a political and ecological catastrophe.

Devi also situates the pastoral landscape of India within historical specificity. The Munda insurgency unfolds against the fertile terrain of the Chotanagpur plateau, characterised by Sal forests and tributary river systems. Colonial reclassification of these forests as "wastelands" enabled their transformation into commercial zones for mining and logging, leading to the destruction of indigenous livelihoods. This process generates violence—physical, psychological, and cultural—which Devi vividly depicts. For the Mundas, the disappearance of the forest is akin to the loss of a mother figure: their home, sustenance, and heritage.

Although the novel has been widely discussed as a historical and political text, relatively little attention has been paid to its ecological insights. This paper attempts to address that gap through a sustained eco-critical reading of *Aranyer Adhikar*. It argues that the novel is simultaneously a historical account of subaltern resistance and a prophetic ecological text that

anticipates contemporary debates on environmental justice, sustainability, and indigenous rights.

Drawing upon eco-critical subfields such as ecofeminism, deep ecology, and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study explores how Devi endows the forest with agency—not as a mere backdrop, but as a living, suffering, and resisting entity. It also examines how indigenous ecological knowledge, women’s environmental wisdom, and Birsa Munda’s spiritual leadership articulate alternative models of human–nature relationships.

Literature Review

The eco-critical perspective on *Aranyer Adhikar* is relatively recent within Indian literary criticism. Scholars have explored the novel’s historical, political, and subaltern dimensions at length, yet its ecological significance has often been marginalised.

Ecocriticism emerged as a recognised academic field in the late twentieth century and was crystallised by Cheryll Glotfelty’s influential definition: “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism*, further insists that eco-critical readings must examine not only literary representations of nature but also the extent to which literature intervenes in environmental politics.

Within the Indian context, scholars such as G. N. Devy have emphasised the importance of tribal epistemologies in reconfiguring literary and cultural studies. These perspectives highlight how indigenous and vernacular knowledge systems were systematically devalued under colonial knowledge-power structures. In this intellectual context, Mahasweta Devi’s writing remains especially significant because it combines activism, cultural critique, and deep engagement with indigenous ecologies.

Critical responses to *Aranyer Adhikar* have largely focused on its depiction of the Munda uprising and its rewriting of subaltern history. Irfan Ahmed, in “Reading Mahasweta Devi’s *Aranyer Adhikar* Eco-critically,” briefly notes the novel’s ecological subtext, though

his essay remains more suggestive than exhaustive. Similarly, Suresh Chandra emphasises historical reconstruction and colonial exploitation, but treats ecology as secondary to politics.

Neha Gupta broadens the discussion by linking the text to issues of “nature consciousness,” arguing that literature can influence environmental awareness. However, her analysis largely treats the environment as a passive setting rather than as an active agent within the narrative.

Rakesh Kumar and Anita Singh, in “Investigating the Heterotopias Design in *Aranyer Adhikar*,” propose that the forest functions as a heterotopic space—both oppressive and potentially liberating. Yet their approach is more rooted in spatial theory than ecological ethics.

Jyoti Yadav stresses the holistic vision of the tribal environment nexus in Devi’s work, noting that forests function as both material and spiritual sustenance. However, the ecological trauma described in the novel—what theorists term “solastalgia,” a profound distress caused by environmental destruction (Glenn Albrecht)—remains under-theorised in most readings.

Although several scholars have acknowledged the ecological scope of Devi’s narrative, there remains a lack of coherent eco-critical frameworks that integrate ecofeminism, deep ecology, and postcolonial ecocriticism. This gap is what the present study seeks to address.

This paper builds upon existing critical scholarship while foregrounding the ecological vision of *Aranyer Adhikar*. It argues that the novel is both a historical testimony of Munda resistance and a manifesto for environmental justice.

Analysis

Contextualising the Forest: History, Memory, and Violence

The Munda community portrayed in the novel does not view forests through a materialistic lens as mere collections of trees. Instead, the forest is represented as a space of origin, ritual, sustenance, and communal continuity. Within their cosmology, the Earth is

revered as *Dharti Ma* (Mother Earth), deserving love and devotion expressed through poetry, songs, and storytelling.

Devi offers a vivid portrayal of this worldview through detailed depictions of the sal groves of the Chotanagpur plateau, mahua flowers, winding rivers, and grazing cattle. These geographical markers are not presented as passive scenery but as living signs of tribal identity. For the Mundas, the forest is not a commodity but kin. The destruction of a tree becomes simultaneously a cultural, spiritual, and communal loss.

Colonial authorities reorganised the forest according to bureaucratic and capitalist logic—through surveys, codification, land revenue laws, and legal classification. Forests were declared “wastelands” or state property. What had once been fluid communal interaction was replaced with contracts of ownership, taxation demands, and extractive imperatives. Devi depicts this transformation as a violent rupture: forests that once sustained life is reimagined as “empty” resources, available for logging, mining, and enclosure. To showcase the aggression, Devi quotes,

“The Dikus come with papers. They show a piece of paper and say the land is theirs. They do not know the language of the trees, only the language of the law.”

Thus, *Aranyer Adhikar* becomes a powerful example of what ecological theorists call ecological imperialism: conquest that dispossesses people while also redefining the meaning of land itself. This violence extends beyond the physical—it invades epistemic and cultural worlds, destroying indigenous cosmologies and imposing a colonial gaze.

Indigenous Cosmology and Environmental Ethics

One of the most significant contributions of the novel to eco-critical discourse lies in its representation of tribal cosmology. The Mundas, like many indigenous communities, understand land not as a tradable resource but as sacred and communal. Their relationship with nature is shaped by taboos, biodiversity preservation practices, and agricultural systems that

sustain both soil and spirit. In the novel *Devi* reflects the Mundas' historical claim to the soil they cleared:

“The forest was ours, the land was ours. We cleared the woods with our own hands, we drove away the tigers and the snakes. The earth is our mother; how can the Government or the Zamindar own her?”

Devi foregrounds rituals such as the worship of sacred groves, agricultural cycles aligned with celestial rhythms, and fertility ceremonies. These practices are not merely religious; they function as ecological systems that reinforce interdependence between the community and its environment.

By foregrounding such ecological wisdom—long marginalised by colonial and state narratives—*Devi*'s work aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, which argues that indigenous epistemologies offer crucial alternatives to ecological crises ignored by Western models of development.

At the heart of this worldview lies reciprocity: forests, rivers, and animals are not passive objects, but active participants in communal life. Their presence is preserved through songs, stories, and proverbs such as “Do not cut your grove” and “Do not pollute your river.” These oral traditions constitute an environmental ethic embedded not in law but in collective memory.

Environmental Injustice: Colonialism, Capitalism, and Extraction

Mahasweta *Devi* powerfully depicts how British administrative practices—surveying, fencing, commodification, and taxation—turned the forest into an extractive frontier.

For the Mundas, the consequences were devastating. Access to fuel, fruit, and grazing land was restricted. Mining polluted rivers and scarred hills. Forests, once maternal and nurturing, were transformed into hostile zones of control, producing famine, illness, and social collapse.

Devi does not treat these losses abstractly. Instead, she dramatises them through characters experiencing psychological distress, what Glenn Albrecht later theorised as solastalgia—trauma caused by environmental destruction. In the novel, this appears through nightmares, mourning rituals, and collective lamentation for forests turned into emptiness. Birsa’s internal monologue echoes in the line:

“The forest is changing its face. The trees look like strangers now. Even the spirits of our ancestors are being driven out by the sound of the contractor’s axe.”

The narrative forces readers to recognise colonialism not merely as political domination, but as ecological catastrophe. Profit-driven systems override sacred groves for timber, exploit rivers for irrigation and industry, and treat human beings as disposable labour. The violence inflicted upon land and community becomes inseparable.

Women, Ecofeminism, and the Gendered Forest

Devi also reveals how women suffer under feudal and colonial exploitation in ways parallel to the exploitation of land. Their bodies become sites of labour and reproduction, valued only for output. Women are humiliated, commodified, and violated by colonial agents and local power structures alike.

However, Devi does not portray women only as victims. She also depicts them as carriers of ecological knowledge—seed keepers, caretakers of fertility rituals, and guardians of agricultural memory. Their role becomes crucial during periods of crisis and displacement. This is embodied in Birsa’s voice:

“The earth does not cry out when it is plowed, and our women do not cry out when they are beaten. But do not mistake their silence for surrender. The forest grows back, and the womb brings forth new warriors.”

This connection between women and nature is not presented merely as metaphor. It resonates strongly with ecofeminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva, who argues that women are often the first to respond to ecological destruction because of their intimate relationship with subsistence and survival. Devi's narrative affirms women's strength as a form of resistance that binds the human and ecological worlds together.

Birsa Munda: Wielder and Defender of the Maternal Soil

Birsa Munda is portrayed not merely as a political leader but as a visionary who integrates ecological, spiritual, and political concerns into a unified struggle for justice. His *ulgulaan* (the Great Tumult) is not only a demand for land redistribution and autonomy; it is also a call for the restoration of balance between human beings and nature. By emphasising this Devi writes,

“The Munda had no other god, but the forest.

The forest was their mother, their father, their everything.”

His speeches are filled with images of regeneration: leaves, birds, rivers, and soil are invoked as symbols of freedom. His movement becomes, fundamentally, an ecological insurrection—a fight to reclaim life in reciprocal relationship with the forest.

Birsa is also represented as an eco-prophet. His imprisonment and death are depicted not merely as human tragedy but as cosmic rupture. The narrative suggests that his removal signals agricultural decline, drying rivers, and suffering animals—symbols of imbalance in the natural order. His funeral becomes a moment where human and ecological grief merge, demonstrating the inseparability of land and life.

Storytelling, Oral Tradition, and Landscape Memory

Devi's eco-critical vision is strengthened by her narrative style, which draws heavily upon oral traditions—repetition, cyclical temporality, and collective voice. This technique

mirrors tribal ecological knowledge, which is transmitted through myths, proverbs, and songs rather than written documents. To justify Devi notes:

“The wind in the Sal trees does not speak once; it repeats the stories of our ancestors over and over. They say Birsa did not lie; he became the leaf, he became the shadow, he became the very air of the Aranya.”

The novel frequently anthropomorphises nature: rivers weep, forests breathe, and groves hum. These personifications elevate the non-human world, placing it on par with the human, and reinforcing the idea that the environment speaks, acts, and suffers.

Devi also employs apocalyptic imagery: droughts appear as divine punishment, forests become cemeteries. Yet apocalypse in *Aranyer Adhikar* is not an ending—it is a call to conscience, demanding renewed awareness and resistance.

Conclusion

Aranyer Adhikar is a complex work: it can be viewed as historical fiction, political testimony, ecological narrative, and cultural archive simultaneously. It records how colonialism, feudalism, and capitalism violently tore apart land and community, while also preserving the memory of resistance.

The forest in the novel functions as spectator, victim, and participant in history. Even when commodified and enclosed, it continues to resonate through memory, song, and rebellion. Devi forces readers to reconsider historiographical categories—who speaks, what counts as life, and how landscapes can remain haunted by the violence inflicted upon them.

Birsa Munda’s *ulgulaan* emerges not as isolated rebellion but as part of an ecological revitalisation project. He recognises that political freedom is meaningless without environmental freedom, and dignity cannot be restored without renewed land, rivers, and forests. His vision anticipates contemporary global discourses on indigenous sovereignty, sustainability, and climate justice.

The novel also weaves ecofeminist concerns into its narrative, demonstrating how the commodification of women's bodies mirrors the exploitation of land. Women are not only victims; they are bearers of ecological wisdom, custodians of seeds and rituals, and carriers of survival knowledge. Their resilience becomes a silent yet powerful form of resistance beyond warfare.

Devi's stylistic approach strengthens her ecological vision. By incorporating oral, mythic, and cyclical time, she disrupts colonial narratives of linear progress and instead presents a temporal structure in which memory, ritual, and song sustain life across generations. This affirms how indigenous knowledge persists despite devastation.

With striking relevance to contemporary India and global ecological debates, *Aranyer Adhikar* challenges displacement, commodification, and the destruction of indigenous lifeworlds. Adivasis and other oppressed communities continue to resist mining, deforestation, and large-scale development projects that threaten both human and ecological futures. The novel echoes the broader environmental justice movement worldwide, reminding readers that the fate of forests and peoples is inseparably intertwined.

Ultimately, *Aranyer Adhikar* is not merely a historical account—it is an appeal to the present. It demands that we listen to indigenous voices, recognise ecological knowledge systems, and understand how survival, dignity, and place are deeply entangled. Mahasweta Devi honours Birsa Munda while also offering a blueprint for a future rooted in justice, ecology, and resistance.

The novel asserts that the struggle for justice is inseparable from the struggle to defend the Earth itself: political freedom remains incomplete unless ecological renewal is achieved.

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