

BIOREGIONALISM AND REINHABITATION: ECOCRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDYOPADHYAY'S *PATHER PANCHALI*, *ICHAMATI*

Subhankar Roy
Research Scholar, Dept. of English
Adamas University, Barasat, India.
suvooncar@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper analyses the probability of restoration of the essence of a place through the bioregional practices of literary reinhabitation. Gathering insights from the bioregional scholars and practitioners the paper explicates the issues related to literary reinhabitation; two novels of bioregional importance by the renowned Bengali novelists Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay has been explored to weigh the chances of reinhabitation in the locales of the novels Ichamati and Pather Panchali. The place conscious portrayal of the flora and fauna in the novels, the presentation of the unique bond between the human and the non-human entities and the near-spiritual connection of the author and some of the characters with the place potentially lead one to review these novels from bioregional perspectives. The paper specifically focuses on the scope of bioregional activity of reinhabitation in the texts.

Key words: bioregionalism; geocultural; biodiversity; habitat; reinhabitation

Bioregionalism grew as an environmental movement during the 1970s in the North America. The bioregional thinkers such as Peter Berg, Raymond Dasmann and Gary Snyder were in favour of addressing the global environmental crisis at a local scale called bioregion; these thinkers either formed various organizations like Planet Drum Foundation or closely associated themselves with bioregional practices of protection and restoration of the geocultural specificity of a place; that, they thought, in the long run and at a larger scale will arrest environmental degradation as well as the disintegration of environmental imagination. They contemplated on the characteristics of a biogeographically distinct region and emphasized on building a place conscious sustainable living pattern. The practice of place conscious living is not an ingenuous strategy invented by the bioregionalists rather they assembled the insights from similar practices from indigenous and traditional societies and the knowledge of the place gathered through scientific data regarding soil, habitat and biodiversity. Michael Vincent McGinnis has observed that bioregionalism is not a new idea rather it can be traced in the living pattern of the aboriginal, primal and native inhabitants of

the places (2). It can be noticed that place-conscious living is a part of the life of many people of a given place; these place-based thoughts can be organized to set an environmental movement through bioregional practices, and the living pattern that tends to be harmful for a bioregion must be discarded and discouraged. The process of bioregionalisation or the demarcation of the territory of a bioregion follows the biogeographic regionalization of the lands and oceans; the territory of a bioregion cannot be a definite one as biogeographical changes are gradual rather than abrupt phenomena; certainly there is no definite border to declare that this the end of a bioregion and the beginning of another one; there are certain transitional zones. Robert L. Thayer Jr., a bioregional thinker and practitioner, defines bioregion in his book *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* thus:

A *bioregion* is literally and etymologically a “life-place” –a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or costal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. (3)

There is a chance of misinterpretation of the thoughts and practices of the bioregionalists that these are discarded from the powerful global forces as these activities are set at a local scale, but bioregional thinkers are not aloof from the global scale environmental crises, and are not unaware that a global scale policy implementation is necessary to address the issues of climate change and rapid environmental degradation; but their response towards a local scale initiatives means that their activities would not stop if there is not a global scale miracle suddenly to roll out. By a deep understanding of a biogeographically demarcated region they demand for bioregional planning to address the immediate issues that can be arranged at a bioregional scale. They employ scientific investigation as well as traditional knowledge to meet the challenges of environmental disharmony, the later is more emphasized. Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann in the article “Reinhabiting California” combines the physical and psychological aspects to describe a bioregion as a “geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness (36).” Reinhabitation is the most challenging and integrative bioregional practice as it aims at retrieval of certain aspects of a place that has been mutilated due to industrial development and citification. Reinhabitation is a kind of renewal of the place to a state as it had been in the pre-industrialized era; it does not mean that they suggest that the urbanized places should be demolished; but it strongly promotes an urbanization design keeping in mind the biogeographical pattern of the places and renewal of the basic geocultural specificity of a life-place. Literature plays an influential role in the bioregional practices as literature is supposed to build the terrain of consciousness. Some of the practices that are followed for Reinhabiting a place are discovering the indigenous lore, gathering of empirical findings and rereading of place-conscious texts to extend place-conscious

imagination. Literature ignites the imaginary bioregion that is to be achieved through bioregional practices; to use Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann's term literature weaves the terrain of consciousness to some extent. Lawrence Buell, in his ecocritical book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, argues that the environmental crisis is "a crisis of the imagination (2)"; bioregionalism also targets the alleviation of the poverty of imagination, naturally literary bioregionalism may be foregrounded to promote the imagination for the place-conscious lifestyle. In the United States Thoreau's works are appreciated for their bioregional merits; the understanding of the habitat and diversity of a place. The renowned Bengali author Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's (1894-1950) novels ignite a literary bioregion that parallels with a real bioregion called Bengal delta or Ganges delta. His novels like *Pather Panchali* (1929), *Aparajito* (1931), *Ichamati* (1950), *Ashani Sanket* (1959, published posthumously) etc. portray the bioregional specificity of the floral and faunal world, riparian life, water bodies, agricultural practices, cultural and economic trend of the region as well as ongoing changes in the region. A close study of the novels based on this bioregional approach may help us in the bioregional process of narrative reinhabitation as well as real reinhabitation. For a close analysis of Bandyopadhyay's works two novels have been chosen; English rendering of *Pather Panchali* and *Ichamati*.

Ichamati captures a geocultural condition of the place and its flux of approximately third and fourth quarter of the nineteenth century and much of *Pather Panchali* depicts that of the last quarter of the nineteenth century of that place. Urbanization in the locales of the novels, the middle part of the Ganges delta region had not still gained much acceleration at that time; actually urbanization in those places is a late twentieth century development, and the depiction of the geocultural reality in the novels was much of a pre-urbanized rural condition. The novels are admittedly autobiographical and the author's diaries tell the parallel stories. So the novels can be studied to find the traces of geocultural history; but the fact that these are novels and not any documentation means that these only provide fragmentary presentation of the biogeographical status of the place and the bridge can only be proposed with a great deal of imagination. But the portrayal of the rural Bengal in the deltaic zone is authentic and hence the literary bioregion that can be framed from the novels can be supported by *A Statistical Account of Bengal* which was published in 1978. As the place and time preserved in the novels describe a pre-urbanized rural setting it can be seen as a purer form of environment and the practice of reinhabitation should try to retrieve the geocultural aspect of the time; but it should at the same time be noticed that the colonizers had already established their power in the region and changed certain aspects of economic practices by destroying the cottage industry and forcing the peasants to cultivate according to the demand of the British Empire. So actual reinhabitation would demand collection of information much beyond the time; but the rapid urbanization that destroyed the ecosystem of the places of the locales were then still a phenomenon of the future and the basic pattern of life was not

foreign to the place and unsustainable to the environment at the time which has been captured in the novel. The keen observation of the present condition of the locales in *Pather Panchali* and *Ichamati* in the first quarter of the twenty first century in the areas across the basins of Mathabhanga, Jalangi, Churni and Ichamati would bring what the philosopher Glenn Albrecht terms after his own coinage solastalgia- a kind of pain when one finds the home environment to degrade. What E. O. Wilson proposes in his biophilia hypothesis would also suggest that the preservation and retrieval of the geocultural characteristics is an innate demand. From Albrecht's concept of soliphilia- the love and responsibility for a bioregion it can also be posited that a reinhabitation is an innate demand for ecopsychological interest too.

The physiography of the locales of the novels can be imagined from the description of the places in the novels; the imagination of the place is the first step towards the retrieval of the characteristics of the place—its habitat and biodiversity, its culture and lifestyle. Most of the place names in the novels are taken from actual places in the region of the basin of the river Ichamati; as these places are from the middle part of the deltaic region a field study of that places can be undertaken to understand the extent of ecological degradation in contrast with the information acquired from the ecological study of the places for suggesting measures for renewal and reinhabitation. The novel *Ichamati* has significantly captured the habitat, biodiversity and culture of the place; it begins with a biogeographic detail; at the very outset it narrates the floral and faunal diversity of the place:

If you go to Marighata or Bajitpur by boat upto Chanduriar Ghat- you will be able to see on two sides *palte mather* trees' red flowers, the bush of *banyo buro* coming out of water, the floating leaves of *topa pana*, wild *titpalla* creepers, exhibition of yellow flowers, somewhere up above the bank in the shade created by banyan or *asatha* tree, *uluti-bachra-bainchi* bush, bamboo grove, the hole made by the river bird *gangshalik*, delicate creepers. (3)

The description of the river and its bank evoke a picture of a vivacious ecosystem dependent on a flowing river; the trees and creepers has made the banks a show of colourful beauty; on the other hand it can be assumed that this barricade would protect the banks from soil erosion and the river from rapid siltation. The astonishing variety of the local plants has been presented in the novel with their own local identity. Subhankar Roy in the article "Championing the Subaltern Flora in *Pather Panchali*: A Sustainable Mirror" has interpreted this type of bioregional representation while he analyses Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* from a subaltern point of view and showed that these representations reflect Bandyopadhyay's strong feelings for the local and neglected flora (378-386); this outlook of the novelist may be seen as a decisive step forward to sustainable bioregional design. A visit to the places of the locales of the novel would prove that the river is no more navigable at the places; the green banks have succumbed to the demand of agricultural expansion and human settlement; the inhabitants are not familiar with *uluti*, *bachra* or *bainchi*; the habitats have

been critically mutilated for the purpose of human settlement. Someone from the deltaic region would probably feel solastalgia as he or she goes through these pages of the novel; the person would long for the green vegetation, clear flow of water, continuous chirping of birds and bucolic fresh air. Someone who lives in a place mindfully can understand the inner flow of the place; he would explore the beauty of such a habitat and cherish the happiness for being a part of the ecological region; the novelist has wisely captured the essence of bioregional living as he notes: "That portion of Ichamati which is situated between Nadia and Jessore districts, is extremely beautiful- those who have seen it know. Those who have been residing in this area for a long time realize it well (3)." The author has particularly mentioned about the places by the river Ichamati in the districts of Nadia and Jessore of his time; the place roughly covers the middle portion of the deltaic region. The bioregional consciousness of the writer can thus be produced from many textual references. The love for the place does not only provide a person with aesthetic joy; it leads him to ecospirituality- a deep understanding of the divine in the nature: "This is a brilliant art work of God- the two banks-green with forests, ringing with bird-cries (3)." Not only in the authorial narrative, the place consciousness can be traced in the characters of the novels too; the place turns out to be a terrain of consciousness for some of the characters. The reverberation of the thought of the authorial narrative can be noticed in Bhabani Barujye's understanding of the place; he also gains aesthetic pleasure and divine connection with nature; it seems that the author and the character merge into one in their ecological introspection:

River Ichamati was full to the brim with rain water. Bhabani took khoka and made him sit on a boat. On two banks deep green bushes, on the water tendrils hanging, golden *babla* flowers bloomed on the bank on the lowered branch. From the other bank blue *nirad mala* flowers came floating, a yellow *basanta bowrie* (bird) came and sat on green bowers and leaped from one branch to another. Bhabani Banerjee wondered which great artist created this great art. (188)

The human life is not a separated construction; it has always been a part of the great ecological design- the more people get isolated from that connection the more would be the degradation of mind and the environment. A connected life with a bioregion would mean aesthetic pleasure and demand responsibility for preservation and restoration at this stage of increasing green house gases and harmful carbon footprints. Unless one understands the value of the biodiversity, ecosystem and habitat of the place one lives in and starts acting for the renewal of bioregional specificity the first step towards reinhabitation would never be undertaken; the literary representation of the place in the novels like *Ichamati* may hopefully grow the terrain of consciousness for sustainable bioregional living.

Pather Panchali also captures the beauty of the same bioregion as it is preserved in *Ichamati*; the Ganges delta bioregion, to say more precisely the basin of Ichamati in the middle part of the deltaic region. The bioregional aspects of a place not only pass into the

mind through ocular impression; it permeates through olfactory and auditory senses too; the following extract convincingly portrays that essence of bioregional introspection:

The narrow path to the river steps ran through a jungle of wild bushes and behind them on both sides were the trees of a mango orchard. The breeze was warm and heavy with the scent of blossoms, and bees and crystal beetles murmured among the branches; while from the shade beneath the trees came the song of the kokil. (208)

The place gradually integrates into the human consciousness; but its immediate effect is not a less blessing; when we read “Durga’s heart felt very warm” as she passes through this natural setting in which she was brought up the immediate impact of place can be noticed. The author has repeatedly mentioned the impact of the place upon his characters; he has developed his characters in such settings that his characters would seem to be alien to other natural settings. The presentation of the characters amidst the local flora and the specific habitat has attributed distinct characteristics to them. There was not much of a wilderness in the middle part of the deltaic region; but the vegetation was thick throughout the tract and the combined greenery of the trees, creepers and bushes brought to the dwellers in the area the rural untended forests that ignited their ecological imagination and shaped their psychic pattern in regards to the environmental affinity in particular, and the life in general:

This forest, with its freshness and deep green shadows, had laid its fingers on Opu and his sister alike, and had brought peace and consolation into their hearts. They had known it all their lives. Day by day, hour by hour, its silence and its delights poured rich and varied nectars to their thirsting souls. (169)

Opu and Durga have been portrayed in a way that shows their bioregional understanding and the pleasure they assimilate from the knowledge of the place is an enriching bioregional experience for the readers of the novels too.

But the bioregion was changing under the rule of the British as the rulers were looking for rapid increase of revenue and rapidly converting the various kind of land to agrarian fields. Moreover they were either luring or forcing the peasants to cultivate cash crops in the land where paddy was being cultivated for long as the most important agricultural product. The rapid growth of indigo industry in the bioregion changed the agricultural pattern of the places as it can be noticed from the study of *Ichamati*; the rampant changes were not a sustainable practice for the bioregion- the indigo revolt thus can be associated with its ecological significance too. People were unable to produce paddy in sufficient quantity and the money lending machinery trapped them forever; they were desperately looking for the time and place when and where they can demand the right to cultivate at their own will: “One said- Today the steamer of deputy governor’s will go through this river- to inspect the torture of Nilkuthi. All peasants have become angry, in Jessore-nade district no one will plant a single indigo (194).” The changes were being noticed from other frontiers also; the steps of the industrial civilization were being heard to encroach into the rural life. Calcutta, a city in the Ganges delta bioregion, was the capital of India at

that time and the people from Calcutta brought news to the otherwise uneventful life of the villages of the development of human power in the form of industry and technology. The people of the rural areas occasionally discovered the mysteries of the future world; the people of the places around the locales of *Ichamati* had such an occasion to wonder at such a technological brilliance when the steamer of the governor was passing through the river. When Bhabani Barujye tries to describe his son the specificity of a steamer he refers to smoke as the most distinct factor:

-What is a steamer papa?

-That's called steamer. You will see. Smoke comes out of it.

-Does lots of smoke come out?

-Hum.

-Because fire is put inside. (195)

The smoke that comes out from the burning of fossil fuel declares the onward march of the anthropocene epoch. In *Pather Panchali* a similar suggestion can be noticed from the description of the railway line. When Opu reached Nawabganj he was informed by his father that the train passes through this track, Opu cannot restrain his wonder:

'I want to see the train, Daddy. What time will it come?'

'How can you see a train now? There isn't one till midday; and that's two hours off.'
(147)

Train, again marched through the deltaic tracts as a flag bearer of mercantile capitalism in India at the cost of natural resources and effective waterways. But the destruction of nature was not inevitable; bioregional planning in the places through the twentieth century could have saved the basic bioregional dimensions.

Any serious effort towards reinhabitation practice in the middle portion of the deltaic region must focus on the condition of the rivers and other water bodies like *beels* and *baors*. In the second decade of the twenty first century *Ichamati* is a river only in the rainy seasons in the locales of *Ichamati* and *Pather Panchali*. From its source at Krishnaganj in Nadia to the locales of the novels near Banagram in North 24 Parganas (then a part of Jessore) the river has lost its flowing capacity as the river bed has risen to a great extent due to siltation; and the course of the river is stagnated by the massive bulk of hyacinths. To rejuvenate the bioregional features of the locales the river must be retrieved; though the task is not impossible one, it is not an easy task either. The rivers of the deltaic regions are distributaries of Ganga-Padma river system which is politically shared by two different nations; the countries must plan together in the bioregional scale to regain the rivers of the region like Mathabhanga, Churni, Jalangi, *Ichamati*, Madhumati, Garai, Kumar, Bhairab etc.; not only the rivers but the other water bodies of large scale like *beel* and *baors* (marshlands and horse shoe lakes) as we find in the novels and the small water reservoirs like *pukur* and *dighi* have diminished due to siltation, agricultural expansion and the need for human settlement for an ever expanding population; these also must be retrieved for the restoration of the essence of

the place. From the maps of the past decades the areas of the water bodies may be specified and should be regained to the extent possible. The biodiversity can be partially regained to some extent by planting the right kind of trees; by right kind of tree the bioregionally sustainable trees are meant. Most of the wild mammals have departed the bioregion but fishing cats, rabbits are still traced; they need protection of the habitat. The reinhabitation practices should also be evinced from the kitchen; more bioregionally grown food should be consumed than imported food; eating of seasonal bioregional fruits also helps the reinhabitation practices. Many items of diet can be cited from the novels; most of the dishes have lost their attraction, these have been defeated by the cult of fast food. Since production of food needs much energy, enormous amount of chemical fertilizers and relentless use of pesticides now-a-days bioregional food planning can be undertaken to withhold the expansion of toxicity and carbon footprint in the agrarian sector; and once it is successfully implemented the organic farming would materialize and the environment would be more friendly to the wild animals as well as to the human beings. As the world is crying for clean water, fresh air, toxin free food the practice of reinhabitation and sustainable living can address these issues at a local scale and that in the long run may bring a change in the planetary scale. Literature, old or new, can ignite the imagination for such a future by reframing and reshaping the terrain of consciousness; many writers from the Bengal delta including Jibananda Das, Satyendranath Datta, Rabindranath Tagore and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay have written in a way that would probably invoke solastalgia if these writings are studied from a bioregional approach; which in turn would lead to bioregional imagination and narrative reinhabitation; but only a practical implementation of the bioregional approaches may guide the inhabitants to real reinhabitation.

Works Cited:

Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhushan. *Ichhamati*. Translated by Arup Rudra. Papyrus, 2012. Trans. of *Ichhamati* (1950)

---. *PatherPanchali: Song of the Road*. Translated by T. W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherjee. 1968. HarperCollins, 1999. Trans. of *PatherPanchali* (1929).

Berg, Peter, and Raymond Dasmann. "Reinhabiting California". In *The Biosphere and the Bioregion: Essential Writings of Peter Berg*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Eve Quesnel. Routledge, 2015.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

McGinnis, Michael V. *Bioregionalism*. Routledge, 1999.

Roy, Subhankar. "Championing the Subaltern Flora in Pather Panchali: A Sustainable Mirror". In *Culture and Social Values: Quest for Sustainability in a Market Driven Society*. Ed. Mridusmita Mahanta. Olympia Prakashan, 2016.

Thayer, Robert L., Jr. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. University of California Press, 2003.