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## Ecology and Equality: Tagore's Dramatic Vision in *Mukta Dhara*, *Natir Puja* and *Chandalika*

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### ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's dramatic vision combines ecological consciousness with a deep concern to equality. His plays *Mukta Dhara*, *Natir Puja*, and *Chandalika* highlight the struggles of marginalized individuals and communities while at the same time critiques exploitative powers that seek to control both human lives and the natural world. In *Mukta Dhara*, the life-giving force of a mountain stream becomes the symbol of nature's egalitarian spirit, resisting human attempts to tame nature. *Natir Puja* presents the temple dancer Shrimati's devotion as a challenge to oppressive social and religious hierarchies and highlights the universal acceptance of spiritual and natural grace. *Chandalika* portrays the awakening of selfhood in an untouchable girl, Prakriti, whose recognition of human dignity is inspired by the Buddha's ecological and egalitarian teachings. Together, these plays dramatize Tagore's belief that true liberation lies in harmonizing human society with the natural world without artificial hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and power. This paper reinterprets these plays through the dual lens of ecology and equality and tries to explore how Tagore's dramaturgy visualizes a world where the flow of nature is in parallel to the flow of human freedom.

### KEYWORDS

Ecology, Equality, Nature, Social Justice, hierarchy, elemental resources

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Nobel laureate, poet, philosopher, and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore was also a renowned dramatist whose theatrical works are imbued with philosophical depth and social critique. His plays not only question the injustices of colonial and hierarchical bodies of society but also articulate a notion of harmony with nature. The ecological concept in Tagore's drama is inseparable from his humanist concern for equality. By placing ordinary individuals, women, and marginalized castes at the centre of his narratives, Tagore reveals how the struggle for justice is connected with the natural world we are part of.

This paper examines three of Tagore's seminal plays, *Mukta Dhara*, *Natir Puja*, and *Chandalika*, through the perspectives of ecology and equality. In *Mukta Dhara*, nature itself emerges as a liberating force. This force of nature, in form of flood, resists technological domination and reminds humanity of its shared dependence on elemental resources such as water etc. In *Natir Puja*, the temple dancer Shrimati symbolises universal spiritual equality and her devotion transcends social and religious boundaries. *Chandalika*, by focusing on an untouchable girl's self-realization, foregrounds the democratic and ecological impulses within Buddhist teachings, which reminds us the real value of all life irrespective of caste or status. By placing these plays within an eco-critical and egalitarian framework, this paper argues that Tagore's dramaturgy visualizes freedom not only as a political aspiration but as an organic principle in search of a balance between nature and human life. His plays question anthropocentric thinking, expose the destructiveness of greed and domination, and highlight the dignity of both human beings and the natural world. In a time of ecological crisis and ongoing struggles for equality, Tagore's vision retains remarkable contemporary relevance and presents a worldview where democracy, ecology, and humanism meet at a single point.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) stands among the most versatile figures in modern world literature. While he is widely known for poetry and songs, his plays deserve equal recognition. Tagore's drama not only provides moral lessons to most of the people but also functions as spiritual, and social dialogue. He was deeply influenced by the Upanishadic idea of the interconnectedness of all beings, as well as by Buddhist thought of compassion and equality. At the same time, he was acutely aware of the ecological and cultural devastations wrought by modern industrialism and colonial exploitation. His plays dramatize these concerns in a symbolic form and uses natural elements like water, earth, flora, fauna as metaphors for freedom and justice. The three plays under discussion *Mukta Dhara* (1922), *Natir Puja* (1926), and *Chandalika* (1933) are examples of this vision. Each centers on marginalized figures: the oppressed villagers of Shiv-tarai, the temple dancer Shrimati, and the untouchable girl Prakriti. Yet their struggles are not only social or political; they are also ecological, as nature itself becomes their ally and symbol of liberation.

Ecocriticism views literature as a medium through which human-nature relationships are represented and critiqued. It exposes anthropocentrism and baseless assumption of human dominance over nature. Tagore believed that democracy was incomplete if it ignored harmony with nature. His ecological thought was not confined to his plays. At Santiniketan, he did an educational experiment in which learning was conducted in open-air settings, fostering intimacy between students and nature. He opposed the mechanization of life and warned against blind industrialism that alienates human beings from their environment. In his essays, Tagore often lamented the destruction of rivers, forests, and villages by colonial

exploitation. This ecological philosophy surfaces dramatically in *Mukta Dhara*. The play presents a direct conflict between nature and man-made machinery.

Tagore's idea of equality was also unique. He did not compare equality with uniformity but with harmony. He rejected the caste system's divisive hierarchies and patriarchy's suppression of women and declared them as obstacles to the free flowering of human personality. In *Natir Puja*, he dramatizes how a marginalized woman can embody spiritual power greater than kings and priests. In *Chandalika*, the "untouchable" becomes the centre of ethical truth. Equality, for Tagore, is thus inseparable from ecology. Just as water, air, and sunlight are available to all without discrimination, so too should human dignity and spiritual freedom be accessible to all, regardless of caste, class, or gender.

## 2 | THE ECOLOGY OF EQUALITY IN TAGORE'S PLAYS

Rabindranath Tagore's *Mukta Dhara* is one of his most powerful allegorical plays which dramatizes the conflict between technological domination and the natural flow of life. Written during a period of growing industrial expansion under colonial influence, the play reflects Tagore's anxiety about the mechanization of society and his conviction that nature embodies a higher principle of freedom and equality. The title itself, meaning 'The Stream of Liberation,' signals the play's central motif: water as a metaphor for the free and equal circulation of life, which no political power can legitimately monopolize.

At the heart of the play lies the mountain spring, Mukta Dhara, whose perennial waters irrigate the lands of both Uttarakut and Shiv-tarai. Nature here is depicted as abundant, impartial, and universal. Just as sunlight and air cannot be reserved for a select few, the stream's flow nourishes all communities without discrimination. Tagore elevates this ecological principle to a moral one: equality is not a gift of governments or rulers, but a law of nature itself. King Ranajit of Uttarakut, however, seeks to defy this natural order. Driven by greed and political ambition, he orders the royal engineer Vibhuti to construct a massive machine capable of obstructing the river and diverting its waters exclusively to Uttarakut. In doing so, Ranajit attempts to transform a shared resource into a weapon of control. This act of environmental domination becomes an allegory for colonial exploitation, where rivers, forests, and land were seized for profit, depriving local people of sustenance.

Tagore's vision here is in accordance with modern ecological thought. Environmental theorists argue that the unequal distribution of natural resources retains and perpetuates social inequalities. The Machine that royal engineer Vibhuti constructs symbolizes the arrogance of modern technology without ethical responsibility. Towering over the landscape, it appears both awe-inspiring and monstrous. Citizens of Uttarakut even prepare to worship it as a deity and thus it shows how technological progress can assume the status of an unquestioned ideology. Tagore critiques this blind reverence for machinery, which he saw spreading in early twentieth-century India under colonial and capitalist influences. Yet, the play insists that nature cannot be subdued completely. The waters of Mukta Dhara resist human control, surging beyond the Machine's grasp. This conflict dramatizes what Tagore perceived as the futility of technological domination: human beings may attempt to imprison rivers, but sooner or later nature asserts its freedom. In this way, *Mukta Dhara* echoes ecological critiques of anthropocentrism, reminding audiences that human sovereignty is an illusion when set against the larger forces of the natural world.

Opposing King Ranajit's project is Crown Prince Abhijit, whose character embodies Tagore's vision of ethical leadership. Abhijit recognizes that the waters of Mukta Dhara belong equally to the people of Shiv-tarai and Uttarakut. He reopens the Nandi Pass, which his father had closed to affect the wood trade of Shiv-tarai. Abhijit's action is not merely political but ecological. He understands that human welfare is inseparable from nature's generosity, and that hoarding natural resources for selfish gain violates both justice and the ecological balance. Another pivotal figure is Dhananjay, the ascetic leader of Shiv-tarai. His philosophy of nonviolent resistance reminds us the Gandhian spirit of satyagraha, but it also embodies ecological wisdom. Dhananjay tells King Ranajit that possession through force is transient, while true ownership lies in letting things be free:

DHANANJAYA: O King, you can keep nothing by straining for it. It is only when you can sit loosely to things, that they are yours.

RANAJIT: What do you mean?

DHANANJAYA: He who gives all, keeps all; greed brings you only stolen goods, and they won't last. There is your mistake. What you seize by violence can never be yours. What you set free is yours for ever. Clutch at it, and it is gone.

RANAJIT: *Mantri*, place this Vairagi in safe custody. (Tagore 47)

To attempt to imprison nature is to destroy its very gift; to let it flow is to sustain life eternally. Dhananjay's role thus highlights the intimate connection between spiritual freedom, social equality, and ecological integrity.

While the play features princes and spiritual leaders, its moral center lies with the common people of Shiv-tarai. Deprived of water, their survival is directly threatened, and their plight dramatizes how environmental exploitation harms marginalized communities. Tagore's portrayal of Shiv-tarai affirms the dignity of ordinary people as rightful inheritors of nature's gifts. Their struggle is not only for political recognition but for ecological survival, underscoring how democracy and environmental justice are inseparable. Throughout the play, the stream functions as a multilayered symbol. On the ecological plane, it represents the life force of nature, vital and uncontrollable. On the social plane, it stands for freedom and equality, as water flows to all without distinction. On the spiritual plane, it evokes liberation. It suggests that just as rivers resist confinement, so too does the human spirit resist oppression. In the twenty-first century, when water scarcity and resource conflicts are global crises, notions in *Mukta Dhara* becomes highly relevant. From the damming of rivers to disputes over transboundary waters, the play is full of modern struggles.

*Mukta Dhara* depicts the intimate connection between ecology and equality. By centering its conflict on a natural resource, the play insists that justice cannot be confined to political rights alone but must extend to the unbiased sharing of nature's gift. King Ranajit's attempt to imprison the stream exposes the destructiveness of human greed and arrogance of technological advancement. In contrast, the figures of Abhijit, Dhananjay, and the people of Shiv-tarai affirm that liberation flows, like water, to all who live in harmony with nature.

Rabindranath Tagore's another play *Natir Puja* occupies an important place in his dramaturgy as one of the few plays he personally staged with students of Santiniketan. While shorter and less elaborate than *Mukta Dhara*, this play is full of symbolic overtones. It

dramatizes the story of Shrimati, a temple dancer (nati) who dares to offer her devotion to Lord Buddha despite prohibition orders issued by King Ajatasatru. Through Shrimati's act of defiance, Tagore critiques the oppression of women and lower social groups while referring to the egalitarian and inclusive spirit of Buddhism. At the same time, the play affirms ecological balance and spiritual freedom: water, sunlight, and other God-given resources cannot be monopolized by kings, priests, or anyone. Written in colonial Bengal, *Natir Puja* reflects a time of intense debate over gender equality, social reform and religious change. Hindu orthodoxy, with its entrenched caste hierarchies and restrictions on women, was increasingly being challenged by reformist movements. Buddhism, with its rejection of caste distinctions and its emphasis on compassion, appeared to Tagore as a spiritual alternative that resonated with democratic and ecological principles. True religion cannot be regulated by any class, gender, or priestly order. Instead, it must remain as universal and impartial as nature itself.

Shrimati, the temple dancer, belongs to a socially marginalized stratum. Her profession is considered lowly, her gender makes her vulnerable to domination, and her devotion is questioned by social prejudice. Yet the playwright elevates her as the protagonist and grants her spiritual authority over kings and monks alike. Her prayers are spontaneous, unmediated, and sincere. Like a river flowing freely despite barriers, her devotion overcomes restrictions. This ecological metaphor is reinforced when Shrimati cleans the stupa and offers her prayers in defiance of the king's decree. Her act symbolizes the restoration of purity. A crucial moment in the play occurs when Upali, a Buddhist monk, begs alms from Shrimati. Conscious of her poverty and low status, she hesitates but the monk encourages her to recognize her true inner self:

Upali: Today I have come to you for alms.

Srimati: To me? But I am so poor! In your alms-bowl anything that I could give would seem so mean. What can I give, tell me?

Upali: Your best gift.

Srimati: What is my best gift? I do not even know that.

Upali: No, but the grace of Lord is upon you. He knows. (Tagore 88)

This exchange dramatizes the principle of ecological equality. Just as every drop of water contributes to the river, every person's offering, however small, has its value. Human dignity is not measured by wealth, caste, or social rank, but by sincerity and devotion. In aligning devotion with the natural act of giving, Tagore dismantles the monopolies of priestly authority. In contrast to Shrimati's liberating devotion, King Ajatasatru represents the political monopolization of religion. By prohibiting worship and issuing punishment orders, he attempts to regulate spiritual expression in the same way that King Ranajit of *Mukta Dhara* sought to monopolize water. Both kings try to confine what by its nature is unconfined.

A striking feature of *Natir Puja* is its attention to Shrimati's body as an instrument of devotion. Dance becomes her mode of worship. This is significant because, in patriarchal systems, women's bodies are often controlled, restricted, or silenced. By turning her dance into prayer, Tagore reclaims the female body as a site of spiritual authority. By asserting her

right to dance and pray, she reasserts women's right to participate fully in both the human and natural order. Tagore frames Buddhism as the spiritual foundation of *Natir Puja*. Unlike Vedic ritualism, which often reinforced caste hierarchies, Buddhism emphasized compassion, equality, and universality.

The climax of *Natir Puja* is Shrimati's fearless act of worship. Despite the king's prohibition, she clears the stupa and offers prayers to Lord Buddha. Her resistance is nonviolent yet transformative, reminding us of Dhananjoy's philosophy in *Mukta Dhara*. Here, devotion itself becomes an ecological act, like the flowering of a plant in barren soil. The playwright seems to depict how ecology and equality come together through the figure of Shrimati. Her devotion is like a river that flows freely, beyond human control. Her dance follows the rhythm of nature and expresses harmony that belongs to all. Through this play, Tagore questions the way kings and priests use religion for power, he also speaks against the injustice of gender inequality. Shrimati's prayer reminds us that equality is not a gift from authority, but a natural truth that flows from life itself.

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* (1933) is a short play that dramatizes the spiritual awakening of Prakriti, a young girl belonging to the untouchable caste of chandalas. Inspired by a Buddhist tale, the play interrogates caste hierarchies, social exclusion, and the quest for dignity. At its heart lies a simple yet transformative moment: the Buddhist monk Ananda asks Prakriti for water, treating her as fully human despite her outcaste status. This recognition shatters her internalized inferiority and awakens her sense of equality. *Chandalika* was written in the early 1930s, a time when India was experiencing intense nationalist struggle and social reform movements. The caste system, deeply entrenched for centuries, was increasingly challenged by reformers like B.R. Ambedkar, who insisted that political freedom from colonial rule would remain incomplete without the annihilation of caste. Tagore, through this play, shares the conviction that caste hierarchy violates the fundamental dignity of human beings. By adapting a Buddhist legend, Tagore critiques caste from a safe cultural distance while also affirming Buddhism's relevance to modern India. The Buddha's teachings on compassion, equality, and non-discrimination resonated with playwright's own belief that society must align itself with the rhythms of nature, which knows no distinction between purity and pollution, Brahmin and Chandal, poor and rich.

The remarkable scene in *Chandalika* occurs when Ananda, weary and thirsty, asks Prakriti for water. For her, this is a surprising moment: as an untouchable, she has always believed her touch, her presence, even her water to be impure. Social norms dictate that she cannot offer water to a monk of high spiritual standing. Yet Ananda dismisses such divisions, declaring: "As I am a human being, so also are you, and all water is clean and holy that cools our heart and satisfies our thirst." (Tagore 148)

Nature does not recognize human-imposed barriers of caste. Rivers do not discriminate between Brahmin and Chandal, between king and beggar. By equating water with purity itself, Ananda rejects the logic of caste and affirms a universal truth: the sanctity of life. For Prakriti, Ananda's words are transformative. Having internalized society's contempt, she initially hesitates and reveals her identity as a Chandal. When Ananda insists on accepting her gift, she experiences an awakening: now she is no longer merely an untouchable but a human being with equal worth. This awakening can be read as ecological self-realization. Just as every plant, every drop of water, every living creature has its place in the ecosystem, so too does every human being have intrinsic value. However, her

transformation is not free from complexity. Overwhelmed by desire for Ananda, she later compels her mother to use magic to bind him to her. This episode complicates the narrative, suggesting that liberation is not free from struggle. This danger of possessiveness contrasts with the liberating generosity of water, reminding us that true equality must flow freely, not be hoarded.

Ananda, as the disciple of the Buddha, embodies the principles of Buddhist egalitarianism. His simple request for water becomes a revolutionary act because it disrupts the entire social order of caste. His teaching that 'all water is holy' links spirituality with ecology: holiness is not confined to temples or rituals but resides in the natural world accessible to all. Buddhist thought often emphasizes interdependence: all beings are connected in a web of causation, and compassion arises from recognizing this interconnectedness. Ananda's recognition of Prakriti affirms this principle. By accepting water from her, he symbolically accepts her individuality and her dignity, irrespective of imposed social hierarchies. Prakriti's mother plays a crucial role in the drama, employing her knowledge of occult arts to bind Ananda to her daughter. This subplot raises questions about the misuse of newfound empowerment. Having discovered her dignity, Prakriti mistakes possession for liberation. Instead of allowing her love to flow like water, she tries to imprison it through magic. Ecologically, this reflects the paradox of human desire to control what is naturally free. Just as King Ranajit in *Mukta Dhara* sought to dam the river, Prakriti attempts to bind Ananda. Both efforts are bound to fail because they contradict the principle of natural flow. True liberation, whether of rivers or of human affection, requires release, not possession.

Like *Natir Puja*, *Chandalika* positions Buddhism as a counterpoint to hierarchical religion. By rejecting caste distinctions, Buddhism aligns with nature's impartiality. Chandradhar Sharma describes early Buddhism as a religion that spread "without distinction of caste, creed, or colour," becoming a world religion by its openness. (Sharma 69) Tagore dramatizes this spirit by showing how a monk's simple acceptance of water dismantles centuries of prejudice. Buddha taught that all life is sacred, that suffering is universal, and therefore compassion must extend to all beings. *Chandalika* also resonates with ecofeminist thought, which links the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature. Prakriti's subjugation as an untouchable woman parallels nature's degradation under patriarchal and hierarchical systems. Both are treated as resources to be controlled or excluded. Ananda's recognition of her dignity challenges this logic, affirming instead that both women and nature are part and parcel of the cosmic order. Moreover, Prakriti's desire for Ananda reflects a deeper longing for participation in the human community. Her struggle symbolizes the repressed energies of marginalized groups, whose voices, like rivers dammed by oppression, seek release.

In contemporary India, caste discrimination remains a pressing issue despite legal reforms. *Chandalika* continues to speak to these realities, offering a vision of equality grounded not only in social reform but in ecological truth. The universality of water as a symbol reminds us that dignity cannot be denied without violating the very principles of life. Just as Prakriti is excluded from social participation, so too are many poor communities excluded from access to clean water, land, and air. *Chandalika* thus symbolises the concept of 'environmental justice' which insists that ecological resources must be distributed equitably. *Chandalika* unites the themes of ecology and equality in the simple yet profound

act of giving water. Through Ananda's request and Prakriti's awakening, Tagore demonstrates that dignity flows from recognition of shared humanity, just as rivers flow to sustain all life. Caste hierarchies, like dams, are artificial barriers that obstruct this natural flow. Through Prakriti's journey from self-contempt to self-realization, the play critiques social exclusion while affirming an ecological principle: all beings, like all waters, are sacred. The tragedy of her misguided attempt to bind Ananda further reminds us the lesson that true liberation lies not in possession but in release, not in control but in harmony.

In *Chandalika*, as in *Mukta Dhara* and *Natir Puja*, Tagore visualizes a world where ecology and equality converge. Nature's impartiality becomes the model for human society, and human dignity is affirmed as universal, indivisible, and as essential as water itself. Written during a period of political upheaval and social reform in colonial India, these plays transcend their immediate context to present a vision of life that remains profoundly relevant in the twenty-first century. In *Mukta Dhara*, the flowing mountain stream becomes the central symbol of ecological equality. Water, essential for survival, should not be monopolized by kings or obstructed by machinery. Its impartiality mirrors the universality of human dignity. Attempts by King Ranajit and his engineer Vibhuti to dam the river dramatize the arrogance of technological and political domination. *Natir Puja* shifts the focus from rivers and machinery to the realm of gender and spirituality. Shrimati, the temple dancer, embodies natural freedom through her dance and devotion. Her prayers, though forbidden by King Ajatasatru, defy artificial restrictions and emit naturally. The message of equality in Buddhism becomes a symbol of nature and spontaneity. In *Chandalika*, the ecological metaphor of water becomes the vehicle for a direct critique of caste discrimination. Ananda's simple request for water awakens Prakriti to her own dignity as a human being. Water here symbolizes universality: it quenches thirst of all, without discrimination of caste or status. Prakriti's subsequent struggles, including her misguided attempt to possess Ananda through magic, shows man's greed to confine and control nature. Her journey illustrates that liberation lies not in control but in release, not in exclusion but in harmony with life's flow.

When read together, these three plays form a coherent vision of what may be called Tagore's dramatic ecology of equality. Each play centers on a marginalized figure or community: the oppressed villagers of Shiv-tarai, the female temple dancer, the untouchable girl and each play shows how their struggles are connected with ecology. Water, devotion, and dignity all emerge as natural rights that cannot be monopolized without violating the order of life itself. Kings and priests, machines and magic, all represent attempts to impose control; yet each is ultimately resisted by the inherent freedom of nature.

### 3 | CONCLUSION

Tagore's vision resonates powerfully with contemporary concerns. The global ecological crises like water scarcity, deforestation, and climate-change demand that natural resources must be shared equitably. At the same time, struggles against caste discrimination, gender inequality, and discrimination based on region remind us that true democracy is still awaited. The plays discussed here, insist that these two struggles are inseparable: injustice against nature results in injustice against people, and vice versa. The lesson of *Mukta Dhara*, *Natir Puja*, and *Chandalika* is clear: to honour ecology and to support equality is to live in harmony with flora and fauna.

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