
Beyond Urban Prejudice: Rural Ethics and Moral Economy in Panchanan Das's *Dokhno*

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Abstract

This article examines Panchanan Das's short story called *Dokhno* as a nuanced literary exploration of rural ethics and moral economy in the Sundarbans. Challenging dominant urban-centric assumptions that equate modernity with ethical refinement, the story foregrounds a community-based moral framework grounded in reciprocity, care, and collective responsibility. Through the character of Soma, an urban-educated woman who travels to a remote village for employment, the narrative stages a gradual dismantling of urban prejudice and reveals the limitations of viewing rural life through a lens of cultural deficiency. Drawing on theoretical perspectives such as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, E. P. Thompson's moral economy, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern, the article argues that *Dokhno* redefines ethical authority by locating it within marginalized communities rather than institutional structures. The figure of the school secretary, an illiterate yet deeply committed social actor, exemplifies a form of subaltern humanism that prioritizes communal welfare over individual advancement. The article also highlights the role of gender in shaping moral agency, particularly through Soma's transformation into a responsible provider and her engagement with an ethics of care. Additionally, it explores how the ecological instability of the Sundarbans—marked by shifting rivers and environmental uncertainty—shapes a relational ethical system rooted in interdependence. By integrating themes of community, gender, and environment, *Dokhno* emerges as a powerful critique of hierarchical distinctions between urban and rural life, offering an alternative vision of ethics grounded in lived experience and social solidarity.

Keywords: Moral Economy; Subaltern Humanism; Rural Ethics; Ethics of Care; Sundarbans

Introduction

Rural life in literary representation has often been framed through a lens of absence—absence of modernity, absence of institutional sophistication, and, perhaps most persistently, absence of ethical refinement. Such assumptions, deeply embedded within colonial and postcolonial cultural hierarchies, have tended to position the countryside as a space of lack in contrast to the perceived completeness of the urban. Panchanan Das's *Dokhno*, however, unsettles this narrative with quiet yet profound force. Rather than depicting the Sundarbans as a marginal or deficient space, the story reveals it as a site of complex moral reasoning, where everyday practices are shaped by responsibility, reciprocity, and an enduring commitment to communal well-being. Set against the fragile and shifting ecology of South 24 Parganas, *Dokhno* brings into focus a world in which ethical life cannot be separated from environmental precarity. Rivers change course, tides unsettle boundaries, and livelihoods remain perpetually vulnerable to natural forces. Within such a landscape, survival depends less on individual success than on collective resilience. It is precisely this condition that gives rise to a distinctive moral framework—one that privileges cooperation over competition and care over accumulation. The story thus invites us to reconsider the relationship between environment, community, and ethics, suggesting that moral systems are not abstract constructs but lived responses to specific material conditions. At the centre of the narrative is Soma, an urban-educated woman whose journey to the Sundarbans initiates a gradual reconfiguration of perception. Through her encounters with the people of the region, particularly figures such as the school secretary and Molina Maity, the text stages a confrontation between urban prejudice and rural experience. What initially appears unfamiliar or suspect gradually reveals itself as part of a deeply rooted ethical order. In this sense, *Dokhno* becomes more than a story of personal transformation; it emerges as a critique of dominant epistemologies that equate education with wisdom and urbanity with moral authority. This article examines *Dokhno* through the intersecting frameworks of moral economy, subaltern humanism, and the ethics of care. Drawing on theoretical insights from thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, E. P. Thompson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Tim Ingold, it argues that the story redefines ethical life by foregrounding the practices of marginalized communities. By exploring themes of urban prejudice, gendered responsibility, subaltern agency, and ecological interdependence, the discussion demonstrates how Panchanan Das constructs a nuanced vision of rural ethics—one that challenges hierarchical distinctions between centre and periphery, and reimagines the moral foundations of social life.

Urban Prejudice and the Construction of Rural Otherness

One of the most striking tensions in Panchanan Das's *Dokhno* unfolds through the uneasy encounter between urban assumptions and rural realities. When Soma arrives in Patharpratima to begin her teaching position, she does not arrive as a neutral observer.

Rather, she carries with her a set of implicit ideas about rural life that are widely shared among urban middle-class communities. For many residents of metropolitan Kolkata, the Sundarbans appears as a distant and marginal landscape, both geographically and culturally removed from the city. Within this framework, the inhabitants of the region are often imagined as lacking education, refinement, or social sophistication. Soma's early responses to her surroundings reveal how deeply such assumptions can shape one's perception even before any meaningful interaction takes place. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of 'cultural capital', a concept articulated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues that societies attribute prestige and authority to certain forms of knowledge, speech, and behaviour that are associated with dominant social groups. These forms of cultural capital function as markers of legitimacy, enabling those who possess them to claim intellectual and social superiority while implicitly devaluing alternative forms of knowledge and experience (Bourdieu 241). Within the narrative of *Dokhno*, Soma's initial suspicion toward the school secretary emerges from precisely this hierarchy. His speech is direct and informal, his manner unpolished, and he openly admits that he is illiterate. Such characteristics do not align with the institutional codes of professionalism that Soma associates with educational authority. Consequently, she instinctively interprets his behaviour with caution, reading simplicity as a possible sign of incompetence or even deceit. The persistence of such attitudes becomes explicit when Soma later reflects on how people in the city speak about the region. She observes that "in Kolkata, people say that the people of the south are unlettered, uncultured, unsocial and self-centred" (Das 19). The statement is significant because it exposes an entrenched discourse rather than an isolated opinion. Rural communities are not merely perceived as different; they are categorized as lacking the qualities that urban society considers markers of civility and progress. In this symbolic geography, the city becomes the centre of culture and intellectual authority, while the countryside is relegated to a peripheral position marked by presumed deficiency. Such processes of representation resonate with the insights of postcolonial theorist Edward Said. In *Orientalism*, Said demonstrates how dominant cultures often construct simplified images of others in order to reinforce their own cultural authority. Through these representations, marginal societies are frequently depicted as irrational, underdeveloped, or incapable of self-governance (Said 32). Although Said's analysis focuses on Western portrayals of the East, the underlying logic is equally visible within internal social hierarchies. Urban elites frequently reproduce similar structures of representation by imagining rural populations as culturally inferior or intellectually deficient. Das carefully unsettles this assumption through the gradual unfolding of the narrative. Soma's first meeting with the school secretary intensifies her unease rather than alleviating it. His manner is unusually enthusiastic and his hospitality immediate and overwhelming. Instead of the formal reserve she expects from an administrative authority, he greets her with warmth and familiarity. More troubling to Soma,

however, is his explanation of the salary arrangement for new teachers. With complete openness he informs her that “in the beginning, I’ll pay you as temporary staff for two months. After that, I’ll make full payment” (Das 17). To Soma, the statement sounds irregular and vaguely threatening, precisely because it does not resemble the bureaucratic procedures she associates with legitimate employment. The narrative registers her discomfort in a striking physical detail: “Soma’s eyes reddened, her face lost colour, and she began to sweat” (Das 18). The moment captures the psychological effect of encountering a social practice that lies outside one’s familiar framework of interpretation.

The turning point arrives when the headmistress, Molina Maity, reveals the fuller story behind the secretary’s actions. What initially appeared suspicious now emerges in a completely different light. The secretary, she explains, is not an opportunistic administrator but the very person who made the school possible. It was he who donated “fifty bighas of land and many lakhs of rupees” to establish the institution (Das 18). Even more remarkable is the fact that he himself cannot read or write and signs official documents with a thumb impression. Despite this, he has invested his personal resources and labour in building an educational space for the local community. His generosity extends beyond the school itself: he has also offered shelter to an orphaned widow and has taken responsibility for educating her son (Das 18). In the space of a few moments, Soma’s earlier interpretation collapses, revealing the extent to which her assumptions had obscured the ethical reality before her. From this perspective, the secretary’s behaviour reflects a system of values that cannot be adequately understood through the bureaucratic logic of urban institutions. Instead, it resonates with the notion of ‘moral economy’ articulated by historian E. P. Thompson. Thompson suggests that in many traditional communities economic practices are governed not solely by contractual arrangements but by a network of shared ethical expectations and social obligations (Thompson 79). Within such systems, actions that might appear unconventional from a strictly institutional standpoint often emerge from locally developed strategies designed to sustain communal stability. The secretary’s decision to withhold part of a new teacher’s salary temporarily, for instance, can be interpreted not as exploitation but as a practical attempt to ensure continuity in a rural school where teachers might otherwise leave after brief appointments.

Soma’s realization of her misjudgment marks one of the most revealing moments in the narrative. Confronted with the generosity and sincerity of the rural community, she is compelled to reassess the assumptions she had carried with her from the city. Reflecting on what she has witnessed, she acknowledges: “how wrong the genteel people of the city are! There is so much to learn from the people here” (Das 19). The statement performs a quiet yet powerful reversal of the hierarchy that had structured her earlier perception. The

countryside is no longer the site of cultural deficiency but a space where ethical commitment and communal responsibility are vividly present. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz offers a useful way of understanding this shift in perception. Geertz emphasizes that human actions can only be interpreted meaningfully when they are situated within the cultural context that gives them significance. He famously describes this interpretive process as “thick description,” a method that seeks to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within everyday practices (Geertz 6). Soma’s earlier misunderstanding arises precisely because she observes the secretary’s behaviour without grasping the cultural framework within which it operates. Once the broader social context becomes visible, the same actions that once appeared suspicious reveal themselves as expressions of generosity and responsibility. Through this gradual transformation in Soma’s perspective, *Dokhno* quietly interrogates the assumptions that sustain urban prejudice. Panchanan Das does not simply reverse the hierarchy between city and countryside; rather, he exposes the fragility of the criteria through which such hierarchies are constructed. The narrative suggests that ethical insight cannot be measured solely through formal education, institutional authority, or cultural prestige. Instead, it often emerges from the lived experiences of communities whose survival depends upon cooperation, trust, and mutual care. By revealing the moral depth embedded in the lives of the people known as the “Dokhno,” the story invites readers to reconsider the relationship between knowledge, culture, and ethical authority, reminding us that the boundaries between refinement and simplicity are far less stable than they may initially appear.

Gender, Care, and Moral Agency

Although *Dokhno* primarily explores the ethical life of a rural community, the narrative simultaneously foregrounds the question of gender and the ways in which women negotiate responsibility, care, and agency within a deeply patriarchal social structure. Soma’s journey from a protected urban environment to the remote landscape of the Sundarbans is not merely a geographical movement; it also represents a transformation in the expectations placed upon women within contemporary Bengali society. Her decision to seek employment after her father’s illness reflects a moment in which traditional gender hierarchies begin to fracture under the pressure of economic necessity and moral responsibility. At the outset of the story, Soma’s family situation reflects a familiar patriarchal assumption regarding gendered labour and familial duty. Her father’s illness produces an immediate economic crisis, and the absence of a male breadwinner exposes the vulnerability of the household. Within this context, Soma’s mother expresses sorrow that her daughter was born a girl, suggesting that a son would have been better equipped to support the family in such circumstances. The remark echoes a widely circulated social belief that positions sons as economic protectors while relegating daughters to the domestic sphere. Feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that societies often construct women as the “Other,”

defining them through limitations rather than capacities (de Beauvoir 267). Soma's mother's regret emerges from precisely such a cultural framework, in which femininity is associated with dependency rather than economic agency. However, the narrative gradually dismantles this assumption by placing Soma at the centre of the family's survival. Rather than remaining confined within the expectations traditionally associated with daughters, she chooses to assume responsibility for the household's financial stability. Her acceptance of a teaching post in the distant region of Patharpratima signals both determination and courage. The journey itself carries symbolic weight: by travelling alone to an unfamiliar and geographically challenging environment, Soma effectively crosses the boundaries that conventionally restrict women's mobility. In doing so, she transforms herself into the family's primary source of economic support, thereby contradicting the earlier belief that daughters are incapable of sustaining their families. This transformation can be understood through the framework of the 'ethics of care', a concept developed by philosopher Carol Gilligan. Gilligan argues that moral decision-making often emerges from networks of responsibility, empathy, and relational commitment rather than from abstract rules or individual competition (Gilligan 30). Soma's decision to travel to the Sundarbans is not driven by personal ambition or professional advancement alone. Instead, it arises from a profound sense of responsibility toward her parents, particularly her ailing father. The narrative emphasizes this moral motivation when Soma resolves that she must work in order to sustain the household after her father's illness leaves him unable to provide for the family (Das 12). Her action illustrates how care itself can become a form of ethical agency, enabling women to reshape social expectations through acts of responsibility. Soma's arrival in the rural school further expands the scope of this moral commitment. By choosing to remain in a remote village where educational resources are limited, she becomes part of a collective effort to improve the lives of the community's children. In this sense, her labour acquires a broader social significance. Teaching is not merely a profession; it becomes a form of service that contributes to the ethical life of the village. Such a commitment resonates with the narrative's emphasis on moral economy, where personal actions are guided by obligations to the wider community rather than by individual gain.

The story also places considerable importance on relationships between women, particularly through Soma's interaction with the headmistress, Molina Maity. Initially overwhelmed by unfamiliar circumstances and suspicious of the school secretary's behaviour, Soma struggles to interpret the social environment around her. It is Molina Maity who patiently clarifies the ethical context of the community, explaining the secretary's generosity and the sacrifices he has made to establish the school. Through this conversation, Soma gradually recognizes that her earlier suspicions were shaped by urban prejudice. Molina Maity's explanation reveals that the secretary had donated "fifty bighas of land and

many lakhs of rupees” for the construction of the school (Das 18). By sharing this information, the headmistress not only corrects Soma’s misunderstanding but also introduces her to the deeper ethical values that structure rural life. This interaction illustrates the importance of female mentorship and solidarity in navigating unfamiliar social environments. Sociologist Nancy Chodorow has argued that relationships among women often play a crucial role in transmitting emotional knowledge and social understanding within communities (Chodorow 214). Molina Maity performs precisely this role within the narrative. Her calm authority and supportive guidance enable Soma to reinterpret the behaviour of the people around her and to integrate herself into the community’s moral framework. The headmistress does not simply act as an administrator; she becomes a mediator who helps Soma recognize the ethical depth embedded within rural society. The culmination of Soma’s transformation appears when she reflects on the mistaken assumptions that urban society often holds about the people of the Sundarbans. After learning about the secretary’s generosity and the values that guide the community, she realizes how inaccurate these stereotypes are. In a moment of self-reflection, she acknowledges that the supposedly “genteel” people of the city have much to learn from those whom they casually dismiss as uncultured (Das 19). The statement signals not only a shift in Soma’s perception of rural life but also a broader recognition of the moral agency present within marginalized communities. Through Soma’s experiences, *Dokhno* offers a nuanced exploration of gender and ethical responsibility. The narrative begins with a deeply ingrained patriarchal assumption—that daughters are less capable of supporting their families—but gradually replaces this belief with a more complex understanding of female agency. Soma’s journey demonstrates that care, responsibility, and solidarity can function as powerful forms of moral action. By portraying a young woman who travels to a remote region to sustain both her family and a rural community, Panchanan Das ultimately reframes the meaning of strength and responsibility within a changing social landscape.

Subaltern Humanism and Community Responsibility

Another significant dimension of *Dokhno* is its portrayal of ‘subaltern humanism’—an ethical worldview emerging from marginalized or non-elite communities. The school secretary embodies this perspective through his commitment to education and social welfare despite his own illiteracy. Rather than occupying a position of authority through formal education or institutional status, he emerges as a moral figure through his actions and dedication to the collective well-being of the community. This perspective resonates with the idea of the ‘subaltern’, a concept explored by theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak argues that individuals located outside dominant structures of power—those who lack institutional authority, literacy, or elite social status—are often excluded from mainstream narratives of knowledge and leadership (Spivak 271). In *Dokhno*, the school secretary occupies precisely such a position. Despite being unable to read or write and signing

documents with a thumb impression, he plays a central role in shaping the educational infrastructure of the village. His presence in the narrative challenges the assumption that intellectual or ethical leadership must originate from formally educated elites. His character therefore disrupts the conventional association between literacy and moral authority. Although he signs official documents with a thumb impression, he has taken decisive steps to improve educational opportunities for the local community. As Molina Maity explains to Soma, the secretary had donated “fifty bighas of land and many lakhs of rupees” for the establishment of the school (Das 18). This remarkable act of generosity reveals a commitment to collective progress rather than personal advancement. The secretary does not seek prestige or recognition; instead, he invests his personal wealth in an institution designed to serve the educational needs of future generations.

The secretary’s actions also illustrate the relational nature of rural ethics. Rather than accumulating wealth solely for himself, he channels his resources into institutions that strengthen the social fabric of the village. Such behaviour aligns with the concept of ‘moral economy’, developed by historian E. P. Thompson. Thompson suggests that in many traditional communities economic activity is governed not only by market logic but also by shared ethical expectations that emphasize fairness, reciprocity, and collective survival (Thompson 79). The secretary’s decision to invest his wealth in the village school reflects precisely such a moral orientation. His actions demonstrate that economic resources can function as instruments of social responsibility rather than tools for individual accumulation. Furthermore, the secretary’s generosity extends beyond institutional philanthropy. The narrative reveals that he has also taken responsibility for an orphaned widow and her young son, offering them shelter and ensuring that the child receives an education. Molina Maity explains to Soma that the widow lives on the secretary’s property and that her son studies at the school under his protection (Das 18). This gesture illustrates an ethic of care deeply embedded within the community’s social structure. The secretary’s responsibility toward the widow is not defined by legal obligation but by a broader sense of moral duty toward vulnerable members of the community. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz provides a useful framework for understanding such practices. Geertz argues that cultural systems are sustained through shared meanings that guide everyday behaviour and social relationships (Geertz 5). Within the rural world depicted in *Dokhno*, ethical authority emerges not from bureaucratic rules but from lived practices of generosity, responsibility, and mutual care. The secretary’s behaviour exemplifies this cultural logic: his authority derives from the trust and respect he has earned through his actions rather than from formal education or institutional credentials. Through this character, Panchanan Das ultimately suggests that ethical leadership can emerge from unexpected sources. The secretary’s illiteracy might initially appear to disqualify him from positions of authority in the eyes of

urban observers like Soma. Yet the narrative gradually reveals that moral wisdom is not necessarily linked to formal schooling or urban sophistication. Instead, it often arises from lived experience, empathy, and a sustained commitment to the well-being of others. In presenting the secretary as a figure of quiet yet profound generosity, *Dokhno* reconfigures the relationship between knowledge, power, and ethics. The story invites readers to recognize that communities traditionally labeled as “backward” or “uncultured” may in fact sustain complex moral systems grounded in cooperation and social responsibility. Through the secretary’s actions, Panchanan Das foregrounds a form of ‘subaltern humanism’ in which ethical authority grows from the everyday practices of care, solidarity, and collective commitment that shape the life of the village.

Landscape, Community, and Ethical Imagination

The closing scene of *Dokhno* introduces a vivid evocation of the rivers Shibua, Mridangabhanga, and Pakhinala, where the restless movement of water and the force of the southern winds create a striking image of the Sundarban landscape. This setting is not merely descriptive; it plays a crucial role in shaping the ethical imagination of the narrative. The natural world here is not passive background but an active presence that conditions how people think, act, and relate to one another. The Sundarbans is defined by instability and ecological uncertainty. Rivers alter their courses, tides continually redraw the boundaries between land and water, and storms disrupt everyday life. In such an environment, survival is rarely an individual achievement; it depends instead on cooperation, trust, and mutual reliance. This relationship between environment and social life can be understood through the “dwelling perspective” proposed by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who argues that human beings do not simply inhabit landscapes but are formed through continuous interaction with them (Ingold 153). In *Dokhno*, the ethical values of the community—generosity, responsibility, and solidarity—emerge directly from this lived engagement with a volatile ecological world. The narrative captures this intimate connection through its closing description of the rivers, where the flowing waters and shifting currents evoke a sense of perpetual motion and uncertainty. The landscape appears alive, dynamic, and unpredictable, mirroring the precarious conditions under which the inhabitants must sustain their lives (Das 20). This environmental rhythm reinforces the necessity of collective ethics: in a region where nature itself resists stability, human relationships must provide the continuity that the land cannot.

Soma’s reflection on the “two small rivers” near her home introduces a subtle yet important shift in perspective. By recalling the rivers of her own environment, she begins to perceive a connection between urban and rural experiences. The comparison suggests that, despite differences in scale and context, both landscapes are shaped by movement and change. This moment of recognition enables Soma to move beyond the rigid distinctions that

had earlier separated her from the rural community. As she reflects on these parallel landscapes, she begins to understand that human life everywhere is subject to forces beyond individual control (Das 20). Such a realization resonates with the ideas of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who emphasizes that ethical responsibility arises from an awareness of shared vulnerability and interdependence (Levinas 75). In recognizing the unpredictability that structures both her own life and the lives of the Sundarban inhabitants, Soma develops a deeper sense of empathy. The rural community is no longer perceived as fundamentally “other”; instead, it becomes part of a shared human condition defined by uncertainty and mutual reliance.

The story’s concluding emphasis on the identity of the “Dokhno”—the people of South 24 Parganas—further reinforces this ethical vision. The term itself carries a sense of regional belonging, rooted in the cultural and ecological specificity of the Sundarbans. The narrative suggests that these individuals, though often dismissed by urban society as unrefined or backward, possess a form of moral richness that is inseparable from their environment. Their lives are shaped by hardship and unpredictability, yet they sustain a social world grounded in cooperation and sincerity. Through this closing movement, Panchanan Das brings together landscape and ethics in a compelling way. The rivers, winds, and shifting terrain of the Sundarbans do more than frame the narrative; they actively participate in shaping the values that govern human relationships. By linking ecological instability with ethical interdependence, *Dokhno* ultimately presents a vision of community in which moral life is inseparable from the environment that sustains it.

Conclusion

Dokhno ultimately compels us to rethink the frameworks through which ethical life is recognized and valued. What begins as a narrative shaped by urban skepticism gradually unfolds into a profound meditation on responsibility, care, and community. Through Soma’s evolving perception, the story exposes the limitations of a worldview that equates moral authority with formal education and cultural sophistication. In its place, Panchanan Das offers an alternative ethical vision rooted in lived experience, relational accountability, and a deep sense of collective belonging.

The rural world depicted in the Sundarbans emerges not as a space of deficiency but as a site of moral richness. Practices that initially appear irregular or opaque—such as the school secretary’s informal arrangements or his unconventional authority—reveal themselves, upon closer understanding, as expressions of a coherent ethical system grounded in trust and reciprocity. This system aligns with the principles of moral economy, where the well-being of the community takes precedence over individual gain. At the same time, the narrative foregrounds a form of subaltern humanism in which ethical leadership arises from

those who remain outside the structures of institutional power, demonstrating that wisdom is not the exclusive domain of the educated elite.

Equally significant is the story's engagement with gender and care. Soma's journey disrupts patriarchal assumptions by presenting a female subject who assumes responsibility not only for her family but also for a wider community. Her actions exemplify an ethics of care that extends beyond personal obligation, illustrating how moral agency is often constituted through relationships rather than individual ambition. The support she receives from figures like Molina Maity further underscores the importance of solidarity and shared understanding in sustaining ethical life.

Finally, the ecological setting of the Sundarbans provides a crucial context for these ethical formations. The instability of the landscape—its shifting rivers, unpredictable tides, and constant threats—shapes a mode of existence in which interdependence becomes essential. The environment itself thus participates in the production of moral values, reinforcing the idea that ethics is inseparable from the conditions of life within which it emerges.

In bringing together these various strands, *Dokhno* challenges the entrenched binary between urban and rural, centre and margin, knowledge and experience. It invites readers to recognize that ethical insight often resides in places that dominant discourses overlook or misunderstand. By illuminating the moral complexity of the Sundarban community, Panchanan Das not only reclaims the dignity of rural life but also offers a broader reflection on what it means to live ethically in a world marked by uncertainty, vulnerability, and interdependence.

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