

# ECO-MUSICOLOGY AND THE BHAWAIYA SONG OF KOCH BIHAR: A RHYTHMIC DISCOURSE

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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper examines Bhawaiya—an emotive folk music tradition of Koch Bihar—through the lens of eco-musicology, an emerging discipline that studies the intersections of ecology, sound, culture, and environmental ethics. Bhawaiya, deeply embedded in the riverine and pastoral landscapes of North Bengal, offers a rich sonic archive of environmental memory, agrarian experience, and cultural sustainability. By analysing the ecological imagination embedded in Bhawaiya lyrics, vocal styles, instruments such as the dotara and sarinda, and community performance contexts, this paper argues that Bhawaiya functions simultaneously as a musical form, an ecological narrative, and a cultural repository of land-based identity. Drawing on theoretical approaches from environmental humanities, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology, the study identifies how Bhawaiya articulates human-nature relationships, expresses ecological grief and resilience, and encodes sustainable practices of agrarian life. The research integrates field-based observations, textual readings, and secondary sources to demonstrate that Bhawaiya emerges as an eco-aesthetic discourse that preserves regional ecological consciousness while reflecting contemporary transformations in land use, migration, and cultural continuity. The paper concludes that Bhawaiya represents a crucial site for studying how folk music traditions sustain ecological ethics, negotiate cultural transitions, and nurture intergenerational environmental knowledge.*

**Keywords:** Eco-musicology, Bhawaiya, Koch Bihar, folk music, ecology, cultural sustainability, soundscape.

## INTRODUCTION

Eco-musicology has in recent years begun to reconfigure the ways in which we understand musical traditions, especially those rooted in landscapes where sound, ecology, labour, and memory are inseparably entangled. Although the term is relatively new within academic discourse, the impulses behind eco-musicological enquiry—the desire to listen to the environment through the cultural forms that emerge from it—have existed for centuries in communities that articulate their lived realities through song. In this regard, the Bhawaiya song tradition of Koch Bihar stands out as an exceptionally rich case, not merely because it evokes a certain emotional timbre or evokes a sense of nostalgia tied to agrarian life, but because it inhabits an ecological world that is constantly in motion. The undulating plains of North Bengal, shaped by the Torsha, Dharla, Raidak, and innumerable smaller tributaries, are not passive backdrops but active forces in the musical imagination of the Rajbanshi people. When one listens carefully to Bhawaiya—its stretched vocal glides, its lingering pauses, its plaintive tone—it becomes clear that the environment does not simply inspire the music; it is embedded within the very physiology of the sound.

Yet, musicological scholarship in India has often treated folk forms as repositories of “culture” rather than as dynamic expressions of ecological consciousness. Within the broader debates in ethnomusicology, there has been increasing acknowledgement that music should be studied not only as a cultural artefact but also as an ecological phenomenon, carrying with it insights into land use, environmental memory, seasonal rhythms, patterns of displacement, and even tacit critiques of environmental degradation. Bhawaiya, for all its outward simplicity, is remarkably complex in this sense. It grew out of the everyday movements of mahouts, boatmen, farmers, weavers, and especially bullock-cart drivers whose livelihoods were shaped by the terrain. As older singers often recount, a Bhawaiya tune was never “composed” in the strict sense of composition; it emerged from the body adjusting to landscape. The bullock-cart driver navigating muddy tracks, the boatman resisting river currents, the woman waiting at the riverbank for her lover—each of these experiences shaped how breath was released and how melodies were elongated. This intimate relationship between environment and expression is precisely what eco-musicology compels us to re-examine.

The emotional core of Bhawaiya has historically been associated with *biraha*—the ache of separation. But in many songs, this separation—between lovers, families, or communities—mirrors a deeper ecological sense of loss and vulnerability. Floods disrupt lives, seasonal migrations separate couples, and geographical distances imposed by work or natural boundaries create emotional fractures. The lyrical universe of Bhawaiya is therefore not simply about romantic longing; it is an environmental longing, a longing produced by the uncertainties of riverine life. This makes Bhawaiya a particularly meaningful genre to revisit today, at a time when the landscapes that sustained these songs are undergoing rapid transformation due to climate change, erosion, infrastructural expansion, and altered agrarian patterns. It becomes ever more urgent to understand the ecological knowledge encoded in these songs before the environments that generated them shift beyond recognition.

The introduction of eco-musicological perspectives allows us to read Bhawaiya not merely as folk nostalgia but as ecological testimony. Unlike classical forms that are often preserved through rigid pedagogical systems, Bhawaiya survives through oral transmission, improvisation, and communal memory—processes which themselves reflect ecological rhythms rather than institutional frameworks. The songs evolve with environmental change, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically. For instance, elders in Tufanganj often remark that earlier versions of certain songs included references to now-disappearing flora and altered river routes. When a river changes course, the metaphors change; when agricultural cycles shift, the emotional vocabulary shifts alongside. The environment is not a stable backdrop—it intervenes, intrudes, and insists upon being heard. An eco-musicological reading thus reveals Bhawaiya as a living archive of environmental transitions.

At the same time, it is essential not to romanticise Bhawaiya as a pristine ecological expression untouched by historical or socio-political forces. Koch Bihar's past is marked by complex interactions between princely authority, peasant resistance, shifts in land tenure, colonial reconfigurations of agriculture, and post-Partition demographic fragmentation. All of these forces shaped who sang Bhawaiya, where it was sung, and how it was understood. The melancholic tone often associated with the genre cannot be explained through emotional landscapes alone; it is also tied to the socio-economic marginality of the communities who carried the tradition. Eco-musicology, therefore, must remain attentive to the entanglement of ecology with class, caste, labour, and power. The music emerges not from a neutral nature, but from an environment already structured by inequalities. The bullock-cart driver sings not only because he crosses muddy paths but also because he occupies a precarious social position conditioned by land relations. The environment shapes the song, yes, but social structures shape how the environment is experienced.

Furthermore, the sonic architecture of Bhawaiya—its characteristic glides, the plaintive resonance of the dotara, the nasal timbre of the voice—mirrors the acoustic properties of the region's open fields and expansive horizons. Performers often remark that Bhawaiya “needs air”—a phrase that intuitively captures how the genre is dependent on the ecology of openness. The vocal style seems almost engineered to travel across long distances, carrying feeling across fields and waterways. This sonic openness contrasts sharply with the contemporary performance contexts—recording studios, stage performances, televised competitions—where the sound often becomes compressed and domesticated. What is lost in these transitions is not merely “authenticity” but ecological relationality. When Bhawaiya is removed from its environment, its emotional register subtly shifts, sometimes becoming more decorative, sometimes losing the grain of labour that once animated it. Eco-musicology helps trace these shifts, not to lament change, but to understand how music and ecology remain intertwined even when the contexts evolve.

Critical engagement with Bhawaiya also requires acknowledging the tension between preservation and transformation. Folk researchers, cultural activists, and urban audiences often want Bhawaiya to remain unchanged—as a symbol of “tradition.” But living traditions do not survive by remaining static; they endure precisely because they adapt to new ecological, economic, and cultural conditions. As monsoon patterns change, as younger generations migrate for work, as instruments evolve, Bhawaiya too acquires new tonalities and thematic concerns. Some contemporary songs subtly gesture toward ecological anxieties—dry fields, erratic rainfall, the fading call of certain birds that once signified seasonal change. These are not always explicit environmental protest songs, but they carry within them a sedimented consciousness of ecological disturbance. Eco-musicology offers vocabulary to interpret these subtle shifts without imposing modern environmental categories onto older forms.

Thus, understanding Bhawaiya as an eco-musicological phenomenon means recognising it as a rhythmic discourse shaped by land, labour, emotionality, and environmental contingency. The genre resists simplistic categorisation and demands an approach that listens not only to the surface melody but to the deeper environmental hum beneath it. In its slow, stretched phrases, one hears the sound of rivers that take time to meander; in its abrupt breaks, the shock of sudden floodwaters; in its longing, the distances produced by ecological and social disruptions. Bhawaiya is, in this sense, both a musical form and a way of knowing the world—an ecological epistemology expressed through voice.

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The background for examining Bhawaiya within an eco-musicological framework rests on the understanding that music, especially in its folk manifestations, emerges from the material and ecological conditions of everyday life. Scholars in eco-musicology have long noted that musical traditions rooted in agrarian or riverine cultures often carry within them “the acoustic traces of environmental experience” (Allen 2011, p. 392). Bhawaiya, shaped by the ecological world of Koch Bihar, is no exception. The Rajbanshi community's intimate interaction with the river systems—Torsha, Dharla, Raidak, and Gadadhar—created a sonic environment in which human emotion and ecological vulnerability developed in tandem. Ghosh (2008, p. 54) notes that Bhawaiya originally emerged among bullock-cart drivers, mahouts, and boatmen whose livelihoods were inseparable from the rhythms of the land; thus the genre's emotional tonality cannot be analysed without acknowledging its environmental foundation.

The rationale for revisiting Bhawaiya critically today is strengthened by the changing ecological landscape of Koch Bihar. Pedelty (2012, p. 09) argues that contemporary eco-musicological research must consider not only how music reflects ecological relationships but also how it registers ecological loss. In recent decades, climate variability, riverbank erosion, and infrastructural interventions have altered Koch Bihar's soundscapes, affecting the acoustic ecology in which Bhawaiya once thrived. Local practitioners interviewed during field visits often remarked that "the rivers have fallen silent," a sentiment that echoes Titon's insistence that soundscapes are "barometers of ecological change" (Titon 2015, p. 17). The transformation of these soundscapes consequently alters the emotional and aesthetic registers of Bhawaiya, making a renewed analytical approach essential.

Historically, Bhawaiya has been described as a genre of longing, but Sarkar (2016) points out that the pervasive sense of loss in Bhawaiya is also tied to socio-economic marginality, migration, and ecological instability. Thus, the rationale for an eco-musicological reading lies in recognising that its emotional lexicon is shaped by a landscape characterised by seasonal floods, precarious labour, and the constant renegotiation of human-place relationships. Volgsten (2019, p. 22) asserts that music often becomes "a medium through which ecological intimacy is negotiated," and this argument is particularly illuminating for Bhawaiya, whose metaphors frequently rely on rivers, fields, winds, and birds to articulate emotional states. The natural environment in these songs is never symbolic alone; it is experiential, embodied, and materially consequential.

Another rationale emerges from the need to study Bhawaiya not as a static cultural relic but as a dynamic ecological discourse that continues to evolve. Chakrabarty (2019, p. 76) observes that environmental change always reshapes cultural memory, and Bhawaiya—which functions as an oral archive—absorbs these shifts continuously. The disappearance of certain river routes, the decline of pastoral labour, and the mechanisation of agriculture alter not just the subjects of Bhawaiya songs but the very emotional texture of the tradition. To overlook these ecological pressures would be to miss the changing interpretive horizon of the genre.

Moreover, eco-musicology emphasises the ethics of listening—listening to the land, to marginalised voices, and to the ecological histories embedded in sound (Titon 2015, p. 21). Bhawaiya provides precisely such a listening practice. By foregrounding its ecological embeddedness, this research aligns with contemporary efforts to understand music as a site of environmental knowledge. The rationale is therefore twofold: to illuminate Bhawaiya's ecological dimensions, and to contribute to broader conversations on the cultural sustainability of folk traditions facing environmental and social transitions.

## SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

The scope of this study encompasses the lyrical, musical, and cultural dimensions of Bhawaiya, emphasising its ecological embedding. It does not attempt an exhaustive ethnography of all Bhawaiya variants but prioritises representative songs, themes, and performance contexts from Koch Bihar.

The primary objectives are:

- To analyse Bhawaiya as a repository of ecological memory and environmental consciousness
- To examine the connection between Bhawaiya's musical aesthetics and the landscape of Koch Bihar.
- To explore the role of Bhawaiya in sustaining cultural identity amidst ecological transformation.
- To consider Bhawaiya as a site of eco-aesthetic discourse within broader folk music traditions.

## STRATEGIES FOR ECO-MUSICOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF BHAWAIYA

Examining Bhawaiya through eco-musicology requires a multi-layered methodology:

**Textual Analysis of Lyrics:** any Bhawaiya songs speak directly of rivers, grazing fields, monsoon rains, and agrarian cycles. A song like "*Oki gariyal bhai*" reflects the bullock-cart driver's intimate relationship with the terrain and environmental obstacles.

**Soundscape Analysis:** Instruments like the dotara mimic the open resonance of fields, while the sarinda echoes the rawness of pastoral labour. The vocal stretches mirror the vastness of Koch Bihar's plains.

**Performance Context:** Bhawaiya is often performed during agricultural off-seasons, communal gatherings, or solitary labour, embedding it within natural rhythms.

**Cultural-Ecological Mapping:** Linking Bhawaiya song motifs to agricultural practices, riverine topography, and seasonal changes helps reveal the ecological structure of the tradition.

## IMPLICATIONS OF BHAWAIYA FOR UNDERSTANDING ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

Bhawaiya's lyrical universe presents a world where human emotions and ecological rhythms are deeply entangled. The river becomes a metaphor for longing, the monsoon for desire, the open fields for separation, and the bullock cart for slow time. As

Chakrabarty argues, “ecological intimacy is often articulated through culturally coded metaphors” (Chakrabarty 2019, p. 76). Bhawaiya, with its recurrent motifs of waiting, wandering, and yearning, transforms ecological experience into emotional narrative.

For example, songs often reference:

- *Kheyar nouka* (ferryboats) symbolising movement and uncertainty.
- *Akhra fields* representing fertility and labour.
- *Bansher jhupi* (bamboo clusters) indicating shelter and memory.
- *Raidasher ghat* (riverbanks) as spaces of social and ecological transition.

Through such metaphors, Bhawaiya constructs an ecological philosophy rooted in land, labour, and longing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Eco-Musicology

Eco-musicology has developed in the past decade as a significant interdisciplinary approach capable of rethinking the relationships among sound, ecology, culture, and human experience. While traditional ethnomusicology has often prioritised cultural interpretation, eco-musicology shifts attention to the ecological and environmental contexts within which sound practices emerge and evolve. Allen’s influential formulation of eco-musicology as “the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms” (Allen 2011, p. 391) suggests that the practice of listening must extend beyond human performance to include environmental soundscapes, ecological memory, and non-human agencies. This emphasis resonates strongly with Titon’s concept of “a sound commons for all living beings” (Titon 2015, p. 21), which invites the study of music not merely as an anthropocentric activity but as part of a wider acoustic ecology.

Volgsten’s observation that music often emerges from a “mutual resonance of sound and environment” (Volgsten 2019, p. 22) further deepens the theoretical relevance of eco-musicology for traditions like Bhawaiya, which are inseparably tied to the riverine plains of Koch Bihar. Because Bhawaiya developed within landscapes shaped by rivers, monsoons, marshlands, pastoral labour, and seasonal rhythms, the genre becomes a site where environmental consciousness is not an abstract idea but a lived condition encoded in melody, cadence, metaphor, and breath. Scholars such as Pedelty (2012) have argued that folk traditions emerging from agrarian and riverine regions often express ecological values embedded in daily subsistence and survival practices. This theoretical lens positions Bhawaiya within a global discourse that explores how music registers ecological knowledge, environmental precarity, and the sensorial experiences of land-based communities.

Eco-musicology also emphasises the ethical role of listening, insisting that “to listen attentively is to acknowledge ecological entanglement” (Titon 2015, p. 19). Thus, the genre is not evaluated solely for its musical qualities but for the ecological worlds it sustains. This is critical because Bhawaiya’s recurring motifs—river crossings, muddy roads, wandering lovers, and migratory birds—mirror the environmental uncertainties of the region. As climate change continues to reshape Koch Bihar, eco-musicology becomes a necessary lens to explore how Bhawaiya both reflects and responds to environmental transformation.

### Bhawaiya Studies

Existing scholarship on Bhawaiya has primarily focused on documenting its historical evolution, tracing its migratory pathways into present-day Bangladesh, and analysing its emotional register. Ghosh (2008) offers a well-known account of how Bhawaiya emerged among bullock-cart drivers, mahouts, and itinerant labourers navigating the undulating plains and uneven terrains of North Bengal. Sarkar’s detailed examination of Bhawaiya’s vocal style highlights its distinctive *meend*, nasal tonality, and extended glides, suggesting that the genre’s sonic texture mirrors the slow-moving rhythms of rural labour (Sarkar 2016).

However, despite these valuable contributions, the ecological dimensions of Bhawaiya have remained comparatively underexplored. Scholars have rarely examined how the Rajbanshi community’s intimate relationship with riverine ecologies shapes the themes, metaphors, and emotional tones of the songs. Similarly, the impact of environmental degradation—riverbank erosion, soil depletion, changing rainfall patterns—on the evolution of Bhawaiya remains an open area of research. This scholarly gap is particularly striking given that many Bhawaiya songs explicitly reference rivers such as the Tista, Dharla, and Raidak, and employ ecological metaphors to communicate emotional states. As such, this paper positions itself at the intersection of folk music studies and environmental humanities, expanding the scope of Bhawaiya scholarship by foregrounding its ecological embeddedness and cultural sustainability.

### METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology, grounded primarily in ethnographic sensibilities and textual analysis. Since eco-musicology emphasises not only sound but the environment in which sound is produced, the methods adopted

for this research aim to capture both the musical and ecological dimensions of Bhawaiya. First, **textual analysis** was conducted on thirty two (32) Bhawaiya songs collected from archival recordings, printed anthologies, and field documentation. The analysis focused on identifying ecological motifs—water bodies, seasons, agricultural practices, fauna, and references to environmental hardship.

Second, **interviews** with six (06) Bhawaiya practitioners (2023–24) provided insight into how performers understand the relationship between landscape and genre. These practitioners, residing in Tufanganj, Dinjata, Sitalkuchi, and Ghughumari, varied in age, occupation, and performance experience, allowing the research to incorporate a wide spectrum of ecological memory and cultural knowledge. Their narratives were coded for recurring themes such as environmental loss, agricultural transformation, and sonic imitation of landscape.

Third, **field observations** were conducted in multiple ecological zones across Koch Bihar, including riverbanks, agricultural fields, wetlands, and grazing areas. Field notes recorded ambient sounds, local ecological changes, and the ways residents described their relationships to the environment—data that enriched the eco-musicological framing of the study. Finally, **secondary research** drew from ethnomusicology, environmental humanities, cultural geography, and anthropology, integrating scholarship by Allen (2011), Titon (2015), Pedelty (2012), Volgsten (2019), Ghosh (2008), and Sarkar (2016).

Together, these methodological approaches enabled a multi-layered interpretation of Bhawaiya as a cultural expression shaped by ecological rhythms, agrarian livelihoods, and environmental transformation.

## CASE STUDY: ECOLOGICAL THEMES IN SELECT BHAWAIYA SONGS

A close reading of three canonical Bhawaiya songs illustrates how ecological motifs and emotional structures are entangled in the tradition.

### 1. “Oki Gariyal Bhai”

This iconic song foregrounds the bullock-cart driver’s intimate relationship with the land. The hardships of navigating muddy roads during monsoon, crossing overflowing rivers, and traversing embankments are not merely narrative details; they reflect a landscape in flux. As Titon argues, ecological experience frequently becomes audible through “the physical strain encoded in musical form” (Titon 2015, p. 18). The slow tempo and dragging notes of the song mimic the rhythm of the bullock cart labouring through difficult terrain.

### 2. “Fulkoilam Fulkoilam Tista Parer Bou”

This song illustrates the emotional resonance of the Tista river, whose shifting course has historically shaped life in Koch Bihar. The bride’s longing is expressed through riverbank imagery, suggesting that separation is not merely emotional but ecological. The river becomes both a literal and metaphorical boundary. Volgsten’s concept of “environmental resonance” (2019, p. 22) helps explain how the Tista’s unpredictable currents mirror the inner turbulence of the characters.

### 3. “Jao Pakhi Bolo Tare”

Birds, in Bhawaiya tradition, serve as messengers bridging distance. Their presence signals seasonal change and ecological continuity. As Ghosh notes, the imagery of birds in Bhawaiya encodes “a culturally specific articulation of environmental movement” (Ghosh 2008, p. 58). Significantly, the song illustrates how mobility, ecology, and emotion converge—birds carry human longing across the landscape, becoming agents of both ecological and interpersonal communication.

These songs demonstrate that Bhawaiya constructs an affective ecology in which land, environment, and emotionality are intertwined.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Environmental Anchoring of Emotion

Bhawaiya’s emotional depth is anchored in ecological precarity. The melancholic tone of the songs reflects a landscape shaped by flooding, soil erosion, seasonal migration, and agricultural uncertainty. As Chakrabarty argues, environmental insecurity often manifests as cultural melancholy (Chakrabarty 2019, p. 74). Bhawaiya’s expressive world thus becomes an archive of ecological vulnerability.

### Sonic Imitation of Landscape

The dotara’s rhythmic pulse mimics the jolting movement of the bullock cart, while the sarinda’s raw vibration echoes the roughness of rural terrain. Sarkar (2016) notes that the nasal timbre and extended glides mirror the acoustic openness of Koch Bihar’s plains. Bhawaiya singers often claim that the genre “needs air”—a phrase that intuitively recognises the environmental openness necessary for its vocal style.

## Cultural Sustainability

Bhawaiya functions as a repository of ecological knowledge. Allen (2011, p. 394) argues that folk music often preserves environmental memory even when landscapes change. In Bhawaiya, metaphors related to crops, rainfall patterns, livestock behaviour, and soil fertility encode intergenerational ecological wisdom. This oral transmission contributes to cultural sustainability.

## Ecological Grief and Transformation

Climate change has altered Koch Bihar's hydrological systems, reducing the predictability of rivers and rainfall. Titon (2015, p. 24) proposes that music often registers ecological grief before it becomes visible in scientific discourse. Contemporary Bhawaiya adaptations increasingly reference lost rivers, diminished bird calls, and disappearing pastoral landscapes. These emerging themes reflect ecological transformation and cultural anxiety.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Systematic **documentation** of Bhawaiya is essential to preserve its ecological heritage, especially as younger generations migrate from agrarian life. Integrating eco-musicology into mainstream folk music research will allow scholars to recognise the environmental dimensions of sonic traditions often overlooked. Policymakers should classify Bhawaiya not only as an intangible cultural heritage but as an ecological cultural resource, thereby ensuring funding for preservation linked to environmental sustainability. Educational institutions in North Bengal should incorporate Bhawaiya studies into curricula, fostering youth engagement through ecological interpretation, performance workshops, and field-based musical ethnography.

## CONCLUSION

This expanded analysis demonstrates that Bhawaiya is far more than a regional folk genre; it is a complex eco-cultural discourse that binds together the emotional, environmental, and historical life of Koch Bihar. Through its lyrics, metaphors, melodic structures, and performance contexts, Bhawaiya functions as an archive of ecological knowledge, articulating how communities negotiate environmental uncertainty, cultural continuity, and emotional vulnerability. The tradition registers both ecological intimacy and ecological grief, reminding us that music is deeply implicated in the ways communities understand land, belonging, and memory. At a time when Koch Bihar's environmental landscape is undergoing rapid transformation, the eco-musicological study of Bhawaiya stands not only as an academic necessity but as an ethical imperative. It allows us to listen more carefully to how human lives remain entangled with the land—even as that land shifts beneath their feet.

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