

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

**Vol. 16 Issue-5 october 2025**

**Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

## **Discipline, Surveillance, and Punishment in Bhabendranath Saikia's *Dear Father*: A Foucauldian Reading**

**Hunjili Katharpi**  
Assistant Professor,  
Dept. of English,  
B.H. College, Howly.

**Article History:** Submitted-30/09/2025, Revised-15/10/2025, Accepted-29/10/2025, Published-31/10/2025.

### **Abstract:**

The paper offers a Foucauldian interpretation of Bhabendranath Saikia's *Dear Father*. It explores how discipline, surveillance, and punishment function within the narrative through multiple sites of authority, like family, medical, and police. Using Foucault's ideas, the study shows how power operates through these institutions to correct, reform, and eventually produce self-regulating subjects like Bipul. The novel centres on Bipul, a troubled teenager whose rebellious behaviour creates distress at home and leads to harsh punishment from his father. The story broadens beyond the confines of the family to explore a broader system of social control. It brings in perspectives from both the medical field, represented by Dr. Choudhury, and the legal system, embodied by the police detective Nikunja.

Disciplinary power is not limited to a single institution; it spreads across various authorities, such as the family, the school, the community, and the state. Each authority exerts control not just through coercion but also by shaping perception, instilling guilt, and guiding moral reflection. *Dear Father* highlights the ethical and psychological challenges of authority. It examines how discipline can serve as both corrective and coercive, while also expressing care.

Ultimately, the novel provides a nuanced exploration of how different institutions of society enforce moral and behavioural norms in our everyday lives.

**Keywords: Discipline, Surveillance, Punishment, Power, Foucauldian.**

### **Introduction:**

Bhabendranath Saikia is one of the most widely admired writers of Assam. He is a literary genius who wove stories that truly reflected the essence of Assamese society. Besides being a literary personality, he was also a widely acclaimed and talented film director from Assam. He was the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976 and was also honoured with the Padma Shri in 2001. He contributed to different genres of writing, such as short stories, novels, plays, books for children, and essays. His stories are crafted with detail, clarity, and sensitivity to the psychological intricacies of everyday Assamese life. His deep engagement with the human situation is evident even in his cinematic work. According to Atulananda Goswami, “his [Bhabendranath Saikia’s] short stories gave a new colour to Assamese fiction. His treatment of themes, characters, and background in all the stories was surprisingly fresh and reached every reader’s heart instantly, owing to their lucidity and fine details” (170).

Bhabendranath Saikia’s *Moromor Deuta*, translated into English as *Dear Father*, is basically a children’s book narrating the story of an unruly boy, Bipul, who becomes a transformed person at the end. The narrative of the novel seems to be simple, but it also unfolds into a broader social commentary as the story incorporates the perspectives of the medical establishment, represented by Dr. Choudhury, and the legal apparatus, embodied by the police detective Nikunja. The narrative demonstrates how disciplinary power is never confined to a single institution but is instead diffused across multiple sites of authority, like family, the school,

the community, and the state. As Foucault asserts, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (*The History of Sexuality* 93). In this context, Foucault’s notion of discipline, surveillance, and punishment provides a crucial framework for analysing Saikia’s *Dear Father*.

Discipline, in Foucault’s usage, refers to the techniques by which power produces “docile bodies,” capable of being controlled and trained. It “increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (*Discipline and Punish* 138). In other words, discipline is not simply repression but a productive system that moulds individuals into efficient and compliant subjects. Through routines, rules, and correction, discipline simultaneously strengthens and subordinates. As Foucault further elaborates:

‘Discipline’ may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by ‘specialized’ institutions (the penitentiaries or ‘houses of correction’ of the nineteenth century), or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power ... or finally by state apparatuses whose major, if not exclusive, function is to assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole (the police). (*Discipline and Punish* 215-2016)

This passage makes clear that discipline is not tied to one institution but circulates across families, schools, hospitals, prisons, and even state systems, where it organises and reinforces power.

Surveillance, for Foucault, is central to how discipline operates. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panopticon, Foucault argues that modern power works through the possibility of idea of the panopticon, Foucault argues that modern power works through the possibility of constant observation:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Discipline and Punish* 202-203).

Surveillance aims at regulating the behaviour of individuals in such a way that they start internalising discipline even when no one is watching them. In that sense, visibility becomes a trap. The observed, unsure of when or whether they are being monitored, govern themselves.

Punishment, according to Foucault, has undergone a historical transformation as a concept as well as a practice since its inception. In premodern societies, punishment was targeted at the body through public spectacles of torture and execution, which were designed to display the sovereign's power. However, the modern form of punishment has moved from physical to psychological forms, suggesting that it aims at disciplining the soul and reforming the conduct rather than inflicting pain on the body of the offender. This shift in the notion of punishment

ultimately gives way to a more subtle form of discipline and correction of behaviour through education, reform, and moral regulation. As Foucault notes:

Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime; the exemplary mechanics of punishment change its mechanisms. (*Discipline and Punish* 9)

The present paper is a Foucauldian reading of Bhabendranath Saikia's *Dear Father*. It explores how discipline, surveillance, and punishment function within the narrative through multiple sites of authority, like family, medical, and police. Using Foucault's lens, the study highlights how power operates through these institutions and eventually produces self-regulating subjects like Bipul through discipline, surveillance and punishment.

### **Family as the Primary Site of Discipline:**

In *Dear Father*, family plays as a primary setting where discipline is enacted, contested, and ultimately reinforced. The father is the central disciplinary authority whose power is rooted not only in paternal responsibility but also in his careful monitoring of his son's conduct. He was disappointed with Bipul's disrespectful attitude and repeated disobedience. Consequently, Bipul was under constant surveillance of his family, especially his father and was ultimately punished for his errant way of life. The act of punishing Bipul is vividly evident in the father's confession:

By the time I reached my hometown, it was evening, and I decided to look for Bipul before I went home. I was able to find him with his friends. In the dark, I followed him at a distance. When I saw him smoking, I lost my balance of mind. I don't remember when I picked up that piece of bamboo. With that, I thrashed him on the legs with all my might (Saikia 110-112).

The father's act of punishing Bipul by thrashing him on the legs is closer to Foucault's older model of punishment, which was spectacular and aimed at the body. Within the family, discipline operates in such a way that it often gets blurred into sovereign-style punishment, in which the child's body becomes the site upon which paternal authority is exerted.

The father's gaze, which was initially meant to confirm his suspicion about his son's misbehaviour, triggers his violent reaction. His authority is not just about discipline; it mixes affection, frustration, and coercion. The punishment he doles out is not just about asserting power. It reflects his inner turmoil—a conflict between love for his son and the responsibility he perceives to reform him. He feels frustrated because his own ways of caring and controlling have failed. This exposes how affection and authority often exist in uneasy tension within familial power structures. The father's resort to discipline reflects his attempt to restore order while also revealing his struggle to balance emotional ties with the need for control. The father admits:

I work in a place which is far away from home. Bipul is my eldest son. I have provided him with all that he needs. I am not a rich man but I have seen to it that he does not lack anything. At times I have even deprived my other children of certain things which I have made available to him to keep him happy. I thought that by giving presents if I could

keep him happy, he would study well and become a good boy. But I did not realize then that by pampering him I was only spoiling him. (Saikia 109)

Here, the disciplinary framework takes on an ambivalent character because the father's indulgence, which was intended as a form of regulation to ensure obedience through provision, instead facilitated rebellion. This aligns with Foucault's assertion, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (*The History of Sexuality* 95). Bipul's defiance is not outside of power but a byproduct of it, revealing the paradox of discipline within the household.

The father's disciplinary actions also stem from his worry that his limited time at home while working far away in Borapani could lead to his son's disobedience spiralling out of control. He fears that Bipul's errant manner might make him direct his anger toward his sisters and mother. Just the thought of what could happen at home during his absence heightens the father's concern beyond merely watching over Bipul. It turns into a way of anticipating possible wrongdoing, driving him to intervene. This embodies what Foucault describes as "a permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 201). The father's gaze transcends the present and aims to prevent possible future acts of disobedience. He feels accountable not only for Bipul's behaviour but also for upholding the family honour in the community. He employs the mechanisms of surveillance, discipline, and punishment to regulate Bipul's behaviour and restore moral order in the family. However, this discipline is neither stable nor unproblematic; it oscillates between indulgence and violence, love and coercion, shaping both the father's authority and Bipul's emerging sense of self. His actions illustrate how

discipline is shaped by wider social expectations and the need for respectability and reputation. The family in *Dear Father* serves as a microcosm of Foucauldian discipline.

### **Medical Authority and the Production of Morality**

Modern institutions such as schools, barracks, and hospitals are crucial sites for the diffusion of discipline. According to Michael Foucault, these institutions rely on the “micro-physics of power,” where individuals are monitored, trained, and corrected through seemingly benign practices (*Discipline and Punish* 139). In the novel, Dr. Aurobindo Choudhury uses the hospital as a space not only for healing but also for moral correction. The doctor openly admits that he fabricated the seriousness of Bipul's injury:

Yes, I had to tell a few lies, but there was a good reason for doing so. Bipul's father had taken me into confidence regarding his son's rowdy behaviour. He had come to me for help, but his son didn't care to come to me for advice as arranged by his father. I was angry, and at the same time I pitied him. I felt somewhat humiliated, but I let that pass. When he came to my hospital with an injured leg, then I thought I must teach him a lesson. I decided I would keep him here as long as a change of heart did not come about in him. I wanted him to feel sorry and repentant for his acts of rowdyism. (Saikia 106)

By withholding the truth and exaggerating the need for amputation, he creates an environment of fear and dependency. In Foucauldian terms, “the soul is the prison of the body” (*Discipline and Punish* 30), and the doctor deploys discipline as a technology of power that acts not only on the body but also on the soul. The doctor uses his agency of medical authority to correct Bipul's wayward nature by transforming a physical injury into an opportunity to morally correct him. He

focuses more on inducing guilt, anxiety and repentance within Bipul rather than the wound itself. Dr. Choudhury observes Bipul's emotional responses over several days and sees "a change has come about in Bipul. He cries and feels repentant for his past behaviour" (Saikia 106). As such, the hospital becomes a space for surveillance, where the patient's tears, words, and promises of reform are carefully monitored as signs of successful discipline.

However, what makes the medical authority significant is how seamlessly it blends care and control. The hospital, ostensibly a place of healing, becomes a site of correction. Disciplinary power often "trains" rather than punishes, using observation and regulation to mould individuals (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 170). Dr. Choudhury's methods mirror this by regulating Bipul's environment, limiting his knowledge of his condition, and prolonging his stay; he structures the boy's daily experience to induce repentance. His manipulation of medical knowledge becomes a disciplinary technique, revealing how institutions of care can also function as apparatuses of control. The doctor justifies his actions as necessary to achieve moral transformation: "My telling a harsh lie that his leg had to be amputated had a salutary effect on him" (Saikia 106). Deception, in this instance, becomes a disciplinary tool. As Foucault explains:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (*Power/Knowledge* 131)

In this case, the false diagnosis becomes a disciplinary truth: it restructures Bipul's perception of his future, instils fear, and motivates him toward reform. The lie is effective not because it reflects reality but because it produces the desired behavioural outcome, as Foucault states that modern punishment seeks to "reach into the depths of the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (*Discipline and Punish* 16). Thus, in *Dear Father*, the medical establishment, through the role of Dr. Choudhury, demonstrates how medical authority becomes a powerful site extending beyond diagnosis and treatment into the realm of moral pedagogy.

### **Police Surveillance and the Extraction of Truth:**

Police surveillance is a double-edged sword in the pursuit of truth. It serves as both a tool for justice and a potential threat to privacy. Law enforcement agencies use a wide range of surveillance methods to detect, prevent, and investigate crime. In *Dear Father*, the detective Nikunja's investigation method is calculated and methodical, showing how surveillance can be used with precision and restraint to uncover hidden truths. He cross-examines Bipul's father on multiple occasions, probing "serious discrepancies in the statements that he has made" (Saikia 101-102). He instructs his subordinates to investigate in-depth by going to "the old marketplace and to Sonapur to find out where Kasem Ali lives" (Saikia 93). Kasem Ali was the truck driver who was supposed to have informed Bipul's father about Bipul's being beaten up by someone. Simultaneously, the detective also employs deceptive interrogation, a kind of psychological tactic used by law enforcement during questioning to elicit confessions, admissions, or other information from suspects. For instance, the detective deliberately stages a plan in which he falsely accuses Bipul's friend, Mayidul, as the culprit behind Bipul's fractured leg. He does so to

elicit a confession from Bipul's father, who would otherwise try to brazen things out. Nikunja states:

We in the police have ways in which we go about our business. Sometimes, when we don't find any clue that we can follow, then we just name someone guilty and wait to see how the others react to it. In this case, we spread the word that Mayidul is the culprit, though we knew he hadn't beaten Bipul. We assured Mayidul and his father that they need not worry. We were only taking their help to find the real culprit. We advised Mayidul to stay at home for a few days or go to one of his relatives. (Saikia107)

Nikunja's investigation strategies illustrate the interplay of power and knowledge that aligns with Foucault's notion of power and knowledge. According to Michael Foucault, "the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (Power/Knowledge 52). Nikunja's intervention in the narrative helps in the uncovering of deception and the restoration of truth. Under Nikunja's investigation, Bipul's father "got the shock of his life. He felt as if all his limbs were in a shudder. His eyes became larger, and his nose was quivering. He was visibly shaking with fear" (Saikia 103). Nikunja's careful orchestration of meetings, questioning, and observation creates anxiety and moral reflection in Bipul's father, even before the revelation of the truth. By means of both surveillance and deceptive interrogation, Nikunja, the detective, brings to light the fact that Bipul's father had fabricated a journey to Borapani. He compels Bipul's father to reveal the truth by making him confess that it was he who had beaten Bipul severely on his leg in the darkness of the mango grove after witnessing him smoking with his friends.

Through the character of Nikunja, Saikia demonstrates how disciplinary power functions through surveillance, and the subject anticipates the consequences of being seen and acts to conform, effectively regulating himself or herself. The detective compels individuals to reveal hidden truths voluntarily by creating the perception of investigation and accountability, demonstrating Foucault's notion that power works most efficiently when internalised. The very possibility of being monitored and interrogated prompts behavioural adjustment and confession, reinforcing the pervasive reach of surveillance.

### **Convergence of Discipline, Surveillance, and Punishment:**

In *Dear Father*, Bhabendranath Saikia portrays a complex convergence of disciplinary mechanisms across the domestic sphere, the medical field, and the police system. He shows how power is exercised in multidimensional and overlapping ways. The father, the doctor, and the detective all exert forms of power that simultaneously influence Bipul's behaviour, monitor his conduct, and shape his moral reasoning. Bipul's father represents parental authority within the family's private sphere. His resort to physical punishment is a visible display of power, intended to correct his son, who has gone morally astray. However, this authority does not stand independently; it is supported and expanded by greater institutional systems such as the medical and police authorities. Dr. Choudhury's manipulation of information about Bipul's leg by exaggerating its severity to encourage repentance serves as a secondary layer of discipline that complements, rather than replaces, parental authority. The medical authority amplifies the father's disciplinary intentions, demonstrating a convergence of strategies aimed at producing moral and behavioural correction. Similarly, the police force, particularly through Nikunja's careful monitoring and questioning, uncovers the truth behind Bipul's fractured leg, showing

how “power produces knowledge” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 27). This process prompts Bipul’s father to finally explain his actions, bringing clarity and understanding to the family, and it also leads Bipul to reflect on his behaviour, feel genuine remorse, and begin to change.

The father, the doctor, and the detective operate as an interconnected system where surveillance and punishment converge to regulate behaviour. Bipul’s response to these compounded pressures, including physical punishment, fear of medical consequences, and investigative scrutiny, reflects the internalisation of norms and moral accountability. He weeps, experiences shame, and eventually seeks reconciliation with his father. This act of penitence exemplifies Foucault’s claim that effective disciplinary power produces self-regulating subjects who start to monitor and correct themselves in anticipation of observation or moral evaluation (*Discipline and Punish* 201). The narrative reaches its climax when “Bipul went to his father and fell down at his feet. He began to cry” (Saikia 112). This moment reflects the internalisation of authority, where punishment leads to contrition and the desire for reform. The father’s surveillance and violence, though crude in form, along with the interventions of Dr. Choudhury and the detective Nikunja, accomplish what the panopticon represents: the transformation of an individual into a self-governing subject.

Moreover, Saikia’s text illustrates that the convergence of disciplinary forces operates not only across space but also across time. The father’s immediate punitive action, the doctor’s extended moral conditioning, and the detective’s delayed revelation of the truth together shape Bipul’s behaviour in stages. Importantly, the convergence of discipline, surveillance, and punishment is both coercive and constructive. Each authority, whether parental, medical, or investigative, uses power to shape morally accountable and socially compliant individuals rather

than to punish them. The interaction among these spheres demonstrates how disciplinary practices in both public and private domains serve to normalise bodies and produce conformity. Bipul's ultimate repentance, moral reflection, and acknowledgment of wrongdoing are not the result of the influence of a single agent; they emerge from the combined effect of overlapping disciplinary systems. The novel, therefore, exemplifies Foucault's vision of modern disciplinary society, in which power is exercised not through isolated acts of coercion but through complex, intersecting networks of surveillance, knowledge, and normative regulation.

### **Conclusion:**

Saikia's *Dear Father* demonstrates the subtle and complex nature of disciplinary power. It reveals how familiar spaces such as homes, hospitals, and communities become platforms for exercising power, which shapes behaviour, conscience, identity, and ethics. The changes in Bipul's behaviour result not only from the interference of a single authority but from the persistent pressure of different forms of power acting on him. The father, the doctor, and the detective all played roles in his positive transformation.

While authority can be protective, corrective, and even caring, it always carries weight and influences both actions and thoughts. These processes impact character development, self-perception, and how people relate to others. In this way, Saikia's *Dear Father* offers an insightful look at how surveillance, discipline, and punishment converge to produce moral subjects like Bipul. This makes it a significant text for understanding power dynamics in everyday life. The novel not only reflects Foucauldian ideas; it brings them to life, showing how power can teach and control while also revealing the tension and responsibility that come with it.

## Works Cited:

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.

---. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, Pantheon Books, 1980.

---. *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, 1978.

Goswami, Atulananda. “Bhabendranath Saikia: The Versatile Writer.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 47, no. 5 (217), 2003, pp. 169–71. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23341496>. Accessed 22 Sept. 2025.

Saikia, Bhabendranath. *Dear Father*. Translated by Ashok Bhagwati, illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu, National Book Trust, 1998.