

## Eco-consciousness in North-East Indian Indigenous Folktales

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### Abstract

Environmental degradation is a severe threat to the existence of humanity as environment is the source of life for humanity, and the source itself is deteriorating every day due to insensate anthropocentric activities. To save environment from degradation, we need deep eco-consciousness, which recognizes nature as inherently valuable and emphasizes that humans must change their relationship with the ecology from materialistic usefulness to aesthetic and reverence. This study explores how North-East Indigenous discourse in the form of oral tradition, i.e., folktales, mythology, story, and epic, gives an account of Deep Ecology leading to eco-consciousness. It also seeks to answer how the Indigenous community's eco-spirituality is generally formed through cultural, social, and oral traditions that help create a sense of eco-friendly attitude towards the environment. The objective of this study is to critically analyze the Indigenous folktales from North-East Indian cultural contexts to find out the inherent implication of those tales. The intention is to ascertain whether North-East Indian Indigenous oral traditions formulate a collective consciousness regarding preserving and protecting the environment.

**Keywords:** Indigeneity, Eco-spirituality, Eco-consciousness, Orality

### Introduction

Environmental degradation is a severe issue for humanity which dangerously affects all species over the globe. Environmental degradation is the deterioration of natural resources such as air, water, and soil through humans' excessive and unregulated use of sources (Tyagi et al. 1491-1498). Global warming, climate change, and biodiversity loss are well-known environmental pollution results. However, few steps are taken by ordinary people and the government of different countries to minimize pollution, which is insufficient; for instance, in 2000, the Supreme Court of India directed all the cities in India to manage the waste materials to mitigate Environmental problems by segregating the waste materials and recycling and composting them (Maurya et al. 16). Although Environmental degradation affects all the universe's species, Indigenous people are affected most. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, development, and loss of biodiversity negatively impact the life of the Indigenous people due to their dependence on the environment, the resources of the land, and the territory. Besides the economic

loss, it also threatens the Indigenous community's culture, tradition, and knowledge worldwide (United Nations 2). Indigenous people's culture, language, and history vary from place to place. The only thing connecting all the Indigenous population in a single thread is being interconnected with nature, animals, and the Earth (McLauchlan 1). Indigenous people depend highly on their natural environment and forest for their livelihood. Cultivation, hunting, fishing, and collecting forest goods are their main economic pursuits (Saifullah et al. 96). As nature is the source of their livelihood, they worship nature. In an Indigenous lifestyle, each aspect of nature is worthy of reverence, and they worship it accordingly (Norgaard and Fenelon 477-494).

While mainstream society is achieving seemingly unattainable goals with the help of modern science and technology, it hardly thinks about serious issues like environmental degradation; till date, whatever different governments have taken as necessary measures all over the globe has proved beyond doubt to have been insufficient to control the ill effects of environmental degradation. World phenomena are changing rapidly; with it, social, political, and economic demography is also transforming speedily over the globe. Albeit such rapid change, Indigenous people are more conscious of nature and its associated species, which are closely affiliated to their life as compared to non-Indigenous people. The environment is the heart and soul of their livelihood, providing them with food and shelter and designating their identity as a whole. Indigenous people's social, political, economic, religious, cultural and ecological identity is broadly determined by their environment. Because of this diversity, a large number of the Indigenous community can be found over the globe. The socio-cultural variation in and between the Indigenous communities shapes the unique identity of the Indigenous community. Besides socio-cultural diversity, oral tradition in the form of myth, story, song, folk tale, music, and riddles, also plays a significant role in shaping the identity of the Indigenous people. As the Indigenous people live in the lap of nature, their lifestyle and oral tradition also fill with references to plants, animals, and supernatural elements. Animism, a belief system, is quite prevalent among many Indigenous communities over the globe. According to this belief, every object has a soul, and they communicate with others. This belief creates a sense of eco-friendly attitude toward the environment, which is also embodied in Indigenous folk tales. So, this study aims to figure out the link between eco-consciousness and the North-East Indian Indigenous folk tales and how these tales impart a sense of belongingness with nature and self-motivation to protect and preserve the ecology from further degradation. To analyze this interconnectedness, it critically analyses the different environmental elements symbolically presented in folk tales and also in modern North-East literary narration by inculcating these folk tales into their narration, which directly affects the conscious mind of the Indigenous people and helps store them in their subconscious minds and act spontaneously when necessary.

### **Necessity of Eco-consciousness and Indigenous Folk tales**

According to David Rothenberg, Anthropocentrism is the fundamental cause of Environmental Degradation as humanity is not separated from nature but is a unified whole (738). Although human nature and Ecological nature are the same entity, human

nature is destroying Ecological nature to satisfy its greed. Keeping the view of the present scenario, it is necessary to rethink the environmental saving process. A huge gap is significantly noticeable in the attitude towards the ecology among the non-Indigenous community all over the globe. Whereas the Indigenous community relatively more active in protecting and preserving the ecology, the non-Indigenous communities are indifferent regarding the ecological issues rather they are involved in deteriorating it (Snider et al. 2021). Ahi, Yaya and Ozsoy (2014) in their study finds out a positive relationship between environment and folk tales in different parts of the globe. Their analysis of visuals and children's literature from different parts of the globe shows that these narrations provide a positive attitude among the children in terms of creating a healthy bond with the environment (1-17). Indigenous communities have been managing the environment and natural resources for a long time globally, as they are closely associated with it (Richmond et al. 1041-1045). Mythology, folk tales, folklore, and story are not only the cornerstone of the culture and tradition of the Indigenous people but are also significant sources of the history of Indigenous people, which is richly informed by Indigenous prehistoric life, beliefs, and cultural systems (Deka 173-176). This deep consciousness regarding Ecology has been formed through the collective consciousness of the Indigenous people from time immemorial.

### **Deep Ecology and Environmental Degradation**

Deep Ecology refers to an environmental movement that emphasizes the inherent value of nature rather than pragmatic value and usefulness to human beings. With the development of science and technology and human progress, human beings' relationship with nature drastically changed over a period of time. In this era of the Anthropocene, Nature is no more a friend, philosopher, and guide; rather, it is the raw material of human development. Human civilization witnessed the dreadful effects of environmental degradation, which negatively affects both human and non-human beings as well as ecology. After observing this deteriorating relationship with nature, people start reevaluating their relationship with nature. As a result, the concept of Deep Ecology has come into being. The term was coined by a Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, in 1972 for the deep ecology social movement (Peter 2016). Rachel Carson's writing is also the founding inspiration of this movement as her writing expresses how human well-being is dependent on total biotic communities (Carson 1962). This human-environmental reciprocal well-being is getting disturbed by the human being and their greed for development, destroying the bond, which results in countless negative consequences for both. Mark Omorovie Ikeke (2020), with reference to the United Nations Development Programme, points out that Nigeria's main cause of biodiversity loss is the over-harvesting of natural resources, pollution, land-use change, and deforestation (82). In his article, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary", Arne Naess refers to the Western culture as the follower of the Shallow Movement as it exploits the nonhuman being and has detached them from the nature-centric fundamentals to exploitive centric (95-100). Deep Ecology not only focuses on the degradation of the environment but also emphasizes how to preserve it.

The vulnerable effects of environmental pollution and loss of biodiversity greatly affect the lives of the Indigenous people as they are close to nature. Indigenous people's "tradition and belief system often mean they regard nature with deep respect, and they have a strong sense of place and belonging." (United Nations Environment Programme 2). After reviewing the present condition of environment and role of Indigenous community on the different parts of the globe, this study tends to analyze the effects of Indigenous folk tales on the North-East Indian Indigenous community and its outcome in terms of eco-consciousness. In this regard, the sense of "belonging" is reflected in the socio-cultural activity of the North-East Indigenous community. Similarly, this analysis critically examines the Indigenous folk tales to understand how the oral tradition in North-East India promotes eco-consciousness among the community, which directly or indirectly motivates the Indigenous community to protect the environment.

### **North Eastern Indigenous Folk Tales and Eco-consciousness**

North Eastern region of India is geographically, socially, culturally, and demographically very significant. Diversity in terms of culture, tradition, demography and ethnicity makes this region quite vibrant. Multiplicity is the principal ethos of this region. Each group has its own language, culture, identity, and way of life. Other than ethnic diversity, ecological diversity is also another key factor in this region. This diversified multiplicity of ethnoecological aspects is reflected in their oral tradition, song, dance and music. As these people are lovers of song, music, and dance, their oral culture is also full of ecological references, which is socially, culturally, and economically intimately associated with their life. They also create the beauty of nature in their painting, textile, handicraft, and wood carving. North-East Indian poet Temsula Ao, in her poetry, figures out the unheard and unrepresented voices of the Naga Indigenous people who possessed extraordinary survival skills and had an innate awareness of nature's mysteries and wisdom which creates a sense of preserving and protecting the environment among the community (Jayashree 343-345). According to Jayashree, much of Temsula Ao's poetry deals with the eco-ethnic tone of the Indigenous community, which teaches the audience how to "protect" and "preserve" the ecology to sustain long-rooted socio-cultural diversity.

In the same way, the eco-consciousness of the Indigenous community also largely shaped their knowledge of nature and natural beings and their significance in their life. As they depend on nature and nonhuman beings for their survival, they know the value and importance of it. This sense of relevance and necessity of nonhuman beings and the environment motivates the Indigenous people to think about it and preserve it accordingly. Aboriginal, Indigenous, or other traditional knowledge on the sustainability of regional resources is referred to as traditional ecological knowledge. Traditional ecological knowledge is a body of information, belief, and activity that has been passed down through the generations through traditional songs, stories, and beliefs and has evolved through the accumulation of traditional ecological knowledge. It is about how people interact with their surroundings and other living things, including the mainstream. This traditional knowledge system which is prevalent in folk



tale narration, has been adopted by the writers of the different ages in their writing to assimilate Indigenous culture, knowledge and art to the modern popular culture. By assimilating Indigenous culture to popular culture widen the periphery of knowledge which profoundly helps in creating consciousness among the people regarding ecology and its importance. The occurrence of natural phenomenon and the process of regeneration and degeneration was a great mystery to pre-historic human being. Being mysterious and inexplicable they assigned sacredness to those occurrences and formed an organized Animistic religious belief system (Ramakrishnan 154-156). In a given landscape, particular natural beauty, availability of the resources, occurrence of the natural calamities, animals, plants and river are connected to oral literature and transmitted from generation to generation. These tangible and intangible natural resources are not only part of their religious belief but also has a deep cultural connection too. The socio-cultural importance of animals and plants plays a significant role in the lives of the Indigenous people, which varies in different ethnic groups. Some Indigenous groups give more importance to plants, using them in different festivals and medicine to cure various diseases; at the same time, other Indigenous groups pay more value to animals as it is necessary to meet the demand for food. Krishna and Mukud (2023), in their study, by analyzing the “ethnic belief, customs, and different rituals of the tea tribe of Dibrugarh district of Assam in connection with sacred plants and animals” (1) finds that celebration of every ritual of the Indigenous community is centered around on a particular plants or animals. Bhaskar Roy Barman (2010), in his study, points out that “ecology greatly determines the condition of living and the influence of the pattern of thoughts and behaviour in tribal society and accounts for the differences that exist between one group and another” (20). However, some other Indigenous groups value animals and plants and preserve their importance through oral tradition. Moreover, the inherent religious, cultural, traditional and materialistic values of trees, plants, and animals motivate the North-East Indigenous community of India to revere the ecological elements in their environment as powerful entities and worship them accordingly. This ecological sacredness encourages the Indigenous people to preserve it in the form of folktales.

Animism is another important aspect of the Indigenous people of North East; in ancient times, when science and technology had not intervened in Indigenous lives as much as it does now, natural calamities and disasters were a great mystery to the North-East India Indigenous community. So, the Indigenous people imagined every natural element or occurrence as something powerful and sacred and started to worship those elements or occurrences. This legacy of Animism is still followed by the Indigenous community, which reflects in their contemporary religious belief system. Besides natural calamities, snakes, animals, and trees are deified and worshipped (Roy 23). In North East India, Indigenous people at the time of sowing seeds or harvesting the crops sing songs that convey their deep-rooted feelings and emotions connected with the landscape and environment where they live. The main themes of these folk tales are season, topography, eco-cultural values, and history. This is how Indigenous people transmit their values and ideas regarding nature and landscape to the young generation through

the oral tradition, which directly creates a sense of attachment to the environment. In North Eastern states like Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya, numerous Indigenous folk tales and stories proclaim that plants and animals embody deities and ancestors and must not be harmed (Dey 14-27). Hence, this interconnectedness between nature and belief creates a sense of belongingness with the environment and motivates people to protect it. This interconnectedness and belongingness with nature and nonhuman beings are also prevalent in the Mizo myth, folk tale, and folklore. A Mizo myth, "The Myth of Rih", deals with human and ecological relationships. Rih, a mythological figure, is the protagonist who lives with her cruel father and stepmother. One day her father kills her younger sister in a deep forest. After finding out about the dead body of her sister, Rih starts to cry and hearing her cry, a good spirit comes to help her. After listening to her story, the spirit, with the help of a magical tree leaf, revives her sister's life. To quench her sister's thirst, she transforms into a small pool with the help of the same magical tree leaf. Then again, she transforms into a white Mithun and starts wandering here and there for her safety and permanent settlement. After loitering here and there, she decides to settle down in Khawthlir village in the form of a lake, now located in Myanmar (Raha 2). This Mizo mythology does not merely narrate the story of supernatural beings and deities; it also expresses their sense of identity and belongingness with nature. This sense of belongingness and unity with nature and nonhuman beings is also vibrant in Naga folk tales which create a sense of unity in diversity. In this context, the myth of "Man, Tiger, and Spirit" is very relevant. Naga people believe that the soul resides not in the human body but in an animal, especially in the tiger. According to them, the human soul wanders in the forest as a tiger, and they reunite with the human being in the latter's dream. They believe a man, a tiger, and a spirit were once blood brothers. When their mother died, they started to fight over their mother's worldly possessions. They planned to arrange a competition to settle the matter, but the man in guile won the competition and, being defeated, the tiger went to the forest to dwell. The spirit, being deceived by the man, curses him, and promises never to meet again (Kharmawphlang 160-176). In the archetypal memory of the Naga Indigenous community, this oneness with nature is celebrated through saving, protecting, and worshipping nature.

Contemporary writers like Mitra Pukhan, Tamsula Ao, Monalisha Changkija, Mamang Dai, Eastarine Kire, and Rashmi Narzary recollect and brings the Indigenous myth, song, folk tales, orality, and legend into the mainstream to reconstruct the Indigenous knowledge of nature, ecology, nonhuman, and profound philosophy of life. Although Mitra Phukan is not an Indigenous author, her writing reflects on the mythology and folktales of the Indigenous community of the North-East and presents them in a new form; for instance, her well-known text *The Collector's Wife. The Collector's Wife* (2005) is a story of turmoil and uncertainty set against the backdrop of the Assam insurgency, forcing the protagonist, Rukmini, to take shelter in the lap of nature for her spiritual awareness. It is only the ecology whose door is open to all for finding peace and serenity in the world of the hustle and bustle. The undercurrent of an ideal way of life through "back to nature" can also be found in Tamsula Ao's writing. Her short story

collection, *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), idealised Indigenous living to show a contrasting picture of modern lifestyles contributing to disturbing local ecologies. She tries to foreground that in the ever-changing ecology, the only way to live in peace and harmony is to preserve, protect and worship nature: in the same manner, as Indigenous people do. The human-nonhuman relationship in Naga and Adi folk tales and mythology has been reevaluated in Mamang Dai's and Easterine Kire's writing. Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a story of four generations interwoven with mythology and folk tale. In her narration, she tries to showcase a generation gap and its associated cultural, social, economic, and ecological differences through the ages. Through the analysis of Adi folk tales, she tries to justify the ecological wisdom of the Adi community and the eco-mystical way of living is the only solution to the ecological imbalance today's world is facing. Similar to Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) depicts the lives of the Tenyimia Naga community on a remote mountain, their attachment to the land, their rituals, beliefs, and harmonious life with the natural surrounding (Dhanya and Bhattacharyya 1-12). Their connection with the nonhuman being and nature helps them become more knowledgeable regarding their environment, which constructs their "archetypal memory" (Jung, 1919) of preserving and protecting the ecology. Janice Pariat uses Khasi mythology and folk tales in her writing to bring forth the Indigenous knowledge of "ecological sustainability" (Callicott 27-47). Her novel *Boats on Land* (2012) demonstrates a clear worldview of the Indigenous community, their close relationship with ecology, and how it has deteriorated with the influence of materialism and commercialism. It is evident in the narration that the socio-cultural roots of the Khasi community are changing over time, detaching them from their long-rooted ecological legacy.

Contemporary writers from the northeast region of India basically focus on the long-rooted ecological legacy of the Indigenous community in their narration to revive the lost glory of the mentioned community in the form of myth, story, folk tales, and legends and what role these oral traditions play in the life of the Indigenous community. It is evident in their narration that North-East Indigenous folk tales largely shape the cultural identity and consciousness of the community. So, this consciousness regarding ecology spontaneously motivates the Indigenous community to protect it.

## **Conclusion**

North-East Indian Indigenous folk tales are diversified and vary from place to place. North-East Indian Indigenous folk tales and paintings depict the human-nonhuman relationship and the importance of nature in their life. Besides the human-nonhuman relationship, deep attachment with the nature also inculcates a sense of thankfulness and gratitude toward the environment, leading to eco-spirituality. Eco-spirituality of the Northeast Indian Indigenous folk tales also play a pivotal role in creating eco-consciousness among the Indigenous Community. Nature, nurture and belongingness with place and environment are key contributions of Indigenous folk tales among the community. Contemporary writers revive mythology, folk tales, and legends in their narration to form a "collective memory" of the Indigenous community concerning land,

nonhuman form, and ecology. Their narration reflects a holistic view of the Indigenous community and their attitude towards nature as a whole to provide a better understanding of the present ecological imbalance due to unethical exploitation and over-used of natural resources unscientifically. At the same time, it provides a positive vibe and scientific temperament to protect and preserve the degrading ecology. Apart from this awareness of and belongingness with nature, the North-East Indigenous folk tales revives the socio-cultural history of Indigenous people of interdependencies with nature from time immemorial. Revival of Indigenous folk tales in the form of Indigenous narration revitalizes the reader's memory concerning the ecological imbalance and glorious socio-cultural legacy of the Indigenous community with the land, river, plants, animals, mountains, and the cosmology surrounded them. So, an Indigenous folk tale narrates not only the story of animals, plants, and deities but also the undercurrent of a deep-rooted environmental consciousness which unconsciously helps the Indigenous community to save the environment from degradation. This study shows that the cultural identity of the Indigenous community in the North-Eastern part of India, in the form of folk literature, tremendously assists the community in centralized the ecology and nonhuman beings into their consciousness, which plays a major role in constructing the deep ecology in the consciousness of the community which drive them in preserving and protecting the ecology to sustain their cultural identity and legacy.

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