



## Exploring the Voice of Ecological Consciousness in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* and Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta*

Meghali Gogoi

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
B. Borooah College (Autonomous)  
Email Id - [meghaligogoi28111993@gmail.com](mailto:meghaligogoi28111993@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

We live in a mysterious universe filled with great forces of life, death, creation, destruction, cycling and recycling of natural laws. Nature provides not only for material growth but supports our spiritual growth within us. So, nature holds forth a meaning and value to us. But in modern times, environment is becoming bad to worse. Unsustainable human activities and other human centredness threatens human existence which in turn brings great destruction to all the life forms in the universe. Thus, there requires an exploration of return to values, beliefs and ethics that connects human beings with natural environment against these inequalities. This aesthetic value holds all life together and makes it collectively meaningful. The spiritual understandings of the value of nature guide people to develop moral responsibilities towards nature. Mamang Dai, a prominent novelist from Northeast India, in her masterpiece *The Legends of Pensam* addresses the impact of modern developments on tribal communities and reflects on traditional beliefs and animism. Indira Goswami, another writer from Northeast India, focuses on the interconnectedness of women, animals and nature and explores the patriarchal structures that perpetuate their exploitation in her work *The Man from Chinnamasta*. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to explore the eco-consciousness which is crucial for sustainable future in selected fictions of Mamang Dai and Indira Goswami.

**Key Words:** Nature, Inequalities, Spirituality, Moral responsibility, Eco-consciousness.

### Introduction

..... the type of interspecies and ecological awareness that is evident

within traditional and indigenous life-ways was normal before the rise of the west, and a functional and reverent way

of living respectfully in place. (Sepie, 2017, p. 12)

Due to the advent of colonisation and christianization in a land like India with its heterogenous multiethnic culture and huge populations with diverse perceptions, people here suffer from environmental crisis and economic gap. The postcolonial writings from India's Northeast very clearly represent the voice of those in northeast India who could not stand for themselves in the colonial period. This marginalised section from Northeast India had to depend on the west to express themselves culturally. Dr. H. Vanlalhruais in 'Voices from the Margins: Revealing the Marginalisation of the North East India' talks about the different projections of North East India that "Discourse on the concept of North East by mainstream officials, scholars, medias and social scientists have always been an enterprise implicit in the agenda of India's nationalism. The term 'North East' was invented by the colonialist to identify a geographical area, later on adopted by Indian officials, intellectuals and medias for administrative and other suspicious political reasons. The term certainly requires scrutiny in the light of contemporary political situations" (289). So, in the postcolonial period through their powerful writings, the northeast writers represent themselves and tell their own stories of loneliness, war and show their love and consciousness for ecology of their lands. Thus, literature became an important medium for them to create a place and space for themselves and acquire an identity of their own.

Ecological consciousness is one of the dominant features of the northeastern literature. Ecological consciousness is an effort to think beyond the narrow human-centric boundaries. William Devall in the article 'Ecological consciousness and Ecological Resisting: Guidelines for Comprehension and Research' explains the term "Ecological Consciousness presupposes a participatory science in which the observer is not alienated from the observed" (180). Like the poetry of the Romantic age of

English literature, their poetry is a return to nature. In the poem 'Small Towns and Rivers', the Adi writer Mamang Dai writes on the eternity of nature: "the river knows/the immortality of water" and confessed that nature has a living presence: "The river has a soul". Thus, it revives pantheism and says that nature is divine. Their literatures cherish the basic Indian culture and harmonious relationship of man-nature. Temsula Ao in her poem 'Blood of others', asserts the values of nature to be compassionate to nature and to live in harmony with it:

"We believed that our God lived/In the  
Various forms of nature/Whom we  
worshipped/With unquestioning faith  
(81)".

Some of the creatures of nature are worshipped and their sanctity purifies the whole environment. Wordsworth through his nature poetry focussed more with the spiritual than the external beauties of nature. The northeast writers too spiritualises and intellectualises nature. But modernization and industrialisation in this marginalised region has made human beings forget the age-old bond they share with nature. Moji Riba in her literary piece 'Rites, in passing' rightly says that "With progress and modernity, changes in the traditional belief systems and lifestyle have become inevitable" (2). This has compelled the writers of this region to be conscious about the future of both nature and civilisation.

Thus, the eco-cultural conscious tone finds expression in the northeastern writings. For example, there are myths and legends relating to nature among the tribal communities of Northeast, i.e. the Aos of Nagaland believe that when a person dies, the soul takes the shape of a bird or an insect. This concept exists among the tribal natives of Nagaland in their traditional myths and legends. This human-nature relationship and the oneness of the human beings with the nature is best expressed in the following lines of the Nagaland writer, Temsula:

They are chanting prayer  
But I watch a lonely hawk  
Soaring amidst the swirling blue  
Wings darken  
The whiteness  
Of the rushing clouds ('The soul bird',  
1-7)

Ecology which is the relationship of the living and non-living to their environment has gained immense popularity in the recent year as people have become more concerned about the deteriorating environment and co-system owing to its moral concern. The troubled relation between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism has led to the emergence of environmental ethics where moral or ethical dilemma is always there. Aldo Leopold, a pioneer in environmental ethics in his essay 'The Land Ethics' viewed nature not just as resources to be exploited, but as a space to which humans belong advocating a 'land ethic' and respect for natural world. He says: "There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is... an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity" (238-239).

Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* says that nature does not really exist but actually it is an entity which affects us and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. Thus, the world of humanity and ecology is reciprocal. Nature and humans construct one another. Moreover, the outlook of nature is a manifestation of humans. For example, the trees are not trees for us once we learn its electromagnetic and optical side. On the other hand, cultures depend on its natural surroundings. Both are dependent on each other. As both need one another, so moral consideration of nature is always important because preserving, or degrading nature seems to affect humans.

In Chapter 4 'Motherhood in Indian Epics' in the thesis titled *Motherhood in the Indian epics* (2007), Smriti A. Prasad writes: "There is a beautiful invocation to Earth in the Ma'at Book of Shadows.

Hail the Mother of Earth, Grand Mother of all. Hail Earth, the daughter of Heaven! Earth, whose life blood is the salty sea. Whose bones are the mighty mountains. Whose belly is pregnant with life!"

So, like every ancient culture, Earth was considered to be the primal mother by the ancient Hindus as shown in the Indian Epics. Man was born by her grace and in death, found refuge in her. The many fruits, crops and ores were her gifts to her children. Some tribes refused to till her for fear of injuring her. The cyclical movement of seasons, the growth and decay of the vegetation, gave the initial idea of the death and resurrection. Gods, and the seed of religion was planted in the ancient minds. The earth is still respected as mother, who showers us with her bounties but sometimes as an angry mother punishes us with storms and earthquakes, volcanoes and such to remind us that we are crossing the line and we are not invincible. The disasters that earlier flourishing culture had to face are waiting to happen if we do not treat her with respect. And so the cycle of creation and dissolution will continue." (85-86). There is another example in the same chapter: "Water in all myths is perceived as the feminine principle from whose womb all is created. The Devi Sukta says,

My origin is in the Waters, in the ocean  
Thence I am spread through all existing  
worlds and even touch the heaven with  
my forehead." (97)

Nature has some innate significance that it bears within. There is this chain of life and dependency wherein no entity can be taken in isolation. Ecological evidences show that everything depends on everything else in an inter-web of culture-nature totality. We see

many contributions of culture for preservation of environment.

In Chapter 4 titled 'Motherhood in Indian Epics' of the thesis *Motherhood in the Indian epics* (2007), Smriti A. Prasad writes: "In Atharva Veda (10/10), we get a glimpse of the divine nature of the cow:

'The cow alone is called Immortality, the cow alone is worshipped as death. The cow became this universe, gods, manes, Asuras and seers' The gods live by cow, and also the man lives by the cow; The cow is this whole world as far as the sun looks down."

In the Indian Epics there is mention of *Sagarmanthan* by the Gods and Demons to procure the *amrita* from the milky ocean. Many auspicious objects came out and one was Kamadhenu, the wish fulfilling cow. This set the tone in the epics of the divine nature of the cow" (93). Thus, it shows the interrelationship between nature and culture.

Bibhash Choudhury in *Colophon - Writings From North East India* (2022) rightly comments that "creation myths are crucial in creating the ambience for the sense of belonging, an essential factor in the gelling of individuals through camaraderie that finds a common ground in culture" (39). So, he calls for a "more adaptive understanding" (47) "when it comes to seeing the cultural heritage through the prism of identifiable myths and legends of people" (47). Culture is shaped by nature and in turn influences how humans interact and perceive the natural world. As mentioned in *The Role of Culture in Environmental Sustainability* about culture's important role in our society that "culture explains how natural resources are appreciated by the society" (264).

Deep Ecologists are critical of the Western theorists who are responsible for the radical divorce between nature and himself. They advocate that the postmodern man may have to learn from the old, archaic ways of the

less civilized humanity who lived with nature without being too anthropocentric. In the article 'Deep Ecology: Contemporary Bioethical Trends', Sandra Mijac and Goran Slivsek write: "Deep ecology is manifested in its basic statement about the concept of intrinsic values, which states that every part of nature is valuable in itself and not because of higher goals (human for instance). In that regard, humans are not part of nature and not its highest achievement... Naess equalizes all the organisms in the biospheric community and their equality is a consequence of a relational interconnection, which gives them an intrinsic value" (132).

The traditional Indian doctrine of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* for example, literally means that all of creation is one family. It is the manifestation of the Great Chain of Being. It is the realization that each and every object of nature is a part of the intricate web. But due to tremendous change in human beings' attitude towards nature, this spiritual ecology advocates the restoration of the age-old values of honouring the ecosystem so that instead of domination of nature by human beings, both of them co-exist peacefully and with perfect harmony. This widening of the self surely brings a radical change to human understanding. So, this spiritual ecology or eco mysticism which is based on a sacred relationship with earth & all beings irrespective of caste, class etc. defines a path for self-realization and can be a great source to overcome the present problems.

Emphasizing the need for cultural heritage preservation, ecological balance and interconnectedness of human-nature, this paper through the two select narratives of the region – Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* & Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* – examine the useless destruction of animals, ecological crisis, imbalance between human-natural environment, impact of modernization on indigenous communities and their relationship with nature, contributions of culture in protecting the environment and vice versa. By challenging patriarchal and



exploitative structures, this paper promotes a sense of responsibility towards the environment, and advocates for a harmonious human-nature relationship rooted in indigenous spirituality. The analysis of the paper would be strengthened through ecocritical frameworks i.e. deep ecology, spiritual ecology and ecofeminism.

### Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

Mamang Dai is a celebrated writer in English from Arunachal Pradesh. Her novel *The Legends of Pensam* has a strong ecological concern. The Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh has a rich cultural and ecological heritage. The Adi practice an animistic faith that is constructed around forest ecology. For them, faith is everything. Their faith in nature prompts coexistence with the natural world. These value systems, presented from an ecological point of view, are crucial for the tribal world as a conscious way of asserting the identity of marginalized people whose voices have been suppressed due to the changes of modernity.

Dai starts the book with the story of a boy, Hoxo, who considers his birth to be his ultimate blessing. He was carried by one Lutor to his village after returning from his work on a road project by the migluns (British). Hoxo plays a key role in the stories that describe tribal beliefs and the modern development that throws their lives into confusion. The earlier pristine environment has faced degradation due to modernity and ecological crisis. This is described vividly in the novel:

"The river cuts through our land as before in its long journey to the sea. In spring the red flower still blaze against our sky. But the old people now, the few of them alive, turn slowly in their sleep as the fires burn down to a heap of ash. In the middle of the night a bird swoops low and calls out in a wild, staccato note. The thatch rustles! The bamboo creaks. The darkness is full of breath and sighs." (30)

Through her ecological descriptions, Mamang Dai has asserted an identity for Arunachal Pradesh and its tribes by associating tribal life with nature. "Green" becomes the ultimate resort they find from the confusions of their lives. Thus, the novel advocates for the revival of tradition—the age-old bond between humans and the natural world—as a way of retaining tribal identity in this age of globalization.

In the chapter *Small Histories Recalled in the Season of Rain*, there is a description of the impact of globalization on the natural order when the British decided to build the Stilwell Road along the mountains. Due to the cargo trucks and bulldozers, the jungle burst into flames as the mountaintops were blown off. The narrator describes that no other road in the world had taken as high a toll of human lives as this one; it was dubbed a "man-a-mile road." But when Jules came, he spoke about forest management, despite being from the same white race, and said that "we didn't value what we had and seemed too eager to sell out everything to anyone who came with a little money." Hoxo, who had faith in his roots, supported him, saying that there had existed a green and virgin land under a just rule. He adds, "Everything good and bad was inevitable. We need courage and faith in the face of change." Thus, through new ecological virtues, Jules and Hoxo protest against the degradation of nature.

The changing scenario of the world has brought radical changes to the environment and to the lifestyle of tribal people. There seems to be a cultural hegemony in the name of globalization that has pushed these people to the margins. There is confusion in their traditional world, and they are at a loss in this new world. Identity crisis, a sense of alienation, and loss have started disturbing them. Going back to their roots is the key to their resistance. Worshipping and preserving nature, and living in harmony with it, would help them restore their identity in this period of transition and crisis.

Mamang Dai believes that an eco-mystical way of living is the only solution to these problems. Through this living, one finds peace and harmony with the sacredness of all creatures of the Earth, as they accept life as a blessing. This is the eco-mystical way of living. We can note such an experience in the following lines from the third section of the novel, *The Scent of Orange Blossom*:

"Nothing was complete. But there was comfort in looking at the green hills and the river that she had crossed to become Kao's wife. Together, they would raise a family, guard their land, and live among their people observing the ancient customs of their clan. Surely these were enough gifts for one lifetime." (120)

There is another description of how nature is a source of spiritual significance, where individuals experience unity with the cosmos. This is found in one of the most remarkable stories in the collection. When the relationship between Nenem and David, a British officer posted in the region, leads to a passionate union, she decides not to leave her roots and go with him. She says:

"No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own."

She marries Kao from her own land and feels complete with her nature. At the end, when their village is ravaged by floods and has no place left to stay, she could not take the pain and drowns herself in the river, with nature. Kao, in his patient stillness, believes:

"Time will move on and to survive in one piece all one needs is the ferocity of a lion or the heart of an angel." (120)

Thus, pain creates creativity to redefine oneself in nature.

In another story, *Pinyar, the Widow*, Pinyar finds refuge in nature far from the crowd after the death of her husband. Another story in the novel describes how Kalen, who suffers

from malaria, experiences an unusual connection with nature. In order to regain his vigor, he identifies with the monkeys of the forest and lives among them. Bodak mistakenly believes Kalen might be thinking of how monkey meat is good for malaria patients.

#### Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta*

The biodiversity of the Northeast region, with its rich flora and fauna, has been presented again and again in Goswami's writings. Indira Goswami's novel *The Man from Chinnamasta* is a story about Chinnamasta Jatadhari, a hermit who leads a protest movement against the ritual of animal sacrifice. He is supported by some strong-willed youth like Ratnadhar, Bidhibala, and Dorothy Brown, a British lady who comes to Kamakhya in search of peace of mind. In the novel, these three vigorous personalities raise a voice of protest, with a conscious ecological sense, against the ritual of animal sacrifice before the goddess Kamakhya. Thus, the novel has a strong ecological perspective as it talks about the disturbance of the ecological balance due to the ritual of animal sacrifice.

The peaceful coexistence of human beings and animals—an enviable feature of Northeast India—and their mutual congenial relationship have been expressed in her writings. This eco-mystical ideal is a significant feature of her works. It has been consciously explored by the writer to assert a distinctive identity of the region through its ecology:

Seuli flowers cast forth distracted fragrance to soften the raw odour of butchered flesh. A hushed whisper of dewdrops brushed the Kendur shrubs, the round flat outenga leaves that snake-hooded them, the ripple-leaved ashoka, the vast khokam. (1)

Thus, the overall ecology has been explored in the novel, which shows the writer's conscious ecological sense. There are many references to the ecology of the region that

portray people's love and respect toward nature. The following description of a particular spot on the majestic Brahmaputra is suggestive of an eco-mystical tone:

He looked back at the mighty Brahmaputra—just where it veered off its course, to take the shape of a sacrificial machete. The waters had receded around Urvasi, an island in the river, revealing carvings of Vishnu in his half-lion form, the Narasimha avatar. A strip of sand also lay exposed, like the pelt of a white goat laid out to dry after the sacrifice. (17)

Goswami also shows her reverence for nature by drawing a parallel between nature and women. She talks about the exploitation of women in patriarchal structures, which suggests a violation of the natural order. Buell, in the article *Literature and Environment*, argues that ecofeminism sees “the battle for ecological survival as intrinsically intertwined with the struggles for women’s liberation and other forms of social justice” (424). In the novel, the treatment of a drunken husband toward his wife and the language he uses for her is very much suggestive of the plight of women in a male-dominated society:

The man pounced on her and grabbed her by the hair, hurling abuses. “You bitch! You should be pounding the paddy at home. How dare you come to this charlatan who has abducted a foreign woman. You whore!” (27)

This is the description of a futile attempt by a woman who had come to seek help from the hermit Jatadhari to mend her drunken husband's waywardness. Thus, Goswami shows that violence against women can also be seen as violence against nature. The violence against the natural order is also emphasized by the novelist through the practice of animal sacrifice. In the novel, Goswami ponders a debate on this issue and advocates for a new ritual that supports the offering of flowers

instead of animal blood before the altar. This redefining of one's identity through new rituals to celebrate sacredness and oneness in nature is an eco-mystical concern.

Her ecological concern is well reflected in the novel when the narrator argues that animal sacrifices should be abandoned. The novelist takes her own stand through the words of Jatadhari. Describing his initiation as an ascetic and his oneness with nature, Goswami illustrates his frightful closeness to it:

Poisonous serpents had nested in his matted locks. Wild birds had perched on his arms. As Jatadhari is respectful of all creatures, he could not bear the sight of blood at the goddess’ abode. His voice of protest advocating peaceful co-existence of all creatures is the voice of that ecological consciousness. Creation is a blessing for him. Man is God’s creation. Man has many things to learn from animals. Only when men and animals live in harmony will the world become a paradise. (180)

He even goes to the extent of offering his own blood to abolish the system of animal sacrifice. As one of the priests, the chief follower of the ritual, asks:

“You have asked why dumb animals should be dragged to the altar. You have said that if it is blood that is required, devotees should offer their own. Haven’t you?” (185)

Feeling compassionate and one with all creatures, reverence for the sacredness of nature, and a return to it are thus the final facet of eco-mysticism—after the realization that creation is a blessing and suffering will be a continuous process unless one finds an alternative through creativity, i.e., faith in the sacredness of nature. As Mamang Dai also supports, faith and courage are great necessities in the face of change: “*That is all we can do.*” In this era, eco-centric principles have replaced

anthropocentric ideals due to human beings' growing awareness of the need to protect the ecology of the planet.

In her novel, Goswami describes people like Dorothy Brown and others who come to Jatadhari in the jungles, surrounded by birds and animals, to attain a sense of absolute peace for their sufferings. This is the basic rule of eco-mysticism. Nature, besides being treated as the mother of benevolence, is also imbued by Goswami with a sense of wonder, according to traditional faith. Since ancient times, people have worshipped natural objects because they believe nature also has an evil side. To ward off evil, they show respect through worship. Thus, through myths and legends, Goswami treats nature as an abode of mysticism and holiness—through which one can realize oneself and live in complete harmony or sacred relationship with the Earth and all beings. Mamang Dai also describes in her novel the deaths of people caused by displeased nature or spirits.

### Conclusion

What we are actually trying to sustain is the underlying pattern of health, resilience and adaptability that maintain the planet in a condition where life as a whole can flourish. Design for sustainability is, ultimately, design for human and planetary health. (Wahl, p. 43)

Thus, the final peace is possible if the individual is able to be one with and accept other living and nonliving entities as part of the same existence as oneself. In this northeastern region of India, there has an intimacy between humanity and environment as the ethnic communities live in deep contact with nature. Religion and culture has a deep history in this part of the land of India, as much as oppression, domination and resistance. But degeneration of the ecological values and in turn their traditional values due to modernisation has been the great concern of the age. Environmental ethics and ecological consciousness has attained great momentum

recently. Preservation of the rich eco-cultural heritage of Northeast India will be a great aid in retaining the exclusivity and identity of the region. It has been the subject of literature since ancient times. There is an evidence of description of interdependence between man and nature, between the physical and the spiritual in the Northeastern literature. The narratives mentioned above have a great ecological concern. So, nature holds forth a meaning and value to us.

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