



Panch-Bhoota Sensibility in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

Dimple Pannu

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya
Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat, Haryana, India
E-mail: associatesvnnarwal@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.1.140](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.1.140)



Article info

Article Received: 04/01/2026
Article Accepted: 02/02/2026
Published online: 06/02/2026

Abstract

The proclaimed five elemental forces- Earth, Water, Air, Space and Fire, known as *Panch-Bhoot* in Hindu discourse, function as an effective parameter to examine Indigenous ecological sensibilities across several philosophical and cultural traditions and particularly within the cosmological imagination of Northeast India. This study argues that any Indigenous knowledge system upholds a complete, sophisticated, and self-sustaining understanding of human-nature interdependence, in which the elemental forces are not mere symbolic abstractions but ontological realities that are structurally integral to the lived experiences of the common populace. Where modern ecological thought positions human above nature and sometimes vis-à-vis, this alternative ecological rationality considers human life as embedded within the realms of nature. Therefore, these natural forces dictate every aspect of their lives, from social ethics and memory to modes of survival. Such primordial knowledge systems operate through oration, rituals and mythic temporality and offer a model of co-existence grounded in restraint, responsibility and reciprocity. The myths and legends in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* focus on Adi tribe of Arunachala Pradesh and silently acknowledge the animate presence of *Panch-Bhoot* consciousness in their epistemology. The text offers an elemental imagination which reflect a communities' deep ties with myths and traditions of their land. It demonstrate how smoothly they carry intrinsically "soft" attitude towards nature rather than using any codified doctrine to handle nature degradation. So, the literary expression through legends situates *Panch-Bhootas* inseparable indigenous thinking which contribute meaningfully to contemporary debates on sustainable development, eco-criticism, eco-humanities, environmental crisis and so on.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge system, environment sustainability, co-existence, myths and traditions.

In dreams, my people say, they see rain mother sitting on the tree tops, laughing in the Mist. Her silver ornaments clink as she rides the wind, brandishing her sword. Every time she twirls her skirt, the storm clouds edged with black rush up to cover her. -The Legends of Pensam

A profoundly anchored trait of an indigenous narrative is their belief in an enduring tie between nature, human, spirituality and culture, which yield a superlative cosmic balance of existence. Autochthonous cultural vision in Northeast India devotedly uphold the belief that *panchbhoota*- Earth, Fire, Water, Sky and Air are universal life forces. They resolutely defend the view that these five elements are not only corporeal entities but indeed a vital force that regulates existence, influence individuality and sculpt one's cultural sense of being. Mamang Dai, an eminent writer from Arunachal Pradesh, seamlessly blends indigenous expression and the primordial *panchbhoota* principle in her work, *The Legends of Pensam*. This work offers a refined interpretation of the complementary alliance between a sentient being and the natural world. Canadian government set its 20-years agenda- Royal Commission on Aboriginal People in 1996 to provide justice to aboriginal people in which they defines the importance of land to the native people, "Land touches every aspect of life: conceptual and spiritual views; securing food, shelter, and clothing; cycles of economic activities including the division of labour; forms of social organization such as recreational and ceremonial events; and systems of governance and management." (RCAP, 1996, 2.2.4.3.2)

This study explores the sensibility of *panchbhoota* in *The Legends of Pensam*, investigating how Mamang Dai's narration demonstrates the role of these quintessential constituents in shaping the way of living of the indigenous communities. Various sections of the novel, such as "The river woman", "The boy who fell from the sky", "The old man and fires",

and "Travel the road", among others, strikingly accentuate the myths, oral traditions, and lived experiences of the *Adi* tribe. This work exquisitely illustrates the supervisory role of these five elements. The philosophy of *panchbhoota* is explored in this study in order to unveil the interconnectedness between nature and social structures which further shapes an individual's decisions in life. In crux, the paper will discuss in detail how nature has been a crucial component of indigenous living and of their narratives. It will focus on how Mamang Dai formulated the *panchbhoota* narrative as a framework to showcase understated indigenous life philosophy. Also, this paper aims to analyse the key characters, events and motifs employed in the novel by Mamang Dai to articulate the core-native veneration towards substantial energy of *panchbhoota* elements. Such efforts not only highlights the validity of indigenous epistemology under critical literary debate but also incorporate current global climate consciousness or environmental sustainability discourse. So, *The Legends of Pensam* stands as a profound expression of timeless intellect and sagacity of indigenous populace which they attained after an extended period of cohabitation with life sustaining *panchbhoota* elements.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis grounded in Indigenous literary criticism, ecocriticism, and comparative cosmology. Rather than imposing the Panch-Bhoota framework as an external or universalizing schema, the analysis proceeds inductively, allowing elemental resonances to emerge from the text itself. The Panch-Bhoota model is employed heuristically, not prescriptively, as a dialogic lens through which Mamang Dai's Indigenous cosmology is read in relation to broader Indic elemental thought. This approach resists extractive interpretation by prioritizing cultural specificity, oral epistemology, and mythic logic intrinsic to *Adi* cosmology, ensuring that theory remains

responsive to the text rather than determinative of it.

This study builds upon existing scholarship on Indigenous ecopoetics, including the works of Vandana Shiva, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, and Debjani Ganguly, while extending these debates by situating Mamang Dai within an elemental cosmology framework rarely applied to Northeast Indian literature.

The Hindu concept of *panchbhoota* resembles with various other existing theories throughout the world such as the *Iwigara* concept from indigenous community of Northern Mexico named Raramuri (Tarahumara). They follow a cultural model where they believe in kin-centric ecology, making it an reciprocal effort to preserve, respect and enhance ecosystem in order to get benefited from these natural resources. The doctrine '*Iwigara*' adheres to the conviction that nature and cosmic powers are capable of effecting not only the physical health but also the mental health and social structures in life of a human being. Basically, their ideology reflect significant human impact on planet's climate, eco- system and geology and vice- versa. Another is the concept of *Oikos* proposed by Dr. Silvamony to refer to the connection between ecology, human and culture. According to the idea of *Oikopoetics*, Dr. Selvamony in the work *Essays in Eco criticism* asserts that indigenous populace strictly comply with the notion that human, culture and nature/supernatural synthetically maintain equilibrium. Various other worldview, such as Eco-criticism, Anthropocene, *Babylon* mythology etc. share similar grounds of their belief system. According to *Vedic* philosophy these elements are counted as the foundation of existence, woven together with life, nature and ethos. By conveying significant reflections on these five elements, the *Vedas* actually invite a respectful, harmonious and humanitarian approach towards *panchbhootha*. Oldest scriptures of Hinduism depicts Earth as the mother of all- enduring, nurturing and stable. The *Atharva*

Veda (12.1.12) states: "*Mata Bhumi Putro Aham Prithivyah*", which translates to, "Earth is my mother, and I am her son." Whereas the Sky, or space, or *Akasha*, due to its infinite expanse is considered the subtlest of all five elements. The *Chandogya Upanishada* (3.14.3) elaborates the unbound, unconfined and unfathomable as the hallmarks of the galaxy. It states, "*Ya chidākāśa vad vyāpakah*," which translates to, "There is a divine energy within us all, which is immense and infinite in nature." This verse provides a conceptual connection between the physical and the spiritual. It restrict us to consider it a medium through which existence of every living being is connected, rather considering it mere an external agent or an organization working outside. Then ancient wisdom contained in Hindu *shashtras* consider the Fire or *Agni* as a divine transformer. It is seen as an energy which is efficient in purifying the impurities and facilitates spiritual awakening. So it is central to various spiritual rites or sacred *yajnas* and held as an efficient medium to achieve *Moksha/Nirvana*. The very first verse of the *Rig Veda* (1.1.1) states: "*Agni mīle purohitam yajñāśya devam rtoijam, hotāram ratna dhātāmam*," which translates to, "I wish to plead the high energy inherent in the *Agni*, which represent the power of renunciation and liberation." Similarly, the Air or the *Vayu*, is revered in the scriptures like *Yajur Veda* asserts, "*Vayur anilam amritam*" meaning, "There is no life, no breadth without vital whiff of Air." This sacred statement emphasizes the inherent divine permanence or unceasing spirit of Air. Its necessity in upholding life is undeniable. Then comes the Water or *Jala* or *Apas*, an another fundamental element out of five *panchbhootha* is considered elixir of life which represent renewal. The *Rig Veda* (10.9.1) proclaims: "*Aapo hi shtha mayo bhuvah*", which means, "Water is impetuous and major catalyst of life on Earth which can sustain and expel too." This line give prominence to the pivotal function Water performs in nourishing and revitalizing life on this planet. The *Vedas* firmly forge a deep

connection between water, purification and healing.

In the novel *The Legends of Pensam*, the significance of natural entities has been reflected through the various episodes where traditional theatrical performance of the region unfolds mythic narration pertaining their genesis. The podium has been festooned like an orchard under a vast open sky which typifies in a nutshell- the cosmic dance of existence. The stage functions as a microcosm of five fundamental elements - the *panchbhootha*- Sky, Fire, Water, Earth, and Air, which ultimately aids the author in crafting a classical, indigenous saga and eulogising the ethnic and prehistoric way of living of her people.

The drama unfolds with a woman, stagnantly standing in the centre of the stage, personifying Earth. In mythologies, Earth is often represented as embodying the motherly traits, such as Gaia in Greek mythology, Terra Mater in Roman mythology, Dewi Sri in the Malay Archipelago, and Bhumi in Hinduism, which is another incarnation of the Earth. So, the woman on stage is an anthropomorphism of Earth holding existence in her stillness. The Sky is represented, draped in a blue veil, standing in for her husband. Sky, one of the five elements, features the qualities like vastness, infinity and unattainability.

The opening scene, "...and they are still so close to each other that the child of their union is restless..." serves as a compelling narrative hook (Dai 186). It was a moment of anticipation before the great act of creation followed by an explosive sound of a black Mithun which awakened the mute air in the audience. His horns were flaming with celestial brilliance and his body is the embodiment of fire- *Agni*- the primal force of renewal and ruin. He is the first progeny of Earth and Sky, their apparent heir but a restless one. In his high strung- impulsive state, he propels the Sky upward parting him from the Earth. This act transforms Sky from a close lover to a distant one, paving the way for

the formation of the universe, cosmic evolution, and astronomical cycles, and therefore, for longing, death, birth, and existence on Earth. With this transition, the colour of the Sky transforms too, from blue to pale, representing the dawn. Mamang Dai's masterful display of celestial bodies as living beings prompts her to personify mountains as the Earth, stretching her arms towards her distant companion. Then, from the horizon of this new world and a never-before-seen cosmic rupture, emerge two celestial bodies- the Sun and the Moon.

Universal discussions about these five elements most often refer back to the origin myth or creation story of any community. Also, A.K. Ramanujan in his work *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?* provides an intellectual inquiry about how do humans understand the sacred and stated that, "Indian thought sees the human and the cosmic as continuous." The novel also hints at the same, "in the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement." (56) Through such tales about the genesis of her community, Mamang Dai offers a refined insight into the subtle ideology of her tribal community, as it provides a nuanced depiction of the prevailing cultural fabric and evokes deep respect from mainland people towards their sacred traditions. Mythology, folktales and legends of any indigenous community are the spoken heritage or an evolving legacy of these people. Indigenous storytelling hold a sacred place in the lives of these people, ultimately facilitating them the sense of self and cultural reinforcement. These oral traditions encapsulate the primordial tales of their genesis, ecological and geological progression and the forces of nature that shape their world. Laura J. Murray, in her work, *Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Texts* (1996), asserts the significance of narrative artistry among indigenous people:

Storytelling, she claims, weaves people into the very fabric of their societies. Through speaking, hearing, and retelling, we affirm our

relationship with our nations, our tribal community, our family networks. We begin to understand our position in the long history of our people. Indeed, we become the people and land of our past because our identity is created, our perspective formed, of their telling. (54)

The transgenerational transmission of these narratives reinforces a spiritual connection to the land, time, and cosmos, which further weaves a tapestry of harmonious relationship between humans, spirits, animals, and nature. Usually passed down with high reverence for and respect by the elders, shamans, storytellers or through any traditional theatrical performances to teach and guide the upcoming generations morally and equip them with the wisdom to coexist together. Linda Tuhiwai Smith stated about the didactic orientation of folk tales, "Storytelling is a way of knowing, a way of remembering, and a way of transmitting knowledge."

At the cultural epicentre of an Aboriginal settlement, where an oral tradition sows the seeds of a canonical anthology, an age-old myth is told, danced, spoken, and lived by its adherents. In such traditional lore, a woman, along with Earth, is represented as a river too, flowing with the rhythms of life, memory, and longing. It has been observed for ages that rippling waters are deemed sacred in multiple mythological traditions, often personified as supreme deities. Symbiotic women: nature imagery depicts females as rivers, symbolising fertility, purification, and transformation. Some notable examples include Chinese mythology sanctifying the Luo River by linking it to *Luo Shen*, a water goddess, and, in African mythology, the Niger River is associated with a Yoruba deity, *Oshun*. In Hindu mythology, the Ganga River is also personified as a divine goddess who descended to Earth to purify sins. The Norse cosmogony, in fact, considers a group of primeval rivers (*Élivágar*) as the originators of life and fertility. The river Styx, a primordial goddess of Greek mythology and Aztec goddess in Mesoamerican folklores and legends seen as

a source of life and destruction both. Whereas Danube river in Salvic mythology is also depicted as a divine female entity. Similarly the *Adi* tribe in Northeast India also sees river as a living being and laud it's greatness through dance, oration and theatrical performances. In a mythic representation by a group of actors, the river-woman has been shown as a force that devours those who seeks to control her. She refuses to be mapped, refuses to be owned, yet she allows love to enter her life. The chronicle in *The Legends of Pensam* unfolds with a man and woman dwelling together on the riverbank. They survives in confinement and isolation from the ever-moving tide of the world but in the embrace of love and intimacy with each other. But the man, apprehensive to decrypt uncharted domains, seeks to map the wilderness of the river. He sets out to trace the river's source, believing he can contain it, claim it or measure it with his knowledge. Claude Lévi-Strauss worked extensively on myths and structure in his book *Myth and Meaning* and claimed that, "Myths think themselves through men and not vice versa." Similarly, in *The Legends of Pensam*, elements operate through narrative and represented as structuring force in human life. While individual elemental motifs recur with symbolic intensity, their significance lies in their dynamic interaction rather than discrete representation. Earth, water, fire, air, and space operate as a relational system within Dai's narrative cosmology, where imbalance in one element precipitates disruption across the whole. This interdependence reflects an Indigenous ecological ontology that rejects fragmentation, emphasizing balance, permeability, and mutual becoming as foundational principles of existence.

Dai's act of literary inscription occupies a liminal space between preservation and transformation. While writing inevitably stabilises what is otherwise fluid in oral tradition, her narrative strategies—fragmentation, cyclical temporality, and mythic layering—resist fixity. Rather than fossilising

Indigenous knowledge, the written form becomes a site of mediation, allowing oral sensibilities to circulate within modern literary discourse while retaining their openness, ambiguity, and relational ethos. In a similar vein, the Promethean struggle between man, as a rugged, daring discoverer, and the river, as an unchained, restless spirit, is displayed by Dai in her writing. This star-crossed passion was against the structures of control, against the rules of claims and custodianship, because a river cannot belong to a single man. The consequence is inevitable: "The price of the adultery was a bamboo stake through the union" (Dai 55). But the lovers have experienced the fusion of soul, and with it they have sipped the sorrow of parting, felt the bliss of oneness and also tasted the bitter wine of heartbreak. But love, once experienced, cannot be erased. So, the river has been fated to keep streaming, and the man's mortal frame or the immortal soul, once immersed in the depths of an aquatic expanse, will never truly return to the land. In this narrative scenario, a moment unfolded where nature and the female are not considered separate but intertwined, each posing the same kind of hardships and desires.

Various segments of the novel show that killing or harming a totem An animal may not be forbidden, as it is believed to bring misfortune or disrupt the spiritual harmony of the clan. The totem also functions as a symbolic representation of the tribe's ancestry and collective identity, linking individuals to their communal past and cultural heritage. For example, a neurodevelopmental disorder in a child, Kepi, is considered the curse of some hostile spirit because her father once missed catching the presence of some sinister being in the form of a grumpy elephant while working with logs. In this situation, the family calls a shaman to perform ceremonies to dispel the negative energy surrounding the household. Then the Fire, one of the five *panchbhootha* elements, serves as both a producer and an eliminator. It embodies the conundrum veiled in

a state of being. It is often considered a catalyst that can cause devastation and exhaustion, yet also bring transformation and illumination.

Keep the candle burning
Keep one steady light
In the world that's turning
Keep the candle burning... (Dai 189)

The song "Keep the candle burning" expresses the will to embrace change, or a transition, not through annihilation alone but through endurance, acceptance, and spiritual awakening. Fire here acts in the capacity of a guiding compass showing virtuous direction. It motivates one to keep pace towards progress and preservation. Yet, the tale of "Pinyar the Widow" provokes profound inquiry: Does the Fire bring renewal or ruin? Does it make a new beginning or a tragic end? In any case, it depends on the one encountering it. Whether they perceive it as a pathfinder or as a scorching force. The story of this widow symbolises Fire as an exclusionary energy because, on the one hand, her house bursts into flames. On the other hand, the villagers also acknowledge it as an ominous sign, which causes a grim prophecy of some catastrophe awaiting the whole village. So, the villagers according to their customs casts her out of the village. Poor woman resigned to her fate, "The Fire swallowed everything with an evil appetite,.... 'It seems my destiny is cursed!'" (Dai 28) Behind this custom is a persistent conviction among villagers that the fire ignited itself because a displeased leopard spirit was angered, and that one should call upon a shaman to pacify and drive away the malevolent spirit. The contrast between the song and Pinyar's story reflects the dual nature of Fire in human consciousness. This duality is somehow woven into intergenerational mental records, where a flame in a sacred wick lamp is sanctified, but the flames consuming a house are always nightmarish. It is not the Fire itself that carries meaning, but the context in which it burns. In conclusion, animism and totemism are not merely ancient belief systems but vital parts of the social fabric and spiritual life of Northeast

Indian tribes, guiding their relationships with nature, their ancestry, and their communities. As Julie Cruikshank observes, "Stories are not just reflections on the past but active agents in shaping present understanding and future possibilities."

Dai's literary articulation of elemental interdependence does not translate into policy prescriptions in any linear sense; rather, it functions as a critique of modern developmental paradigms grounded in extractive governance. The mythic temporality of Indigenous ecological thought—cyclical, relational, and sacred—stands in tension with the instrumental rationality of contemporary sustainability discourse. By foregrounding coexistence over control, Dai's narratives challenge technocratic models of ecological management and invite alternative ethical imaginaries rooted in restraint, reciprocity, and ancestral accountability.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is a dexterous amalgamation of the indigenous ideology of the *Adi* community and the universal philosophy of *panchbhootha*—Earth, Air, Water, Fire and Sky. Her storytelling, however, is an anecdote which shares her own tribal experiences since childhood, which is deeply rooted in an amicable relationship between human culture and nature. The indigenous worldview, much like the *panchbhootha* philosophy, validates the vitality of these five forces in maintaining a peaceful sustenance, explicitly stating that human longevity and eco-realms are two wheels of a cart. Dai's work, therefore, aligns native wisdom with a holistic global perspective about understanding of life and the relevance of synchronicity with nature. In *Legends of Pensam*, the author expertly threads together the presence of *panchbhootha* into the regular lifestyle of the indigenous *Adi* community. Such an indigenous populace not only views them as imperative for sustenance but also sincerely

bows before them, venerates them, which further shapes their cultural identity and anthropological viewpoint. The character like Hoxo, who wields a sacred tie with nature, signifies a well-ingrained veneration for the Earth. The land is also central to their myths and oral traditions, forming the foundation for their overall identity. The text clearly articulates earth or land as ancestral continuity, cultural permanence and territorial belonging; water as sustenance, migration, and renewal; air as movement, voice and spiritual passage; fire as ambivalent force which can cause destruction and regeneration both; and space as an all-encompassing realm where the human, natural and metaphysical converge and create equilibrium. This ethical cohabitation and interdependence deny anthropocentrism and extractive logic, and hence, automatically privilege balance and permeability with the natural world.

Notes:

1. References to mantras and passages from the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda, and Chāndogya Upaniṣad are drawn from well-known traditional formulations that circulate across multiple canonical editions and oral traditions. These texts are treated here as part of a shared cultural-religious corpus rather than cited from a single critical edition.
2. RCAP is a government commission report — not a journal article, but a formal policy/legal research document.

Limited and careful use of AI as an assistive technology has been made for grammar checking, stylistic refinement, and preliminary idea organisation. No AI tool has been used to generate original arguments, scholarly interpretations or findings.

References

- Dai, M. (2006). *The legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books.

-
- Cruikshank, J. (1998). *The social life of stories: Narrative and knowledge in the Yukon Territory*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1978). *Myth and meaning*. Routledge.
- Murray, L. J. (1996). *Talking on the page: Editing Aboriginal texts*. University of Toronto Press.
- Ramanujan, A. K. (1989). Is there an Indian way of thinking? *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 23(1).
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Vol. 2, Restructuring the relationship, Sec. 2.2.4.3.2). Canada Communication Group.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.