



A DEEP ECOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE SELECT FOLK LEGENDS OF THE MEITEIS

Chandam Chanu Nganthoihanbi

Research Scholar, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract

*Deep ecology is the newly emerging trend of ecocritical studies. The term 'Deep Ecology' was coined by a Norwegian philosopher in his article, *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary* in 1973. He developed two ultimate norms – Self-realization and Biocentric egalitarianism to get the insight of deep ecology. The study intends to understand Meitei worldview toward ecology through the lens of deep ecology. The Meiteis are the dominant ethnic group of Manipur, a state in the northeastern corner of India. The ancient Meiteis were animists by nature, and thus they believed that spirits dwelt in the natural entities namely trees, water bodies, mountains, and forests. Moreover, the geographical setting of the place, the rich flora and fauna of the state bring the people of the land and their natural surrounding into close proximity. Thus, it led to having a deep sense of respect and concern for the environment that surrounds them, which ultimately led to conserving the environment. The study aims to explore the select Meitei folk legends of Hijan Hirao, Konthoujam Nongkarol, and Tutenglon to study the eco-consciousness of the Meiteis, and the evidence for their love of the environment.*

Keywords

Deep Ecology, Oral Narratives, Meiteis, Ecocriticism, Eco-Consciousness, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Earth's health is deteriorating day by day. Although we may not be aware of it, we are living in a world where, in one place, people yearn for rain and water, and in another, they struggle to battle the consequences of heavy rains and floods. The mountains that once stood tall and proud have now crumbled. The once green and lush forests are now barren. Such woeful sights of the earth encouraged the rise of a large number of environmentalists and later on paved the way for the birth of ecocriticism. Since ancient times, writers and storytellers have often, though unintentionally, drawn a close connection between man and nature. In most ancient literature, we find humans in a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. Ecocritical aspects are even seen in abundance in the epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. However, 'Ecocriticism' as a field of study is relatively new; it prominently bulged after the formation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), an association founded in the US in 1992 that focus the study of literature and the environment. The term 'Ecocriticism' came into existence in 1978 with its coinage by William Rueckert in his essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in the Ecocriticism*. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneer ecocritics, has perceived that ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical world" (xviii). Ecocriticism delves into literature to understand man's relationship with nature, and examines how a writer depicts nature in his work.

'Deep Ecology' is a term coined by the Norwegian philosopher in his 1973 article, *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary*. There, he differentiates



between the Shallow Ecological movement and the Deep Ecological movement. While the Shallow Ecological movement fights against the environmental degradation that has become a challenge to human survival, Deep Ecology is an environmental philosophy that shifts from conventional environmentalist's human-centric approach toward nature and calls for a reformation in the spiritual and ethical human relationships with nature. It exhibits a deeper concern towards nature which lay on having intrinsic relationships between humans and the non-human beings, interdependence of all life forms, respect for all living creatures, and a harmonious coexistence with them. The idea of Deep Ecology is inspired by Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Gandhian philosophy and the philosophy of Spinoza. Deep Ecology movement, as Naess pointed out, are based on rejecting the man in environment image supporting the relational total field image, Biospheric egalitarianism, the principles of diversity and of symbiosis, anti-class posture, ethics of responsibilities, complexity and decentralization (Naess, 95-98).

Arne Naess, along with George Sessions, have proposed eight points as a foundation of Deep Ecology. Naess puts them down in his article, "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects".

- All humans and non-humans on Earth have intrinsic value and inherent worth. The values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
- Varied and diverse life forms help in realising the values.
- Humans, except for satisfying vital needs, have no right to reduce this varied diversity of life forms.
- Human life, cultures and non human life flourish when human population is less.
- Humans have been interfering with the non-human world excessively.
- Thus, policies that are affecting basic economic, technological and ideological structures must be changed.
- The ideological change will be that of appreciating the quality of life rather than focusing on higher standard of living.
- Those who concur the above statements are obliged to implement the necessary changes (15).

Naess has drawn out the ultimate norms of deep ecology from the insight of deep ecological consciousness. The ultimate norms are Self-Realization and Biocentric Egalitarianism.

Self-Realization is central to Naess' Deep Ecology. It happens when we form a deeper concern for nature and develop a close connection with them, considering ourselves a part of it and not separate entity. When this happens, human beings could sense the pain in the destruction of any natural element. Devall and Sessions point out that, "We must see beyond our narrow contemporary cultural assumptions and values, and the conventional wisdom of our time and place, and this is best achieved by meditative deep questioning process. Only in this way can we hope to attain full mature personhood and uniqueness" (Devall, 67). Biocentric egalitarianism professes that every life form on earth should be given equal love, care, concern, and respect. This very norm suggests for human non-interference in other life form except fulfilling their basic needs. The deep ecologists look forward to a peaceful co-existence of humans and all the other beings on the earth. They find errors in the human domination over other non-humans. Bill Devall and George Session observe that the intuition of biocentric equality is that "all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth" (Devall, 67). They further point out that "Biocentric equality is intimately related to the all inclusive self realization in the sense that if we harm the rest of Nature then we are harming ourselves. There is no boundaries and everything is interrelated" (Devall, 68).



Methodology:

The research work employs a qualitative research method to explore the ecological consciousness of the ancient Meiteis by analyzing the concept of Deep Ecology developed by Arne Naess. By applying the Deep Ecology approach developed by Arne Naess, Bill Devall, and George Session, the study intend to explore the worldview of the ancient Meiteis regarding their natural environment that are reflected in the select Meitei folk legends of *Hijan Hirao*, *Tutenglon*, and *Konthoujam Nonkarol*.

Findings and Discussions:

The Meiteis are an ethnic group who dominantly live in Manipur, a beautiful state in the North-eastern part of India, “consisting of an oval-shaped lush green valley and folds of majestic blue mountain ranges surrounding it” (Singh, 3). They have a close and inseparable connection with nature. The state, being located on the Himalayan ranges, is full of exotic mountains, dense forests, wilderness, and breathtaking landscapes. When the world was young, devoid of any developments, the ancient Meiteis depended on the forests for their livelihood. The Meiteis were animists, and they believed that natural objects had life, and thus they worshipped them. They felt that mountains, forests, rivers, water bodies and trees had supernatural powers and hence, they had a great sense of respect for the natural objects that surround them. Peeping through the lens of deep ecology into the rich oral literature of the Meiteis, one could see that the ancient Meiteis have a deep affection and concern for the environment. They felt that nature has life and that, it has emotions just like humans. The perceptions of the Meiteis regarding the society, culture, ethical values, and the environment are engraved in their oral narratives in the form of text and kept alive by passing on from one generation to another through the tradition of *Lai-haraoba* (an important religious festival of the Meiteis), *Wari Leeba* (Storytelling), and folk songs.

In the narratives of *Hijan Hirao* (*The Boat Making*), a big, tall and straight *Uningthou* tree, which is now considered the state tree of Manipur, was cut down for making a racing boat. But, as a ritual, before the tree was being cut, it was paid homage with offerings requesting the tree to allow them to cut it.

Changbi laga tha
Chenggou pha haapna
Yerom kang khinna
Heirang asang yen
Taojing amun khalladuna
Pari ibungo nangi
Tala namal hallamle (Ningthoukhongjam, 56).

On the leaf of *Changbi* banana,
White rice being set
Egg being placed,
Observing the green fruits,
Selecting the ripe ones
O dear son
Thy value has been paid (my trans.).



The above lines manifest that the tree is regarded with high esteem and bestowed with immense love and respect. The Meiteis understand the intrinsic value of nature. Although it was their ardent need to cut the biggest and tallest *Uningthou* tree for making a racing boat, however, its worth and importance are known to them. Thus, the ancient Meiteis returned the value of the tree in exchange for its life. Moreover, the tree is personified, treating it as if it were a human and not a lesser being. And when the fate of the *Uningthou* tree is inevitable, the ancient Meiteis show that they understand the plight of the tree's mother if it has one. The wailing mother's cry reflected the ecological empathy of the people of the time, rooted in the Meitei oral narratives.

At daybreak, hacked at the trunk
You will be found lying prostrate.
No longer will you respond
To your mother's call
Nor a likeness of you
Shall be found, when I survey
The whole hillside.
Who shall now relieve my grief? (Singh, 17)

The above lines from the narratives of *Hijan Hirao* reveal the symbolic representation of environmental loss and the emotional attitude the ancient Meiteis exhibit in the loss of a non-human that shared THE same ecological space with humans.

The legend of *Konthoujam Nongkarol* (The Goddess of Konthoujam's Ascend to the Sky), relates the journey of Huimuleima Naohuinu, who is also known as *Knonthoujam Lairembi* or the Goddess of Konthoujam. She was a mortal being belonging to the clan of Haorok Konthou, who got married to Sorarel, the lord of the Sky, and ascended to the Sky. At the time of marriage between Huimuleima Naohuinu and Sorarel, the sky god, the bride's father cried in agony during his separation from his daughter. Thus, lord Sorarel gifted his father-in-law a dog to mend the emptiness left by his dear daughter. One day, when Naohuinu looked towards her maternal place, she saw a trail of smoke rising from her village. Despite Sorarel's explanation that the smoke was from the pyre of her father's dog, her worries about any mishappenings that may have occurred at her father's home led her to descend from the sky with the promise that she would not touch any food and drink offered by the humans. The dog remained a faithful companion to her father, and thus, when the dog died, he was given a proper funeral similar to that given to humans. The legends of *Konthoujam Nongkarol* demonstrate the immense amount of love and respect given to the dog by the people of Konthoujam as it was given a proper funeral with proper funeral rites involving the death of a human. It is felt that dogs are treated with utmost importance by them.

The philosophy of Taoism, from which the inspiration of Deep Ecology stems out teaches about the levelling of all life on the earth into one; "a twig and a pillar, or an ugly person and a great beauty, and all the strange and monstrous transformations. These are all levelled together by Tao" (Yutang, 58). Such essence of the deep ecology that levels all things can be seen in *Tutengton*, where one would find humans, birds and animals on the same hierarchy. *Tutengton* is a legend that narrates the story of two Meitei princes, Yoimongba and Taothingmang, who decided to clean the channels of Iril and Imphal rivers. They felt the necessity to clean away the silts on the river-beds and weeds grown on its banks that were hampering the flow of the rivers. They did not like the fact that the rivers lay neglected and thus should be kept clean and looked after. It shows their deep concern for the environment and a sense of consciousness to conserve water bodies.



And, as the two brothers cleaned the rivers, they worked together with various birds and animals that came forward to help them.

Lairen Ngangoi Yoimongbana thumnao, ennao apakmabu yahoukhiyel mongba machal mamom thingrabina khunlong nathang lonna wangle yusinn tamjakhiyel Thourei wakharekna thoujan langgaijakhiyel polbi songairabana makok singdu luroi thetna Sinai maiga changjakhiyel lawai haoyam moi chekla momai kangna matha moikai top mangak fingang kisinna charei phiba lonbaijakhiyel polbi urok namburana charei fidung khaonna chamlouchamlou lakhangkhiye l Polbi urok namburana charei fidung khaonna chamloulakhang singjanjakhiye (Ningthoujam, 3).

Lairen Ngangoi Yoimongba went along with various hens and chicks. The small *mongba* bird's sister *Thongrabi* tied a container of wine on her waist and keeps drinking. The bird named *wakhrek* spread the message to others to proceed together. *Songaraba* (Hoope) decorated his head and managed the whole thing. All the birds that were afar tie red cloth on their heads, white cloth on their breast, and tried to provide the cloths to those who had none. The Crane went to cut bamboo leaves to put foods (my trans.).

The legend renders a lucid picture of the living together of the rich and varied life forms, without exhibiting a sense of superior or inferior than one another. The coming together of all beings regardless of humans and non-humans, to clean the river channels bring forth the functioning of biocentric egalitarianism and indicates that nature belongs not just to humans but to all beings on the earth. The very insight of the deep ecology that draws us "to respect all human and non-human individuals in their own right as parts of the whole without feeling the need to set up hierarchies of species with humans at the top" (Devall, 68) not only reflects here profoundly, but also professed eco-consciousness as the brothers cleaned away the river channels understanding the need to clean the environment. In the legend, the cleaning of the two major rivers of Manipur is done not from the anthropocentric perception to obtain clean water for their use, but solely for the sake of the maintenance of the rivers, as they bear the memory of their mother, Nongmoinu Ahongbi, who made the two rivers,

Ishanou Yoiheiton Taothingmang-o, nahal nong ipal palem ima Nongmoinu Ahongbina tusarambabu leiye. Sanou ichil inaoti mongba amarak tutenghouse (Nongmaithem, 2).

O brother Yoiheiton Taothingmang, there lay the rivers created by our mother Nongmoinu Ahongbi. Let us clean them together once (my trans.).

Moreover, if the birds and animals in the legend, which were helping the two brothers, were given human names and concealed their identities, the thin line separating humans and non-humans would be lost. It suggests the worldview of the ancient Meiteis that considers non-humans as their fellow beings and not inferior to them in looks, form or in capabilities. The rejoicing of the non-humans as they took part in the cleaning process, as they drink and sing their heart out, and adorning similar and colourful clothes symbolises the harmonious coexistence amongst them.

Conclusion:



The oral narratives of the Meiteis are the embodiment of not only the cultural significance and ethical values of the community but also how they conceive the environment they dwell in and the non-humans they thrive together with. Ecoconsciousness of the Meiteis, which was always unconsciously present among the ancient Meiteis, can be felt in their oral narratives. They have a deep affection for their natural environment. The ancient Meiteis put forth the idea that man and other beings showcase a beautiful sight to behold as they coexist. They have a deep affection for the natural environment around them. For them, every object of nature they come across every day- the birds, the animals, the rivers and the trees is important and form a close connection with them. The love for nature and their environment is found to be immense as we go through the select folk legends of the Meiteis.

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