

Eco-Consciousness in Northeast India: Insights from Traditional Wisdoms of Indigenous Communities

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Abstract: Northeast India is well known for its unique landscapes and ecosystems, as well as its ethnic and cultural diversity. People in the Northeast India coexist peacefully with the natural world and are committed to protecting it. Their symbiotic bond with nature is demonstrated in their ancient worship practices, folktales, diverse customs, festivals, traditional values and beliefs, traditional administration, natural resource management, etc. This paper aims to investigate the presence of eco-consciousness amongst the indigenous communities of Northeast India by revisiting its traditional knowledge and wisdoms. For this study, four parameters of eco-consciousness have been identified upon which the evaluation will be done. The study is a content analysis that has been carried out based on secondary data collected from various books and journal publications. The indigenous traditional communities of Northeast India regard their natural environment as a life-sustaining resource. The different communities construct and enforce distinct indigenous norms and regulations in the form of social taboos, religious feelings, or customary laws, which ultimately leads to sustainable development. Hence, there is a need to explore, and appropriately document and analyse the profound eco-consciousness that is reflected in the traditional wisdom of this region's indigenous populations.

Keywords: Eco-consciousness, Environment protection, Indigenous communities, Traditional wisdom, Traditional knowledge

I. INTRODUCTION

The issues we encounter now markedly differ from those of antiquity, mostly due to contemporary modes of thought and existence. The relationship between humans and the environment has been a subject of considerable discourse over the years. The distinctions between nature and humans have frequently been misinterpreted as opposing forces (Srivastava, 1998). Griffith Taylor, an Australian geographer, introduced a concept known as 'Neo-determinism', which highlights the environment's influence on human behavior. This concept implies

that although people have the freedom to make choices, they need to pay attention to environmental cues to promote sustainable development. Enhancing the quality of life for the population cannot happen without a balanced relationship between human existence and the environment. Contemporary researchers emphasise the importance of examining an individual's environmental awareness as a fundamental factor in influencing the relationship between humans and their natural environment (Efimova, et al., 2018).

Eco-consciousness is marked by a strong awareness of nature's significance in human existence (Efimova, et al., 2018). Within the realm of psychological science, eco-consciousness is described as a particular factor associated with an individual's likelihood to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours (Kim & Lee, 2023). According to Panov (2013), eco-consciousness represents various ways in which humanity interacts with nature, impacting behaviour towards the environment. The relationship between humans and nature has been a subject of research since the late 1960s, emphasizing the importance of the physical context in human behaviour (Jena & Behera, 2017). A person's behaviour reflects their cultural values. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds hold different perspectives on life. Culture within a system denotes ideal factors that can significantly shape human actions and events. People's thought processes and perceptions are profoundly influenced by their cultural backgrounds. In each society, individual behaviour appears to be heavily impacted by prevailing cultural values (Cetiner & Yenilmez, 2021).

The Indian cultural views the entire universe as a significant expression of a fundamental reality, infused with a dynamic connection that energizes all existing entities within it (Srivastava, 1998). Therefore, the 'Hymn to the Earth' found in the Atharva Veda refers to 'earth' as 'mother,' and

'humans' as her 'children' (Atharva Veda, XII.1.2, as cited in Bruce, 2011). Nature has always been vibrant, generous, and remarkably resilient (Danino, 2017). Considering this, all facets of Indian culture, including its festivals, are closely tied to nature and the environment, along with scientific environmental management (Bruce, 2011). Nature and culture are deeply interconnected. Culture embodies our history, traditions, and beliefs (Danino, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to develop a more profound conceptual and theoretical understanding of the relationship between the natural environment and various cultural communities, particularly regarding their environmental awareness and conservation strategies. Various elements of indigenous communities' traditional knowledge support effective management of forestry and agro forestry regions. This encompasses their values, beliefs, customs, productive methods, and practical experiences, all of which are closely linked to their cultural identities (FAO and FILAC, 2021). Traditional knowledge represents the wisdom acquired by communities over generations based on their hands-on knowledge for resource utilization and management that possesses scientific validity that has been passed down through generations as traditional wisdom. Hence, traditional wisdom can be described as the accumulation of knowledge gained from living in a specific region, concerning human relationships with their natural surroundings (Supyan, Susanto, Samadan, & Sulistiono, 2021). In this context, Northeast India can be viewed as a reservoir of traditional knowledge systems that the local people have gathered about their environments, conveyed as wisdom through oral traditions passed down from their ancestors (Hazarika, 2015). Northeast India is renowned for its distinct landscapes characterized by a blend of low mountains, expansive valleys, and rolling hills, featuring large rivers, dense forests, and ecosystems and is inhabited by numerous cultural and religious communities that uphold environmental principles (Nag, 2017). People in Northeast India have a strong regard for humanity, nature, wildlife, and the rituals passed down from their ancient cultures and forefathers (Shangpliang, 2020). Their harmonious relationship with nature is evident in their ancient worship practices and folklore, making it a suitable region for understanding the man-environment relationship in a comprehensive manner (Hazarika, 2015).

II. OBJECTIVES

- To examine the connection between nature and the indigenous communities of Northeast India.
- To analyze the influence of traditional wisdom from indigenous communities on environmental protection and conservation efforts in Northeast India.
- To investigate the traditional ecological practices embraced by the indigenous peoples of Northeast India.
- To evaluate the level of eco-consciousness among the indigenous communities in Northeast India.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative in its approach. It is based on secondary data gathered from various relevant books and journal articles. A content analysis has been conducted to explore how traditional wisdom impacts the protection and conservation of nature among the indigenous communities of Northeast India. Additionally, after a comprehensive literature review on the definitions and concepts of eco-consciousness, four parameters were identified: environmental knowledge, environmental values, environmental attitudes regarding sustainability, and involvement in environmental conservation practices, to evaluate the level of eco-consciousness among the indigenous communities residing in the Northeast region of India.

IV. MAN AND NATURE IN NORTHEAST INDIA

In Northeast India, many tribal communities practice nature worship, engaging in rituals that honor rivers, mountains, trees, and animals, which they view as manifestations of divine spirits. Their close relationship with local ecosystems and reliance on nature significantly influence their cultural identity. These groups essentially rely on their environment for both living and sustenance (Hazarika, 2015). Over time, they integrated nature as a critical aspect of their existence. Traditionally, the indigenous communities of this region adhered to forms of animistic beliefs (Mahato & Saha, 2022). Animism is a belief system that blurs the line between humans and all living beings on earth, including animals, birds, mountains, rivers, lakes,

and spirits. Several researches indicate that many tribes in Northeast India continue to observe animistic practices (Subba, 2022). Consequently, the enduring connection of the indigenous communities with the diverse flora and fauna of their natural environment has allowed them to gain insights into the medicinal uses of plants. This accumulated knowledge eventually evolved into a belief system that was conveyed through folktales from one generation to the next. For generations, tribal communities have utilized various plant resources to treat numerous ailments (Hazarika, 2015). In a study, Jamir and Lal (2005) documented the medicinal applications of animals and animal parts, along with their local and scientific names, in traditional healing among the Naga tribes, concluding that the tribes residing in the remote hills of Nagaland still employ fauna-based traditional healing practices, which have been remarkably effective for both mild and severe conditions.

Furthermore, with a multitude of tribes inhabiting different states in the region, the festivals of Northeast India reflects a profound bond between humans and nature. Most festivals in the region are related to agriculture and celebrated to express gratitude and hopes for a fruitful harvest seasons. For example, the 'Dree festival' is a significant agricultural celebration for the Apatani Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, marking the end of crop planting and involving prayers to deities for crop protection and abundant yields. In Assam, the 'Bihu festival' is celebrated throughout the year on three distinct occasions, each with unique significance: Bohag Bihu signifies the start of the sowing season; Magh Bihu is celebrated when the harvest season is ended, and Kati Bihu marks the completion of sowing while seeking a good yield. Likewise, festivals such as Lui-ngai-ni in Manipur, Moatsu Mong in Nagaland, Losoong in Sikkim, Chapchar Kut in Mizoram, and Wangala festival in Meghalaya celebrate agricultural activities related to the planting and harvesting of crops and plants. The Nongkrem Dance Festival in Meghalaya is another festival celebrated to express gratitude to the goddess Ka Blei Synshar for a successful harvest and prosperity (Singh N. , 2024). Among the Meitei people of Manipur, 'Umang Haraoba' is a significant festival that honors the 'Umang Lais,' that is believed to be the deities of the forest (Devi, 2019).

V. FOLKTALES AND TRADITIONAL WISDOM OF NORTHEAST INDIA

The ancestral knowledge of the indigenous communities in Northeast India has been deeply embedded in community life for ages, shared across generations through storytelling that forges a spiritual and cultural connection (Singh R. , 2022). Storytelling has been a cherished art form throughout history of Northeast India. Sustained by the oral traditions of ancient societies, narratives were conveyed by elders, shaping our current understanding of history. Many of our fundamental and archetypal values continue to be conveyed through the collection of myths and stories known as folktales (Dey, 2015).

Northeast India showcases a diverse blend of cultures and beliefs, demonstrating profound wisdom in their understanding of the environment and its importance for a community's survival and well-being (Shankar, Revitalizing traditional knowledge in North East India by combining conservation,, 2016). Due to its close relationship with nature, the folktales from Northeast India are closely intertwined with the natural world (Dey, 2015). Each folktale from different states in Northeast India carries a purpose and significance, often aiming to impart moral lessons, mirror cultural values, elucidate natural occurrences, or comment on societal issues. Folktales have consistently played a vital role in maintaining the region's ecosystem. Various notable folktales from the tribal communities of Northeast India have led to the development of particular ecological values, beliefs, and conservation practices.

Folktales such as the 'tale of the river dolphin and crocodile' from the Mising tribe in Assam, recounts the story of a lovely girl named Tamang, whose parents arranged her marriage as she matured. As her wedding day approached, she felt immense anxiety because she was in love with someone else and didn't want to betray either him or her family. Ultimately, she ended her life by jumping into the Subansiri River. However, instead of perishing, she transformed into a dolphin upon sinking beneath the water's surface. When her lover heard about her jumping into the river, he rushed to the riverbank and called her name. Receiving no reply, he leapt into the water as well. In due course, he also underwent a transformation and became a crocodile.

This belief is the reason why the Mishng people of Assam refrain from killing dolphins or crocodiles, they rather practice conservation of the endangered river dolphins in the Brahmaputra River. Another folktale regarding the origin of the King Chilly in Nagaland tells of a man named Panmei who inadvertently consumed a ripe Naga King Chilly while on a hunt, suffering intense burning. In his distress, a bird named Roingau dropped a cluster of paddy onto him. Consuming the raw paddy miraculously alleviated his pain. Panmei perceived this as a divine act. He claimed the chilly plant and paddy, which marked the commencement of their cultivation. To express gratitude towards the bird for its assistance, the Panmei clan established a tradition that prohibits the killing or consumption of Roingau birds. This highlights the deep respect for nature and the significance of gratitude within Panmei culture (Dey, 2015). Among the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, there is a concept of Sacred Forest which is believed to be home to a deity who safeguards the community during times of difficulty. Consequently, rituals and ceremonies are conducted regularly to appease this deity. Similarly, in Garo culture there is this concept of “Songsarek”. These restricted areas, often regarded as the habitat of malevolent spirits, remain untouched by human intrusion due to the fear of these supernatural beings. Likewise, certain sections of rivers and lakes in Meghalaya are believed to be the lair of a mystical entity that attacks individuals who attempt to fish there. Consequently, fishing is not allowed in these water bodies (Shruti & Wanchoo, 2024). Even for the Meitei community in Manipur, Loktak Lake, situated in the Moirang district, holds immense social and cultural importance. The locals regard the lake as their Ema meaning mother, and numerous mythological tales are tied to it. In one well-known folktale about the romance between Kamba and Thombi, Loktak is described as the place where their love flourished (Kumar, 2024). From these folktales, it can be observed that the profound understanding and reverence for nature prevalent among the communities of Northeast India is intricately woven into their rich folklore and folk songs (Bhattacharyya, 2021). Many tribes adhere to specific taboos that protect wildlife resources, as documented in their myths and folklore. These cultural beliefs and practices illustrate a deep-rooted respect for the natural environment. In this manner, traditional knowledge aids in forest conservation

and the protection of biodiversity across the region (Hazarika, 2015).

VI. TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

Northeast India is a region rich in natural resources that has a long history of indigenous communities coexisting with nature. Throughout the generations, these communities have accumulated valuable knowledge about their environment, which is referred to as *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* (TEK). According to Harisha, Padmavathy, & Nagaraja (2015), TEK is an intellectual process within environmental contexts. Other researchers also describe TEK as a people-centered approach to practices and innovations that are uniquely tied to many indigenous groups through customary laws; it represents a cultural legacy that is preserved and passed down through generations. TEK arises from knowledge gained over centuries and relates to understanding the composition and dynamics of surrounding natural ecosystems and their sustainable use for the benefit of humans. The indigenous communities in Northeast India employ various traditional conservation methods such as the traditional water conservation techniques that have been practiced in the region for millennia. Abundant bamboos and stones are found in Northeast India, that are skilfully used to build different structures for storing water, irrigating crops, laying pipes, preventing soil erosion, among other purposes. Some of these methods remain in use today, such as ‘Dongs’ in Assam, the ‘Bamboo drip irrigation’ system of Meghalaya, the ‘Wet rice cum fish cultivation’ system of Ziro Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, the ‘Zabo’ system in Kikuma village of Phek district in Nagaland, and the ‘Roof top rainwater harvesting’ system utilized in Mizoram and Meghalaya (Sarma & Goswami, 2015). These harvesting methods are both eco-friendly and effective. From geographical perspective, the region falls within the subtropical warm summer monsoon climate zone, therefore, it has been observed that local water harvesting systems not only enhance crop production but also mitigate soil erosion and improve soil fertility; thus, these practices are beneficial for both the environment and agricultural productivity (Talukdar, 2018).

The Apatani tribe, residing in the Ziro Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, exemplifies a commendable model of community-oriented natural resource management. This advanced agricultural society in Arunachal Pradesh possesses traditional knowledge of land stewardship and is known for implementing sedentary wet-rice farming alongside fish farming and rural forestry in the limited flat valley terrain. This time-honored method has not only preserved sustainable levels of productivity but has also proven to be highly energy-efficient (Bhattacharyya, 2021). Similarly, the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya have created numerous sustainable methods through collective and strategic collaboration. One of these methods is the 'living root bridge,' where the aerial roots of *Ficus elastica* are cultivated to form bridges, where the aerial roots of *Ficus elastica* are nurtured and directed across gorges and rivers. This technique utilizes locally sourced plant materials, regional tools, and community knowledge illustrating the deep connection between the Khasi tribes and the forest, providing solutions for the future. These bridges underscore the fundamental human value of living with awareness and respect for all forms of life, potentially inspiring a new equilibrium (Shankar, Living Root Bridges: State of knowledge, fundamental research and future application, 2015). Additionally, in accordance with their spiritual beliefs, the indigenous communities of Meghalaya engage themselves in the preservation of small areas of untouched forest. This practice exemplifies community awareness and participation in conserving natural resources through the local cultural tradition of establishing and honoring a sacred grove. A sacred grove is formed when a forested area near a village is designated as sacred, necessitating its protection for religious and cultural reasons. The sacred grove, along with individual trees or animals, may be earmarked for conservation through this traditional approach (Khan, Khumbongmayum, & Tripathi, 2008). The preservation of sacred lands, groves, and lakes is often closely tied to watershed conservation efforts. TEK is also associated with predicting weather and natural disasters. Communities in Northeast India have been able to forecast seasonal and extreme weather phenomena, such as floods, tropical cyclones, and droughts, by closely observing their surrounding environment. Indigenous communities made weather predictions using various indicators that reflect the behavior of insects, birds, and mammals, alongside characteristics of plants, as

well as patterns related to clouds, stars, moon, sun, wind and much more (Tynsong, Dkhar, & Tiwari, Review: Traditional ecological knowledge of tribal communities of North East India, 2020). The Bodo community possess extensive knowledge regarding the sounds made by different birds, which indicates future events. For instance, the chirping of stork birds signals impending rain. In Bodo culture, it is believed that when fowls climb onto the roof of a house, it indicates an approaching flood (Wary & Mushahary, 2020). According to Singh H. B. (2011), a total of ten plant species serve as indicators for weather forecasting among the Meitei community in Manipur. This knowledge continues to be significant among the local population, particularly in rural areas. The *Agave Americana*, known locally as Kewa, is utilized to predict the direction of winds and storms for the year. In Mizoram, the movement of ants as they relocate their food and eggs to higher ground or safer places is considered a sign that rain is approaching, especially when they gather large amounts of food (Tynsong, Dkhar, & Tiwari, Review: Traditional ecological knowledge of tribal communities of North East India, 2020). In Tripura, when *Cassia Fistula* tree bears golden yellow flowers in abundance for 45 days, it signifies the arrival of the monsoon season (Acharya, 2011). In Meghalaya, local communities often observe the phenology of certain plants to forecast impending rain or shifts in weather patterns, a practice that has proven effective in maximizing the productivity of rice and other crops (Samati & Begum, 2006).

A comprehensive array of regulations governs biodiversity and conservation of natural resources in India. Significant documentary and scientific evidence suggests that biodiversity concentrations are greater in rural and tribal regions of India compared to urban areas (Pant, 2003). In Northeast India, customary law regulates various aspects of community life, and such laws are acknowledged as essential due to the perception that customary authorities are secondary only to the state. For effective enforcement of any law or policy in the Northeast region, it is crucial to consult indigenous customary authorities and local people. Neglecting this could render a law ineffective and potentially lead to confusion within the community (Ao, 2020). The management of natural resources in this area largely lies in the hands of local communities, with practices that are not recent inventions. These time-

honored practices have been honed over generations and passed down through history. Indigenous communities have developed their own social norms, rules, and regulations regarding resource utilization based on the needs and availability of resources (Pant, 2003). The sacred groves in Meghalaya, linked to specific taboos and beliefs, have established traditional laws prohibiting not just tree felling, but also the trimming of branches, twigs, and leaves, as well as the collection of dried wood (Kharkongor & Tiwari, 2015). Anything found in the forest is meant to stay there. Even taking a fallen leaf or a dry twig is forbidden. Breaking these regulations is thought to anger the deity overseeing the area, who may enact punishment on the transgressor (Shruti & Wanchoo, 2024). The native people of this area are deeply connected to and concerned about their environment, resulting in effective waste management practices as a result of which the small village of Mawlynnong in Meghalaya was recognized as the cleanest village in Asia by Discover India Magazine. This accolade was achieved due to their continuous efforts in promoting cleanliness and environmental protection (Konwar, n.d.).

VII. ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The traditional use of natural resources by indigenous communities is rooted in ecological awareness and the cultural landscapes they cherish. The effectiveness of sustainable social development is largely influenced by attitudes associated with ecological awareness. Ecological consciousness merges personal values, worldviews, and goals of individuals, shaping their behaviors in relation to the natural and cultural environment. Here, the collective aspect of environmentally-aware individuals contributes to the development of ecological culture. The tangible and spatial representation of human existence alongside ecological awareness is depicted in the cultural landscape (Ragulina, 2023). Research indicates that Northeast India has, until recently, preserved its rich biological diversity, largely due to the respect and active involvement of local communities in fostering a balanced relationship with the environment. The traditional land practices of indigenous groups and their eco-consciousness are vital to their cultural identity and lifestyle. They

possess extensive knowledge of nature, its resources, and ecosystems, which is transmitted through generations. Indigenous communities have cultivated a distinct form of eco-consciousness based on their reverence for nature and recognition of the interdependence among all life forms.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The traditional knowledge prevalent in Northeast India serves as a valuable repository of wisdom that can aid in environmental protection and sustainability. The indigenous communities of this region embody a profound sense of eco-consciousness that merits thorough documentation, analysis, and acknowledgment by the global community. Emphasizing the distinctiveness of such traditions and elevating them as a representation of collective environmental awareness can inform and enhance current eco-conservation initiatives.

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