

**Questing after a New Eco-Canon: Exploring Climate Consciousness in
Literatures from North East India**

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to posit the conceptual possibility of an ‘eco-canon’ comprising writings from diverse genres of Indian literatures united by the essential presence of a ‘climate consciousness’ and characterised by a non-binary, non-confrontational philosophy of interaction between the human and non-human entities of nature. The study takes, for its analysis, various instances of literary creations belonging to the oral–performative and textual traditions of North East India, and argues how this very category of writings placed at the periphery of a centralised Indian literary culture could provide certain fresh and exciting avenues in the quest towards the formulation of a new canon of eco-literature, cutting across genre-based and linguistic boundaries.

Keywords: *climate and ecology, literature, literary history, multimediality, North East India*

Introduction

North East India is home to diverse varieties of literary and cultural traditions differentiated from one another by tangible heritage markers and yet tied together by an underlying emotional–intellectual affinity towards certain shared concerns of social and political instabilities as well as ecological and climatic transformations, the latter triggered by both natural and human-induced factors. In the recent years, the Anglophone fiction emerging from the region has garnered critical attention for its sustained engagement with the issues of identity politics, insurgency, violence, and, more importantly, for our purpose here, with the manifest patterns of ecological transformations influencing the uneven topography of the region (Sharma 2020; Baruah 2022; Bhattacharyya 2022). A few recent critical works have

gone beyond the Anglophone literatures and have looked at the oral–performative and cultural forms of North East India thereby providing wider scope for multidisciplinary research on the continuities and ruptures witnessed within the ethnic life-worlds of the region vis-à-vis the successive factors/forces of Christianity (and colonialism), postcolonial state interventions, and globalisation (Sarkar and Modwel 2021; Baral 2023; Nath, Buck, and Snook 2023). There is also an effort in these works to transcend the onto-teleological frames of reference inherited from the colonial forms of knowledge which have inscribed the region as a frontier and subjected it to certain binaries like mainland/periphery, classical/folk, cosmopolitan/vernacular, and dominant/emergent with respect to its position as a region within the larger scheme of the nation (Sarma 2024a [forthcoming]). The impact of these binary categorisations is perceptible in the chronological framework of literary history where works adhering to the defining *zeitgeist* or the ‘spirit of the time’ find representation as against the marginalisation or exclusion of other works not conforming to the ideological sensibilities of the former. Oftentimes, the oral and performative genres of expression, for their alleged inability to prove their historicity, are placed either as the origins or at the fringes of the literary canon. In this regard, Pollock particularly states that, ‘writing makes possible the production of a history of a sort the oral is incapable of producing’ (Pollock 2006: 4); therefore, it was imperative for the colonial or the nationalist historians to make a judicious selection from the available catalogue or repository of ‘written texts’ or ‘manuscripts’ that would significantly typify the social–cultural dynamics of the language in question. It is, therefore, hoped that a renewed emphasis on the significance of climate consciousness as a subject of multi-generic and multi-medial engagement, as this study endeavours to undertake, will enable a fruitful re-evaluation of the processual dynamics that have gone into the making of the traditional literary canon, with particular reference to selected texts and traditions ranging from the premodern period to the present time.

Nature–Culture Interface in the Literary Traditions of North East India

Among the literary cultures of North East India, Assamese and Manipuri exhibit the presence of demonstrable written traditions which straddle the posited binaries of Margi and Desi, respectively the Great Traditions and Little Traditions of literature. As noted by Kailash C. Baral, '[t]hough Assamese and Manipuri literatures have gone through some processes of sanskritization (though not fully immersed into it), they also have a body of literature that has been outside this tradition' (Baral 2013: 4). Before the arrival of English on the back of colonialism with its own traditions of genres and other expressive forms, the two aforementioned languages and, to a certain extent, Bengali, constituted what Pollock called the 'cosmopolitan vernaculars'—languages which enable the 'localization of the globalizing literary–cultural practices and representations of Sanskrit' (Pollock 1998: 6–7). Within these linguistic traditions, there were also sectarian traditions adhering to various schools of Bhakti devotionalism with documented histories of oral, written, and performative disseminations. Within Assamese literary history, the twin presence of the Sankari and the Sakta–Shaiva literary traditions, and their dynamic interactions over the centuries epitomise two parallel, yet also intersecting, ways of conceptualising the nature of precolonial literary production in the language. While discussions in general have often centred on the differing visions of Godhead as conceptualised within these sectarian traditions, and the relationship between the deity and the devotee, not much attention has been paid towards exploring the engagement with nature and the immediate ecological habitat as enunciated within these traditions. Under the impact of colonial modernity, most of these formulations were either rejected or reformulated in the light of insights derived from the Western philosophical tradition thereby emphasising on the dualities of mind and matter, rationality and experientiality, and, most notably, nature and culture. These modes of perceptions entail what has been stated as binary or confrontational systems of knowledge acquired through a dialectical mode of engagement. As against this

epistemology of dualism, T.S. Satyanath posits a more localised and an entrenched yet dynamic framework of ‘pluralistic epistemology,’ which ‘refers to a model or methodology of understanding a society and its representation systems within a non-confrontational and coexisting mode as compared to a confrontational mode of existence’ (Satyanath 2021: 69). Such an approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the entwined histories of human and non-human entities as part of an integrated geo-cultural space at a point of time. While various critical engagements of recent times with the Anthropocene across disciplines have continually drawn attention towards its benign and malign influences on nature, and have also mapped the epistemic shifts as witnessed within the said epoch (Normand 2014; Dryzek and Pickering 2018; Mathews 2020; Sharp 2020), it seems equally worthwhile to understand how vernacular cultures of North East India over the centuries have conceptualised and visualised, in their respective ways, their existential continuities with the non-human world and how the same has found varied manifestations in the idea of *pralaya* or catastrophe so often articulated through multi-medial exercises within the literary cultures of the region.

Symbiotic Cohabitation: Examples from Select Works in Traditions

As characteristic of all other literatures of the world, the earliest specimens of literatures from North East India too were construed to be oral. In a society gradually consolidating its belief system around and involving the natural forces, most of such expressions have taken the form of ballads and folktales of nature-myths. While it is difficult to arrive at a precise dating with regards to the provenance of such early instances of literary creations, we have access to them through the succeeding cultures of memory that have sustained them. While one can never claim to have access to the original versions, nevertheless these songs and stories have been enriched by being continuously re-casted and rejuvenated in accordance with the developing belief-systems of the social communities inhabiting the region. The following nature poem in Assamese may be cited as an instance in this regard:

O phul, O phul, nuphula kio?

Garuwe je ag khay, moinu phulim kio?

O garu, O garu, ag khao kio?

Garakhaia je mok narakhe, moinu nakham kio?

O garakhia, O garakhia, garu narakha kio?

Randhaniye je bhat nidiye, moinu rakhim kio?

O randhani, O randhani, bhat nidiyo kio?

Kharikotiyai je khari nidiye, moinu randhim kio?

O kharikotia, O kharikotia, khari nidiyo kio?

Meghe je baraxun diye, moinu dim kio?

O megh, O megh, boroxun diyo kio?

Bhekuliye je tortorai, moinu nidim kio?

O bhekuli, O bhekuli, tortorao kio?

Bopa-kokar vrittito, moinu erim kio?

(Bezbaroa 2009)

(O bud, O bud, you do not blossom; why?

The cow eats my leaves, blossom why should I?

O cow, O cow, you eat leaves; why?

The cowherd does not keep me; why should not I?

O cowherd, O cowherd, you keep not the cow; why?

The cook (a woman) does not give me food, why should I?

O cook, O cook, you do not give food; why?

The woodcutter does not provide me wood, why should I?

O woodcutter, O woodcutter, you do not provide wood; why?

The clouds keep on raining down, how could I?

O clouds, O clouds, you keep on raining down; why?

The frog keeps on croaking, why should not I?

O frog, O frog, you do not stop croaking; why?

That is the practice of my ancestors, why should not I? [Translation Mine])

It will be interesting to understand the semiotic universe within which the poem is located. Firstly, the poem begins and ends with nature or elements from the natural forces. Secondly, the expanse of the poem circumscribes an ecological system where nature and culture (represented by human beings and their manifold gender-based vocations) interact in relations of mutual dependence and even disruption. Interestingly, the poem ends in a point of no return; in other words, the very ‘practice of the ancestors’ *vis-a-vis* the croaking of the frog is indirectly held responsible for the non-flowering (or destruction) of the buds. The agency of a relatively insignificant being like the frog in uttering the final word to settle the dispute—despite suggestions of anthropomorphism—nevertheless attests to the prevalent sensibility towards eco-equity within the premodern cultural universe of the region. Furthermore, the reference to persistent rains as a major determinant of the ecosystem as described is characteristic of the region’s continual dependence on the annual monsoon rains and the resultant flooding of the plains on both sides of the Brahmaputra. Speaking on the implications of human interventions into nature like hydel projects and the like, Arupjyoti Saikia, in his book on the Brahmaputra, predicts an increasing regularity of heavy floods in the areas nourished by the Himalayan rivers, subsequently leading to heavier rainfall and non-monsoon floods, something that will drastically jeopardise the agrarian cycle of the plains (Saikia 2019, 507–508). He also draws attention to the fact that the consequent depletion of the forest cover due to inundation and

submergence as well as the degradation of the natural habitat under the impact of the hydel projects will eventually cause the extinction of 22 angiosperms (flower-bearing plants) and vertebrates from the eastern Himalayan region (Saikia 2019, 508). The woe and displacement caused by the river Brahmaputra has become an important field of creative engagement in modern Assamese literature as well and has even led to the formation of a promising genre of river-fiction in the language (Sarma 2024b [forthcoming]). The devastating impact of the annual floods upon the life-worlds of the riverine communities of the state of Assam has been the subject of a number of Assamese novels, most notably, *Rupabarir Palash* (The Silvery Silt, 1980) by Syed Abdul Malik and *Kahibunor Malita* (Ballad of the Kans Grass, 2017) by Rudrani Sarma. Both these novels have also touched upon the much-debated issues of climate-change-induced migration and the identity-related struggles of the East Bengal-origin Muslims who had settled down, during the colonial times, in the *char-chapori* (riverine) areas of Assam.

Just like the poem quoted above, a similar engagement with the ecological balance and also a concern regarding the depleting forest cover is perceptible in a Karbi folktale called ‘Winter and Summer,’ centring on an old woman abandoned in the forest by her grandchildren. While she is cursing her misfortune and weeping out of thirst and starvation, she is being watched over by two celestial brothers named after the two seasons. They approach her out of compassion and ask her about differentiating between living during the summers and the winters? She replies very meaningfully that, ‘I think both the seasons are equally fine to live in. ... If one knows how to lead a healthy life, these days can’t be so bad. God has created the trees not without any cause. We are cutting them due to our ignorance. ... The animals and birds survive on the fruits of the trees’ (Sarma 2023: 50–51). While attributing a divine provenance to the elements of nature, the narrative also focuses on human agency—much to the detriment of the non-human entities—in causing an imbalance in the seasonal dispositions

and thereby increasing the extremity of their relative impact on the living beings in general. Whereas a long-standing written textual tradition characterised the literary culture of Assamese, further complemented by an equally strong tradition of hagiography (the *guru charita* tradition) and chronicles (the *buranjis*), the precolonial literary cultures outside Assamese were primarily based on a dynamic oral–performative dimension with a poetics of their own. And folktales resonating with diverse social–cultural implications have constituted one of the major components constituting the literary history of languages like Karbi. There are folktales entitled ‘How Paddy Came to be Introduced’ and ‘How Jhum Cultivation Originated,’ which also serve as repositories of narrativized indigenous knowledge again signifying the symbiotic cohabitation of human beings with nature. This non-confrontational impulse remains the mainstay of most of these narratives belonging to the quotidian lifeworlds of the indigenous communities the world over, including of course North East India.

Considering the fact that North East India is home to a large number of communities living in close proximity to nature while simultaneously adopting the transformative dynamics of a technology-driven lifestyle, it is necessary to preserve and closely analyse their respective patterns of development without resorting to homogenisation. Despite the supposed dearth of written documentation regarding their religious and social–cultural belief-systems and practices, the available testimony in the form of folk-literatures provide ample testimonies of their sustenance and continuing readjustment with their immediate eco-systems. During the first half of the 20th century, Banikanta Kakati (1894–1952) was particularly instrumental in bringing together the diverse religious–anthropological materials belonging to the Aryan and non-Aryan belief systems prevalent across undivided Assam in order to explore newer possibilities of studying the cultural history of the region. Even though he is not usually identified as a literary historian, his analytical writings on various aspects of the oral and written

literary expressions *vis-a-vis* the contexts of their production in precolonial and colonial Assam have the potential of contributing towards the rethinking of the paradigms of literary history in Assamese and other North East Indian languages. He was undoubtedly the first scholar-academician to introduce comparative and interdisciplinary methodologies of analysis into the domain of critical–academic studies pertaining to Assam and its adjoining areas. More recently, in an essay on the efficacy on folktales in enabling the rediscovery of the age-old cultural lineage shared by North East India and South East Asia, Saji Varghese maps the significance of folktales as providing a network of linkages between the ethnic communities inhabiting the respective eco-cultural zones of the region, and explores how the series of migrations across these regions across several centuries have established certain long-entrenched continuities and overlaps finding expression in oral literatures. Drawing upon folktales from the Zeliangrong Naga and the Ao Naga communities from Northeast India on the one hand and the same from Cambodia, Vietnam, Japan, Myanmar, Thailand, and Khmer on the other hand, the author emphasises on the alternative universe created by those folk narratives and the unique role played by language in expanding the experiential limits of the ethnic lifeworlds endemic to each of those communities. He also points towards the efficacy of this newer understanding of language, which ‘shows the insufficiency of the merely anthropological and instrumental interpretation of language’ (Varghese 2021: 47) and goes beyond to suggest its capability to represent the symbiotic interrelationship between human beings, nature, and the non-human entities.

The interface of climate consciousness and religious–cultural sensibility prevalent in Assam and in the wider eastern Indian region is also made evident in the devotional cult of Shitala (the small-pox goddess) and her association with the arrival of spring every year. The outbreak of epidemic was (and still is) a recurrent phenomenon associated with the onset of

seasons characterised by extreme weather conditions, particularly in a country like India. As a goddess, the iconographical representation of Shitala is represented by the accompaniments of a broom, a pitcher of water, and a winnowing fan all of which embody a more quotidian significance rather than an overtly religious or mythical one. The twin presence of the sweeping broom and the water-pitcher attests to the necessity of keeping the setting of the house clean at the time of small-pox infection—while this may suggest a process of keeping the patient free from possible contamination on the one hand, there is also a simultaneous effort to honour the ‘presence’ of the goddess within the body of the patient. It is a kind of ‘ritual possession’ by the goddess of the body of the person, and she needs to be kept happy so that she leaves without causing further damage or illness to the body. The winnowing fan is invested with the dual function of maintaining cleanliness and cooling the fever heat (*jwara tapa*). For being used for the purpose of removing the chaff from the grain, the fan also has a symbolic association with the concept of fertility and regeneration, and hence it is used as a ‘ritual object’ during the auspicious occasions of marriage and childbirth (Tiwari and Giri 1983: 683). In the context of various *mantras* and *padas* sung in the presence of the afflicted person, the presence of the aforementioned accompaniments could be seen as a folk and localised therapy of healing, which has obvious Tantric implications. The ‘body’ is simultaneously seen as ‘sacred’ and ‘infected’—there is thus an objective towards perceiving the body as ‘here and now’ and also beyond the ephemeral. This, we can argue, is also a further attestation of the human body perceived as being part of a symbiotic network of existence encompassing the phenomenological as well as metaphysical aspects of the universe.

In the last few years, Soumyadeep Dutta has been instrumental, through his writings mostly in Assamese, in creating awareness regarding the interactive dynamics between the preservation of the forested landscapes of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and the arresting of

climatic degradation in those areas. A few of his significant books in this regard include *Asomar Charai Parjyabekshanar Haatputhi* (A Handbook for the Observation of Birds in Assam, 2013), *Namchang'or Antheshpur* (The Inner Halls of Namchang, 2013), *Aranyar Cha-Pohar* ([Under the] Light and Shadow of the Forest, 2015), and *Into the Wild* (2022). In an interview, he expresses his doubts regarding the much talked about conflict between nature and human beings, for he believes that conflicts take place only among the equals, and humans have no claim to power against the all-pervasive might of nature. The ecological disasters confronting the humans are consequences of their own misadventures against nature, the latter even having the power, as witnessed in global history, of destroying civilisations erected upon its virgin space (Dutta 2018). Dutta's stress on the overarching power of nature could also be seen as a possible critique of the Anthropocene and its excessive emphasis on the singular agency of human beings towards the degradation of the natural habitat. Nature has its own regulatory mechanism, and what all human beings must do is to let nature take its own course and thereby desist from making unprincipled interventions into the generative principles of its working.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite the assumed centrality of human beings as the architect of histories and civilisations, nature has silently yet resolutely played its part in asserting its presence from time from time. However, the eventual inseparability of the two entities has also been articulated through works of literature in almost all literary genres, from oral–performative folk-narratives to novels and non-fictional writings. The pluralistic nature of this engagement has somewhat made it difficult to conceive all such works as constituting a singular canon of literature with a demonstratable history of growth and development across space and time. However, if one takes into account the presence of a pervasive 'climate consciousness' as an abiding and dominant factor across all these works, then it can surely be possible to conceptualise this already-existing body of works as constituting an 'eco-canon' comprising literary creations in

English as well as in the vernacular languages. The present study has confined itself primarily to works composed in the vernacular languages of North East India, though works in English translation have also been considered.

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