



The Spirit of the Land: Folktales of Northeast India and their Ecological Wisdom

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Abstract

Folktales originating from Northeast India play a crucial role in conveying indigenous knowledge, ecological insights, and spiritual beliefs. Based on oral traditions, the stories demonstrate the deep connection among nature, spirituality, and human life. This paper shows how folktales from various ethnic groups, like the Khasi, Mizo, Ao Naga, Bodo, and Meitei-represent ideas of animism, environmental ethics, and moral lessons.

In these folktale stories, nature is frequently depicted as a living being, with mountains, rivers, forests, and animals having sacred importance. Supernatural entities, including guardian spirits and gods, supervise the natural world, reinforcing the idea between humanity and the environment. Animistic beliefs, which suggest that sprits reside in natural elements, influence indigenous perspectives and promote ecological harmony. Through studies of folktales such as The Legend of U Thlen (Khasi), The Spirit Tiger (Naga and Mizo), The Goddess of Weaving (Meitei), and some other references this paper examines how these tales act as means for moral and cultural preservation.

Beyond being mere narratives, these folktales offer ethical guidelines, cautioning against environmental destruction and advocating for sustainable behaviors. As modernization endangers oral traditions, grasping and safeguarding these stories is essential for preserving indigenous identity and ecological wisdom. By investigating the connection between folklore, spirituality, and environmental consciousness, this paper highlights the lasting significance of Northeast Indian folktales in current discourses on culture and environment.

Keywords: Ecological Consciousness, Environmental ethics, Human-Nature Relationship, Northeast Indian Folktales, Animism

Introduction:

Northeast India maintains its identity as a territory which features picturesque backgrounds along with multiple ecosystems combined with cultural diversities through multiple ethnic groups whose heritage extends from nature. The transmission of indigenous knowledge as well as spirit religion and ecological understanding occurs through vital story traditions. Numerous indigenous cultural narratives that span across time have been transmitted from one generation to the next for both educational and ethical and environmental instructional purposes. Mainstream written literature differs from folktales because the community-based

storytelling adapts to changing social circumstances while maintaining their essential messages.

Stories proceed where nature exists as a living force alongside the story's other elements. The indigenous communities see rivers and mountains and trees and animals with respect because these entities embody profound spiritual power in their animistic belief system. The environment has supernatural protectors that observe human conduct toward the natural world. They grant blessings to those who treat nature with respect but impose penalties on people who misuse it. Through their storytelling format folktales provide ethical instructions about sustainable living by teaching people to protect the environment from destruction.

The study evaluates ecological elements found in important folklore from the different ethnic groups across Northeast India focusing on the Khasi as well as the Mizo and the Ao Naga and Bodo and Meitei communities. The paper evaluates moral values and cultural heritage preservation through an analysis of four folklore stories namely The Legend of U Thlen (Khasi), The Spirit Tiger (Naga and Mizo), The Goddess of Weaving (Meitei) and others.

Animism and the Sacredness of Nature:

One of the defining characteristics of Northeast Indian folktales is animism – the belief that all elements of nature, including rivers, trees, mountains, and animals, possess a spirit or soul. This worldview fosters deep respect for nature, reinforcing the idea that the environment must be treated with reverence.

The Khasi Folktale of U Thlen: A Symbol of Greed and Ecological Destruction:

The Khasi mythology presents a legend about U Thlen who embodies the destructive force against human greed. The tale narrates that U Thlen emerged as a dominating being which rampaged throughout the land before its demise. A courageous Khasi warrior obtained victory over the mighty creature until it perished. To stop its return to life villagers needed to complete specific rituals and always keep their words true in trades. The rise of greed led people to hide parts of the serpent while conducting its sacred rituals in order to acquire wealth.

This legend exists to teach people about dangerous results that emerge from unlimited desires. The tale allegorically illustrates the effects of natural exploitation because human interference with the environment for personal dominance leads to environmental collapse. According to Khasi community belief U Thlen represents the importance of ethical stewardship because ecological harmony brings prosperity when humans respect it.

The Spirit Tiger: The Connection between Humans and Nature:

Many among the Naga and Mizo tribes frequently share the folktale about The Spirit Tiger which demonstrates their cultural understanding of human relationship with nature. Certain people within the tale can shift into tiger form which functions as an emblem for their profound spiritual ties to the wilderness. The culture considers these shape-shifters guardians of forests because they connect society to nature through their protective role. The story demonstrates how animal and human beings naturally connect. Through its portrayal of species blurring the story works to reduce wild animal hunting as well as destructive wildlife exploitation. The established conservation practices honour specific animals as sacred beings who may cause misfortune upon injury.

Environmental Ethics in Folktales:

The sacred view embodied by animism coincides with many folktales that serve as lessons about environmental destruction. Warning messages found in these stories encourage humans to maintain balance with the environment through their daily actions.

The Ao Naga Folktale of the River Spirit:

A sacred spirit lives within the river that the Ao Naga community views as sacred. Any community showing respect toward the river and its resources received fertility in their farmlands and rich harvests. People who harmed the river or used it without proper respect would suffer from drought along with famine.

The story warns about ecological risks because it demonstrates the significance of conserving water resources. These tales have the power to teach local people how vital rivers are to their survival thus developing within them a strong sense of responsibility. This story matches traditional water management rules in indigenous communities where ceremonies honour rivers to stop excessive resource removal.

The Man-Eating Tree: A Lesson in Sustainable Resource Use:

The Khasi people of India narrate The Man-Eating Tree which delivers essential messages about environmental responsibility. The story shows how a village tree transformed into a vengeful being after people carelessly destroyed it. People who utilize the tree after failing to show reverence will naturally become its prey.

The narration illustrates how deforestation presents detrimental risks along with a necessity to use resources responsibly. This cultural tradition supports both historical methods of forest protection which includes sacred grove preservation through religious beliefs that prohibit tree cutting activities. This practice, still prevalent among Khasi and other indigenous groups, serves as a natural method of biodiversity conservation.

Spirituality and Nature in Folktales:

The folktales from Northeast India display deep spirituality because they feature divine beings who protect nature and observe anthropomorphic activities. These divine beings make decisions to bless people who adore nature yet mete out discipline to nature destroyers.

The Goddess of Weaving: Honoring Tradition and Nature:

In the Goddess of Weaving Meitei tradition highlights the character of Leimarel Sidabi who showed people how to weave from the fibers of nature. As the tale illustrates, she instructed people to produce fabric from natural fibers while consuming only what was required so they would not damage nature.

The tale demonstrates how Meitei weaving traditions maintain their sustainability by preserving their resource consumption methods. Creativity holds divine value to artisans who understand that nature grants them creative abilities which they must develop through specific care.

The Bodo Folktale of the Forest Spirit:

Several stories exist among Bodo people about forest spirits who watch over both trees and wildlife populations. According to the story a hunter who murdered animals without restraint received a permanent curse from a forest spirit before his collapsing descent. Caters

to those who practice ethical hunting alongside traditional religious procedures because they gain blessings from the spiritual being.

The traditional stories maintain indigenous environmental attitudes which control how people use resources and hunt wildlife according to cultural standards. During the Bodo tradition of Baokhungri Festival people conduct rituals to celebrate forest deities as part of their ecological awareness.

Folktales as Tools for Cultural and Ecological Preservation:

Folktales operate above entertainment value as they contain preservation elements from indigenous knowledge and ethical values. Through their stories ancient cultures used to guide their members in developing sustainable practices for environmental relationships. Modernization actively erodes the conventional customs which may lead to the disappearance of such traditional stories.

Oral Tradition and Its Role in Environmental Conservation:

The Northeast Indian population maintains knowledge transmission through oral storytelling which has existed for generations. Elders throughout different communities transmit folktales to keep cultural values coupled with ecological ethics fully preserved. The youth learn about nature's holiness and environmental damage through these traditional tales that serve educational purposes.

Children among the Khasi community frequently hear the U Thlen legend from their elders because it demonstrates how greed and corruption can cause harm. The Ao Naga people share the River Spirit tale to teach their youth about appropriate waterbody reverence. Through storytelling these folktales make environmental wisdom accessible to children at the time of their young learning stage.

The Threat of Modernization and Globalization:

Rapid urbanization as well as deforestation and industrialization cause many indigenous communities of Northeast India to face both cultural transitions and environmental challenges. The survival of ecological wisdom embedded in folktales remains threatened because traditional living practices together with oral storytelling traditions experience disappearing widespread decline. The younger generation tends to look different from traditional stories because they get their knowledge from the global media alongside their formal education.

Many indigenous languages face extinction thus putting the transmission of folktales at severe risk. The complete disappearance of Languages drains away the collective knowledge about culture and nature which its stories store. The necessity to document these tales through revitalization initiatives becomes clear because their survival is under immediate threat.

Documenting and Revitalizing Folktales:

Documenting and Revitalizing Folktales has become a central priority for scholars and cultural activists and folklorists since they recognized the significance of preserving indigenous folktales during the past few years. Various organizations have begun multiple projects to document these folktales through written and digital records for their conservation purposes. Organizations in Northeast India have taken initiatives to compile folktale anthologies alongside their creation of audio-visual recordings from oral storytelling occasions.

Educational institutions can also play a crucial role in revitalizing folktales. By incorporating these stories into school curricula, students can gain exposure to indigenous knowledge systems alongside their formal education. Furthermore, storytelling festivals, community gatherings, and digital platforms can be leveraged to keep these narratives relevant in the modern age.

Lessons from Northeast Indian Folktales in Contemporary Environmental Discourse:

The ecological themes present in Northeast Indian folktales are not just relevant to their indigenous communities—they offer valuable insights for contemporary environmental challenges worldwide.

Sustainable Living and Ecological Balance:

Modern environmental ethics share a common perspective with the animism worldview through their shared perspective of seeing nature as living. Numerous worldwide organizations advocating for nature conservation have started to defend native wisdom together with traditional ecological strategies.

The preservation practice of Khasi sacred groves shares similarities with present-day biodiversity reserves representing a modern environmental conservation method. Water body worship by the Ao Naga people in their legends demonstrates both ancient and contemporary methods for sustaining natural water resources.

Moral and Ethical Considerations in Environmentalism:

A large section of folk tales from Northeast India demonstrates ethical lessons to humans about their connection to natural surroundings. Literary consequences presented to exploitative characters within the narrative act as warnings about contemporary environmental threats which involve forest destruction and climate change effects and biodiversity decline.

The Khasi folklore *The Man-Eating Tree* demonstrates how destroying forests would create harmful consequences yet the Bodo story *Forest Spirit* supports proper hunting techniques. The stories show that environmental degradation leads to serious repercussions which aligns with modern conservationists working on issues of climate justice.

Indigenous Wisdom and Climate Resilience:

Climate change recognition has grown because indigenous knowledge shows potential to boost environmental resistance against its effects. Traditional ecological practices showcased in folklore provide useful information for developing adaptation plans to address climate change. North-east Indian communities practice shifting cultivation which scientists used to view as damaging to the environment. Appropriate sustainable management turns this system into a type of agroforestry which helps maintain biodiversity and improves soil condition. The use of stories about such practices helps refute wrong perceptions while promoting their proper ethical use.

Conclusion:

Folktales from Northeast India serve as invaluable repositories of ecological wisdom, moral guidance, and cultural heritage. These stories stem from animistic religious practices and display nature as a living being while showing how people stay connected to their environment spiritually. The indigenous communities transmit important wisdom about

sustainability by weaving ethical living practices and respect for nature through their stories The Legend of U Thlen (Khasi) and The Spirit Tiger (Naga and Mizo) and The Goddess of Weaving (Meitei).

The arrival of modernization threatens to erase traditional oral traditions from existence. Protecting ancestral folktales has now grown essential because successive generations tend to lose their cultural origins. The preservation of Northeast India's environmental wisdom in folktales depends on documentation plus educational implementation and contemporary environmental appreciation.

The folktales contain valuable wisdom which addresses global environmental issues above their cultural meaning. Traditional knowledge within these stories warns us about our need to harmonize with nature during the present climate crisis which threatens ecosystems on a global scale. A deeper appreciation of indigenous understanding about nature will support more sustainable methods of environmental protection.

Northeast Indian folktales represent more than stories because they show the fundamental link between people and their environment. The ancient wisdom offers us practice of nature worship alongside adopting sustainable behaviour while maintaining cultural conservation for protecting our ecological equilibrium that stands for centuries.

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