

Environmental Ethos in Koch Rajbangshi Poetry

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Abstract

The Koch Rajbangshi ethos has always been in accordance with ecological sustainability reflected through its rich folk culture. A number of Koch Rajbangshi folksongs, folk tales as well as the rites and rituals manifest this worldview through seemingly simple community practices based on oral traditions. In the literary sphere the same concept gets reflected through various genres, poetry being one such major arena. There are poems written on man-nature relationship where a human is placed essentially as a quintessence of the far greater natural world. Some other poems speak of the havoc created by man-made machines which flaunter nature to the extent of victimization. Yet, nature appears as the soothing mother, nurturing and nourishing with incessant care. The community practice of attributing nature the status of a mother or the even a goddess inspire the poetic outbursts of the poets who intend to spread the message of securing the ancient status of mother nature. In some poems nature in the form of land hoards promises, the loss of which bewilders the indigenous entity.

The proposed paper attempts to present the Koch Rajbangshi ethos regarding ecological sustainability through a reading of certain select poems written in the Koch Rajbangshi language. The translated versions of these poems would be analysed for a closer view of the embedded ecological concern that the poems connote. The paper would take up select poets from Assam and Coochbehar such as Kamalesh Sarkar, Nikhilesh Ray, Alauddin Sarkar, Dipak Kumar Ray, Jyotirmoy Prodhani, Gauri Mohan Ray, and others to examine how nature has been a common heritage of the Rajbangshi poets, at times appearing as the mother archetype, across the borders. It would also look into how the poets have responded to negotiate with this crisis caused by the brutal disfiguration of their bucolic landscape.

Key Words: *Ecology, environmental ethos, heritage, mother archetype, landscape.*

Introduction :

The intimate relationship between culture and environment can be taken as the most tangible basis of human ecology. The indigenous man has been existing as a part of the cosmos and contributing to the ecological sustainability since times immemorial, whether consciously or unconsciously. Man's accordance with the ecological balance had given rise to rites and rituals which gradually evolved and synchronized into indigenous knowledge paradigm. The practical expressions of this paradigm are what can be comprehensibly termed as folk culture which tends to reflect the worldview and ethos of the community.

The Koch Rajbangshi folk culture reflects this tendency to transmit the indigenous ethos. A number of Koch Rajbangshi folksongs, folk tales as well as the rites and rituals manifest this worldview through seemingly simple community practices based on oral traditions. In the literary sphere the same concept gets reflected through various genres, poetry being one such major arena. There are poems written on man-nature relationship where a human is placed essentially as a quintessence of the far greater natural world. Some other poems speak of the havoc created by man-made machines which flaunt nature to the extent of victimization. Yet, nature appears as the soothing mother, nurturing and nourishing with incessant care. The community practice of attributing nature the status of a mother or even a goddess inspire the poetic outbursts of the poets who intend to spread the message of securing the ancient status of mother nature. In some poems, nature in the form of land hoards promises, the loss of which bewilders the indigenous entity.

Objective :

The article attempts to present the Koch Rajbangshi ethos regarding ecological sustainability through the reading of certain select poems written in the Rajbangshi language. The translated versions of these poems would be analysed for a closer view of the embedded ecological concern that the poems connote. Many of the poems discussed in this paper are taken from the anthology, *This Land This People: Rajbangshi Poems in Translation* (2021), translated and edited by Pradip Acharya and Jyotirmoy Prodhani. Regarding the poems of this volume, Bandita Baruah writes, "Nature is an essential component to be found in abundance in the collection. In all its grandeur and furor, nature has deeper associations to the life of people. Besides the sun, moon, winds, storms, trees, paddy fields, local fruits and nuts, birds and animals, the presence of water bodies like ponds and rivers find manifestation in many poems" (thetranscript.in). This assertion is found reflected through the poems which speak of a landscape unique in its own way where man exist as a component of the whole gamut of the ecosystem. The article would take up select poets from Assam and Coochbehar such as Kamalesh Sarkar, Jatin Barma, Santosh Singha, Nikhilesh Ray, Dwijendra Nath

Bhakat, Alauddin Sarkar, Dipak Kumar Ray, Jyotirmoy Prodhani, Gauri Mohan Ray, and others to examine how nature has been a common heritage of the Rajbangshi poets, at times appearing as the mother archetype, across the borders. It would also look into how the poets have responded to negotiate with this crisis caused by the brutal disfiguration of their bucolic landscape.

Text Analysis :

The poems of Kamalesh Sarkar celebrate the natural bounty while at the same time rue the gradual disappearance of nature's abundance. Environmental issues are addressed from the vantage of an insider who has grown and lived amidst nature. His dwelling habitat places him very close to natural flora and fauna, so much that a fox becomes a familiar individual to him whose gradual disappearance he mourns:

"Woods are gone, just trees, one or two

No fox in the woods though the foxy people around".

("Days Pass in Pangs", in Acharya and Prodhani 65)

The two lines highlight the anthropocene dimensions where the humans have displaced the foxes, who were the original inhabitants of the place. In the poem the human-animal binary is addressed both literally and metaphorically. Another of his poems titled "The Jungle" talks of a poet's obsession with the lost ways of life when 'the birds kept flying all around' and he had 'discovered the familiar land of doves' (Acharya and Prodhani 62). The loss is reflected through the tale of 'the cowherd' who has 'vanished in the hearth' (Acharya and Prodhani 62). The poet too, decides to leave civilization and take recluse in a jungle "After a prolonged battle/ Against the shadows of masquerading men" (Acharya and Prodhani 62). The loss of the ancient ways, nevertheless, leads to the loss of the very tune of life as expressed in the poem, "Bena Bairagi". The poem is in the form of a reminiscence of the hermit who played the *benā* (a folk instrument with strings). As the natural surroundings changed their ways, the hermit had forgotten how to play his tune. So, the poetic persona laments: "The tales of the gardener and his wife came to an end./ The palms in the garden turned ripe and went dry, / All sparrows flew back home./ Then strings of the *benā* got snapped" (Acharya and Prodhani 61). The ineffectual state of the *benā* player is reciprocal to the sterility of the land as things are interconnected in a natural world. So, these poems not only present the ecological change but also point towards human responsibility through the consciousness of the artists.

The concern for the native ecology has been a universally approached in the recent times, while the land, its inhabitants and the knowledge which emerge from their harmonious co-relationship have drawn much attention. The activists of traditional ecological knowledge

have always acknowledged this concern to be the prime focus of their studies. In “Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Wisdom of Peoples of British Columbia”, Turner, Ignace and Ignace highlight the threat to the traditional ecology and the knowledge emerges from it. They reflect on the impending intimidation which may threaten the existence of the same, at the intrusion of the modern technology and economic expansion. As they argue,

Indigenous people are uniquely positioned in their close and strong standing environmental relationships, yet the survival of many indigenous cultures is severely threatened by the insensitive economic development, by coercive education system, by assimilation into modes of production and inexorable movement towards market economies of the dominant society and by the escalating ecological destruction of peoples’ homelands and resources (Turner, Ignace and Ignace 1276).

The same thought reverberates in the Rajbangshi poems which reflect apprehension for the land and her natives who are at the verge falling prey to modern civilizational monoculture. Jatin Barma’s poem “The Face of a Child” dwells on the crisis of the plantation labourers of a tea estate. The speaker of the poem starts by saying, “For how long these tea gardens are to be? / The world drinks tea/ When the garden owners are in junket spree” (Acharya and Prodhani 75). The next part of the poem highlights the predicament faced by the poor workers while the gardens close for some months. It is the same predicament faced by the farmers when uniform plantations are imposed upon at the cost of the local diversified farming as both the method and its marketing remain alien to the farm workers. This hegemonic imposition has been a reality in India since the colonial era when tea, indigo, and poppy were grown in profusion at the cost of replacing indigenous trees, over huge areas of vegetative landscape. The ecofeminist critic Vandana Shiva in her book, *The Violence of Green Revolution: The World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (1993), highlights a similar kind of crisis brought into by systematic cultivation during the Green Revolution in Punjab. As she says,

The ecological costs and natural conflicts associated with Green Revolution were rooted in replacement of cropping systems based on diversity and internal inputs with systems based on uniformity and external inputs. The shift from internal to external purchase input did not merely change ecological process of agriculture. It also changed the structure of social and political relationships... (Shiva 171).

The same concern is found in Jyotirmoy Prodhani’s poem “Farmstead” where the old farmer’s talk about traditional paddy seedlings, *phoolpakri* and *manoharshailare* are ignored by a young farmer as the very seeds are replaced by the new variety of *aijong* (Acharya and Prodhani 206). Vandana Shiva points out how the old variety of seeds is called ‘primitive’

while the new variety has gained the prestige of being called ‘elite’ or ‘advanced’ and hence scientific. As she comments, “The mechanistic thinking underlying the new seed industry is anthropomorphic and also culturally chauvinistic” (Shiva 67-68). In another poem titled, “The Plough and the Saplings” the same poet refers to a farmer’s father’s advice to his son to plough and plant. The father instructs the son about how to hold the plough and till the land as well as how to dig up and plant saplings. The father’s instructions are the age-old methods of agriculture, the knowledge of which he passes on to his son as a legacy. Alauddin Sarkar’s poem “Plant a Tree” echoes a similar concern where the speaker advises to ‘Plant ten saplings’ which would make ‘a green dream flourish’ with ‘*sal* and *satian*’, ‘Debdur, shisav, mango and jackfruit’ (Acharya and Prodhani 44). Ramakanta Ray’s “This Land, This People” wants the same landscape back as it has vanished behind the curtain of civilization: “No I don’t want anything else/ The fecund field of my adolescence/ The green expanse of emptiness/ In the dew cold of a Sunday/ The bathing and the unease of the shiver/ Yes I want that/ the trees and blossoms/ Where the *sajana* flowers like earrings/ Where the coral blossoms as my beloved/ Blowing through the *shindas* to make the amber sparkle” (Acharya and Prodhani 78). Land as the mother of bounty emerges also in the poem of Satya Ray. In “This Our Land” Ray says: “We are ploughman’s sons, we are of land/ Land we must have/ We make gold sprout in the land/ And fill the barns” (Acharya and Prodhani 80). The lines breathe the feelings that the land is the only source; tilling the land is the only purpose. This has been a truth to most of the people of the Koch Rajbangshi community whose indigenous identity is integrally related to the soil.

This kind of intimate bond to the soil is common in most of the Rajbangshi texts. Here land becomes the source of pedagogy. It must be inherited and cherished as the source of livelihood. In her essay, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation”, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson speaks of the indigenous pedagogy of the Nishnaabeg natives who rely on their land as the source of knowledge. Considering land itself as pedagogy she says, “Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual traditions unless it comes through the land, unless it occurs in an Indigenous context using Indigenous processes” (Simpson 9). The knowledge that comes from the lived experiences of the land can be the sustainable legacy that the natives must imbibe and share. As the critic affirms, “The native elders would always guide with statements which ‘position them as learners, that position their ideas as their own understandings, and place their teachings within the context of their own lived experience’” (Simpson 11).

The same kind of pedagogy is found reflected in the poems which connote the passing on of indigenous wisdom about the environment around the native entity. Santosh

Singha's poem, "Sada Bhuikhan" (The white land) speaks of the golden crops which would give rise to *Bhawiya* songs. The land appears as the source of sustainability. The same imagery of the golden crops with the ears of rice flowing on the trails emerges in Abhijit Barman's poem "AshinatUak Fam" (Remembrance in Ashin) (Barman 43). Dipak Kumar Ray's poem, "Bison" (Seeds) speaks of the birds' ecstatic songs after feeding on grains, which takes up the tune of *dotara* accompanying *Kushan* songs (Ray 2012: 29). Prasenjit Ray in his poem, "Phal Daan" (Fruit Giving) speaks of the abundance of food in the form of yams, rice and fruits that the land provides, while another poem "Sonar Dhan" (Golden rice) celebrates the flourishing the ears of rice (Ray 2010: 26). Yet in another poem "Sakto Haya Thako" (Be Strong) the poet advises a pedestrian to seek relaxation under the jackfruit tree which has sheltered birds, borne nests and offered fruits to all though it has weak roots. He urges the passerby to learn endurance and sustenance from this tree. Land also produces the cures to diseases. The poem "Asukh" (Sickness) of Kumar Sauvik (Gauri Mohan Ray) speaks of 'Jaigan Bibi' and 'Phulmati' who could cure the disease suffered by a certain man, Jatinda, though they do not know nursing (Sauvik in Barma 27). Contrary to the modern medications their old knowledge about charms and herbs belonging to the land would come handy. They tend to acquire this knowledge from the land they are born in. As Ranjeeta Mukherjee says about the intimate relationship of women with land, "(the)extensive and intimate relationship with the land means that women, often exclusively, have extensive knowledge of traditional remedies and plants, indigenous farming practices and local methods of crop cultivation" (Mukharjee 7). This relationship is an important component of ecofeminism which places women very close to nature, often sharing with and caring for as well as learning from its elements.

Yet, this land is snatched away in Nikhilesh Ray's "The Anthem to Wake Us Up": "The land you snatched away/ And turned into acres of weeds/ Would bloom one day/ With flowers and grains/ Mellow winds will blow that day" (Acharya and Prodhani 120). Ray's "The Midday Poem" speaks of the havoc of a drought-stricken weather: "The soil cracks into lumps of clod/ All over/ At midday the noon settles/ On the head of the sky/ Creepers get dried/ Even in the three-fold bamboo rack/ Cows and calves are tired to the brim" (Acharya and Prodhani 117). Pijush Sarkar's "Bhabatosh" highlights the same crisis at a symbolic level as the granaries are washed away by the erosion (Sarkar 56). Another poem of Santosh Singha "Mor Gaon Mor Maon" (My Village, My Mother) speaks of the catastrophe of the natives as the river has dried. As he says, "*Nadisukiyahoishaidda/ Dhan sukiyahoishukati/ Jaminermatihoisebala/ Din duniyahoiseati*" (Singha 2012: 10). This can be translated as "The River has turned to dry shells/ Paddy grains have become

dry leaves/ Soil has turned into sands/ The day has changed into the night (translations mine). The perched land in the same poem turns into his mother and also to his village. Salil Panchanan's poem "A Patch of Green" puts the complaints of a wailing mother: "Look, my breast is empty meadow... A patch of green someone, do get me" (Acharya and Prodhani 81). In this poem it is the mother who has lost her village and her green. But, a close look into the poem shows that the mother has merged her self identity with that of the village and its green landscape. Prasenjit Ray's poem "MorAii" calls the land as mother, as well as uses the emotions relation to the land and the biological mother interchangeably (Ray 2010: 16). The marsh wears a bun adorned with hyacinth in Abhijit Barman's "Jonak-Chan-Nadi" (Barman 2010: 27). This identification of ecological entities with that of a woman and looking into the ecological crisis from a feminist perspective have been the prime concerns of ecofeminism. As Chen Ling says in her essay, "The Background and Theoretical Origin of Ecofeminism":

The generation of Ecofeminism is closely related to the ecological crisis caused by modernization and industrial civilization. As the industrialization improves in modern society, people's demand for resources and energy is increasing in social production and life. Meanwhile, the total amount of production and life waste discharged to the nature is also increasing. When the usage of resources and energy and the waste emissions are beyond the ecological capacity of the natural ecosystem, it produces ecological crisis. (Ling 105)

Jahira Hossain's essay on the poetry of Temsula Ao reflects on the ecofeminist perspective of the poet. She says :

Ecofeminism, as an academic discipline, results from the intersection of myriad forms of feminist and environmental studies. It claims that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are inherently bound up with the notions and workings of class, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism which result from the patriarchal order of society... Temsula Ao, a formidable poetic voice from the North- East India, expresses her concern over the gradual degradation of the natural surroundings of the North- East India and the cultural transformation taking place in the region. (Hossain 13)

A number of Rajbangshi poems reflect the same attitude towards environment and the women self associated with it where natural objects are identified as women. Apart from the land, the river appears as a feminine entity ever present in the native imagination of the Rajbangshis. The poem, "Old Mother Teesta" by Preetinicha Barman Prodhani speaks of such a man-made crisis that threatens nature. The construction of dams has turned the mythical river into a victim of civilization. At the beginning of this poem Teesta appears as a beautiful woman in love, and then as a mother. The image of Teesta in Koch Rajbangshi imagination is quite vivid as her myths suggest. The river can be taken as a mother archetype

as she is worshipped by the natives as a river deity who nourishes and provides. The same image is found in Dipak Kumar Ray's poem "I am Teesta". In his poem, the river appears as a primordial archetype, omnipresent in the course of the native psyche. As Erich Neumann speaks of the mother archetype, "We employ the concept of archetype as Jung has clearly defined it in most recent writings – as a structural concept signifying 'eternal presence'" (Neumann 7). This image of the 'eternal presence' is found to be eroding in the poem "Old Mother Teesta" while Teesta has been continually shrinking under the pressure of the dam. She has to crawl into surrender as "The gluttonous dam swigged in a drought" (Acharya and Prodhani 165). It is as if the river 'full of waves' (Acharya and Prodhani 130), as it appears in Dipak Kumar Ray's poem, had shrunken into an old dammed river with 'mouth dry' and 'arid mind' (Acharya and Prodhani 164). Dwijendra Nath Bhakat's poem "Gadadhar" identifies the river Gadadhar as a married woman with a vermillion dot. She appears as a humble streamlet quenching the thirst of mankind as well as the source of profound knowledge. This rivulet has survived the pangs of modernism and is still breathing life. The mythification of rivers as well as the emotive reciprocation with the water bodies has been a continuing preoccupation of the Rajbangshi ethos. As Dipak Barman puts it, "From the time immemorial the rivers Teesta, Torsha, Mechi, Kaljani and Mujnai are sharing and emphasizing the grief and pain of Rajbangshis" (<http://www.the-criterion.com>, 24). As an example Barman refers to Basanta Barman's poems "The Blue Water of Teesta" "The Riverbed of Mechi" and "The Spot of Water". In the first poem the poet refers to the empathetic feelings of river Teesta for the fellow Rajbangshis who reside on her banks. The other two poems represent the poet's conscious identification of himself to the rivers of his land (<http://www.the-criterion.com>). Pijush Sarkar too, imagines a virtual river that overflows his bed and waters his pillow, in his poem "MichhangNadi" (Sarkar 34). Abhijit Barman's poem "Tor KatharNadi" (The river of your words) identifies even his beloved and her words to the river. He sees the moonlit river on her face and keeps optimistic attitude that the river near the crop field would never dry up (Barman 2010: 11).

Conclusion :

The representation of ecological concern in poetry had been an age-old tradition. In English Literature the Romantics had a unique claim over the natural environment. The same is true of German Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Japanese senryus, Classical Chinese poetry as well as Sanskrit poetry. Regarding 'eco-poetics' Forrest Gander and John Kinsella say that the term connotes, besides others, a unique concept that the originality of the poem is not the self but the surrounding landscape (<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/inflibnet-ebooks/reader.action>, 11). In the recent years, the advocates of indigenous

ontology put much effort to bring forth the ontological perspective to look at the land from the point of view of its natives who have been living on it for generations. Theorists and critics like, Walter Mingolo, Catherine E. Walsh, Anibal Quizano, Nicole Fabricant, Nancy Postero, Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola have been working in support the indigenous ontological approach as against the modern ontological approach. The former sees nature and culture to be one and the same, while for the later they stand in a binary relation. So, the landscape becomes the begetter of poetry which echoes its elemental forms and their relationships. In the Koch Rajbangshi tradition poems on ecology may be said to have a long genealogy. The poems discussed in this article are all contemporary poems written in a recent time and are concerned with the recent predicaments. As Rini Barman says about the Rajbangshi poems of the recent time, "For the modern poems, the emphasis is visibly on retaining the flavor of contemporaneity" (www.himalmag.com). This 'contemporaneity' is reflected through the ecological concerns of the Rajbangshi poets who endeavour to present the latest environmental issues from different perspectives (www.himalmag.com).

However, it does not imply that ecology is a new concern for the Rajbangshis, for the community has been practicing a number of naturalistic rites since times immemorial. The abundance of nature deities like, *Sonaray* (the tiger deity), *Hudum* (the rain deity), *Baruni* (the river goddess), *Teestaburi* (river goddess *Teesta*), *Maish Thakur* (buffalo deity), *Madan Kaam* (deity of eroticism and fertility) etc. and the particular rituals associated with them justify that the community has deep rooted dependence on and reverence for the natural world. The tiger deity *Sonaray* is apparently a malevolent deity who protects the forest from human interference. The myths and rituals associated with him reflect the abundance of forests in the Rajbangshi localities as well as the forbearance of the community against intrusion into the forest ecosystem. In the folk world of the Rajbangshis man exists just as a part of nature, ever paying homage to the natural world. Invocation to the nature deities reflect the reverence and dependence of the community on nature. Besides, the sheer number of fertility cults, rooted in Rajbangshi tradition highlight on the close association of human, natural and the spiritual worlds. The cults of *Hudum Deo* (the god of rain and thunder) as well as the cult of *Kati*, which are fertility cults exclusively carried out by women tend to underline this particular aspect of the Rajbangshi tradition in general, while specific analyses of these rituals show a deeper concept of identification of nature and ecology with women. The role of women as priestesses positions them as interlinkages between the human world and the spiritual world identified with nature (according to their indigenous belief). These rituals are always accompanied by a number of chants and songs which narrate the myths associated with the deities as well as highlight on the human-nonhuman relationship. They form the

gamut of folk literature which later has inspired poetry coming out from the people of this tradition.

Thus, in Koch Rajbangshi tradition Nature is something that is not outside the community life, but an integral part of it. The poems written in the contemporary times echo this ancient wisdom where love for the vegetative landscape as well as riverine site remains the prime concern. So, the Rajbangshi poems reflect ecology as an embedded entity with that of the native consciousness where the landscape, the animals and the primacy of land emerge as the lasting metaphors of their folk imagination.

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