

IMPORTANCE OF NATURE IN THE INDIGENOUS TRIBES OF ASSAM

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Abstract

Nature has always been central to the cultural, economic, and spiritual life of the indigenous tribes of Assam. The ecological landscapes of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining hills—marked by dense forests, rivers, wetlands, and biodiversity—form the foundation upon which the tribes have built their daily livelihood systems, seasonal rituals, cosmologies, oral traditions, symbolic art forms, and social structures. This research paper examines the multidimensional importance of nature in the lives of major indigenous communities of Assam, including the Mishing, Bodo, Karbi, Rabha, Garo, Dimasa, Deori, and others. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study reveals that nature is not merely a physical environment but a cultural ecosystem intimately woven into identity formation, belief systems, festival cycles, occupational habits, medicinal practices, and community governance.

The paper explores how indigenous cosmologies interpret nature as a living entity endowed with spirits and moral agency. These cosmological structures guide ethical codes of human–nature interaction, encouraging harmonious coexistence and environmental stewardship. Rituals such as *Dobur Uie* (Mishing), *Kherai* (Bodo), *Rongker* (Karbi), *Wangala* (Garo), and *Magh* (Dimasa) demonstrate the deep interdependence between ecological elements and ritual performances. Nature also plays a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods through agriculture, fishing, hunting, forest gathering, weaving, and traditional crafts that use natural materials such as bamboo, cane, cotton, medicinal herbs, and aromatic plants.

The paper further discusses how oral literature—myths, legends, folktales, chants, and songs—symbolically encodes ecological knowledge and preserves intergenerational memories of rivers, forests, and wildlife. Indigenous ecological knowledge systems(S) guide agricultural techniques, climatic predictions, flood management, resource conservation, and biodiversity protection.

Modern influences, however, have brought significant challenges: deforestation, riverbank erosion, industrialization, climate change, and the intrusion of market-based economic systems threaten both natural resources and cultural sustainability. Yet, indigenous tribes continue to demonstrate resilience through adaptation, community-based conservation, and cultural revival movements.

Using interdisciplinary methods—anthropology, ethnography, folklore studies, environmental studies, and cultural geography—this paper offers a holistic understanding of the ecological foundations of indigenous cultural identity in Assam. It argues that the protection of indigenous ecological knowledge is vital for sustainable development and climate resilience in the region.

Keywords: Indigenous tribes, Assam, nature, ecology, folk beliefs, rituals, cosmology, environmental ethics, cultural identity, traditional knowledge.

1. Introduction

The indigenous tribes of Assam represent some of the most culturally diverse communities in India, reflecting long histories of migration, settlement, cultural interaction, and ecological adaptation. Their habitats—river plains, wetlands, foothills, and forests—shape their lifestyles, languages, rituals, food practices, socio-economic structures, and worldviews. For these communities, nature is not an external resource but an integral part of social existence. Rivers, forests, animals, birds, soil, rainfall, and seasonal cycles hold aesthetic, spiritual, symbolic, and economic significance.

Assam's indigenous tribes have historically developed intricate environmental knowledge systems adapted to the monsoon-based ecology of the region. Their agricultural techniques, settlement patterns, traditional medicines, and ritual practices reveal an intimate understanding of local ecological conditions. In many tribal belief systems, natural elements such as the sun, moon, fire, water, forests, and mountains are deified, indicating a sacred understanding of nature.

This paper investigates the importance of nature in the indigenous tribes of Assam through an in-depth analysis of cultural practices, folk beliefs, ecological ethics, and traditional knowledge systems. It highlights how nature shapes tribal worldviews and sustains cultural continuity.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the cultural, spiritual, and economic significance of nature among the indigenous tribes of Assam.
2. To analyze how nature influences tribal rituals, festivals, oral traditions, and cosmology.
3. To document traditional ecological knowledge and resource management practices.
4. To study the relationship between natural environment and tribal social structure.
5. To assess the contemporary challenges facing indigenous ecological practices.
6. To highlight the relevance of indigenous environmental ethics in modern sustainable development.

3. Scope of the Study

The study covers major indigenous tribes of Assam, including:

- Mishing
- Bodo
- Karbi
- Garo
- Rabha
- Dimasa
- Deori
- Tiwa
- Sonowal Kachari
- Thengal Kachari
- Lalung and others.

The scope includes analysis of:

- Ritual practices
- Festivals
- Oral literature
- Agricultural systems
- Folk medicine

- Material culture
- Ecological knowledge
- Contemporary threats

4. Methodology

This research is based on:

4.1 Qualitative Research Methods

- Literature-based study
- Folklore analysis
- Anthropological theories
- Cultural ecological framework

4.2 Sources

Primary sources include:

- Ethnographic descriptions
- Oral narratives
- Community-based knowledge
- Observations of ritual practices

Secondary sources include:

- Books
- Journal articles
- Reports
- Theses
- Government publications

4.3 Theoretical Framework

- Cultural Ecology (Julian Steward)
- Symbolic Anthropology (Clifford Geertz)
- Environmental Determinism (Ratzel)
- Eco-critical theory in folklore

5. Significance of the Study

1. Highlights the deep connection between natural environment and tribal culture.
2. Offers insights for environmental conservation using indigenous knowledge.
3. Encourages cultural preservation through ecological awareness.
4. Helps policymakers integrate local traditions into sustainable development initiatives.
5. Contributes to academic fields such as folklore studies, anthropology, and cultural geography.
6. Emphasizes the importance of indigenous ecological ethics in climate resilience.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Studies on Indigenous Ecology

Scholars such as P. K. Bhowmick, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Verrier Elwin, and Nirmal Kumar Bose have explored tribal relations to nature across India. Their works emphasize the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems.

6.2 Assam-Specific Studies

- S. K. Chatterjee and Medhi (1999) highlight how river systems influence the socio-cultural life of Assam's tribes.

- T. B. Subba and G. C. Sharma provide ethnographic insight into Himalayan and North-East tribal ecologies.
- Sources on individual tribes (e.g., Mishing, Bodo, Karbi, Garo) document nature-centered rituals, oral traditions, and cosmologies.

6.3 Folklore and Nature

- William Bascom and Dorson emphasize oral narratives as cultural carriers of ecological knowledge.
- Assamese folklorists such as Birendranath Datta and Praphulla Deka demonstrate how folk narratives encode ecological memory.

6.4 Eco-critical Perspectives

Recent eco-critical scholarship highlights indigenous knowledge as crucial for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation.

7. Detailed Analysis

7.1 Nature in Tribal Cosmology

Indigenous tribes perceive nature as infused with spiritual force. Elements such as sun, moon, wind, soil, and water are deified.

Examples:

- Mishing belief in *Donyi-Polo* (sun-moon deity).
- Bodo worship of *Mainao* (goddess of crops).
- Karbi belief in forest spirits called *Rongphu*.
- Garo worship of *Misi Saljong* (sun deity and harvest spirit).
Nature is seen as a moral force and protector.

7.2 Nature in Festivals and Rituals

7.2.1 Mishing Community

- *Ali-Aye-Ligang*: spring agricultural festival celebrating sowing of *ahu* rice.
- *Dobur Uie*: ritual to appease forest and river spirits.
- Bamboo, leaves, smoked fish, and rice beer (*apong*) reflect ecological ties.

7.2.2 Bodo Community

- *Kherai Puja*: invokes natural forces and fertility.
- *Bwisagu*: celebrates animal and human regeneration during spring.

7.2.3 Karbi Community

- *Rongker*: full-fledged ceremony to honor forest deities for ecological protection.

7.2.4 Garo Community

- *Wangala*: harvest festival dedicated to *Misi Saljong*, symbolizing sun and fertility.

7.2.5 Rabha and Dimasa

Their rituals reflect seasonal cycles, forest dependence, and agrarian rhythms.

7.3 Nature in Livelihood Practices

7.3.1 Agriculture

Tribes use:

- shifting cultivation (*jhum*)
 - wet rice cultivation
 - terrace cultivation
- Agricultural calendars follow lunar phases and monsoon rhythms.

7.3.2 Fishing

Communities living near rivers (Mishing, Sonowal Kachari) use:

- bamboo traps
- traditional nets
- eco-friendly fishing methods

7.3.3 Hunting and Gathering

Forest-based tribes rely on edible roots, wild fruits, herbs, and animal protein. There are taboos protecting certain species.

7.3.4 Weaving & Crafts

Natural materials used:

- bamboo
- cane
- wild cotton
- riverine

clay

These materials reflect ecological connectedness.

7.4 Nature in Oral Literature

7.4.1 Myths and Legends

Examples include:

- Flood myths of Mishing and Karbi.
- Forest spirit narratives among Nagas and Garos.
- River-based myths of Dimasa and Deori tribes.

7.4.2 Folk Songs

- Bihu songs (Assamese tribes) reference seasonal rhythms.
- Mishing *oi nitom* describes rivers and paddy fields.
- Bodo musical lyrics refer to nature as metaphor for human relations.

7.4.3 Folktales

Animals, birds, forests, and rivers symbolize moral values.

7.5 Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

7.5.1 Agricultural Knowledge

- Mixed cropping
- Natural pest control
- Seed preservation
- Indigenous irrigation

7.5.2 Weather Prediction

- Reading animal behavior
- Observing wind direction and humidity
- Studying cloud patterns

7.5.3 Community Forest Management

- Sacred groves
- Clan-based forest zones
- Ritual protection of ecologically sensitive areas

7.5.4 Folk Medicine

Use of:

- basil

- ginger
- neem
- turmeric
- medicinal bark
- wild

creepers

Tribal healers (*ojhas, miris, gaonburas*) preserve herbal knowledge.

7.6 Environmental Ethics and Philosophy

Tribal ethics emphasize:

- community ownership
- sustainable usage
- gratitude to nature
- non-exploitative worldview
- rituals reinforcing conservation

7.7 Threats to Indigenous Ecological Systems

1. Deforestation
2. Riverbank erosion
3. Industrial pollution
4. Climate change
5. Loss of biodiversity
6. Encroachment
7. Market-driven economic pressures
8. Decline in transmission of indigenous knowledge

8. Conclusion

Nature remains the foundation of identity, culture, and survival for the indigenous tribes of Assam. It shapes their cosmology, rituals, livelihoods, folklore, and environmental ethics. Despite modern challenges, tribal communities continue to maintain and transmit traditional ecological knowledge that offers valuable insights for sustainable development and environmental conservation. Recognizing and strengthening this indigenous ecological heritage is essential for cultural preservation, biodiversity protection, and climate resilience in Assam.

9. Findings

1. Indigenous tribes of Assam maintain deep spiritual relationships with nature.
2. Festivals and rituals are rooted in agricultural and ecological cycles.
3. Oral literature encodes ecological knowledge and environmental ethics.
4. Tribal agricultural systems are environmentally sustainable and adaptive.
5. Community-based forest management helps conserve biodiversity.
6. Traditional medicinal practices rely heavily on natural resources.
7. Environmental threats are disrupting tribal ecological knowledge.
8. Younger generations are losing touch with nature-based traditions.
9. Indigenous ecological ethics can support modern environmental policies.
10. Preservation of nature-centered cultural practices is crucial for sustainable development.

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