Journal of Kolkata Society for Asian Studies : : Vol. 2, No. 1 & 2, 2016

ECOBALANCE, GROWTH STRATEGIES, IDEAL PAST AND TRANSFORMED FUTURE: THE NORTH-EAST INDIAN RESPONSE*

SOUMEN SEN

The ecological movement, with increased public awareness of environmental issues, is distinctly a contemporary agenda. These movements, based on anxieties for the loss of environment-friendly existence and habitat, share a disenchantment with the priorities of modern societies that seek to master nature in the interest of increased growth, expanded market and profit. This agenda of growth has been expounded well by formar Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohon Singh, in his vision 'North East 2020': "Full advantage may be taken of the Look East Policy of the Government of India. ASEAN markets provide big opportunities for NER, particularly in areas such as promotion of horticulture, floriculture and medicinal herbs. Affinity in the cultural background will make our products acceptable and saleable once the connectivity is improved."[1] Interpreters find in this 'vision' a suggestion for exploring the possibility of producing commodities easily marketable in ASEAN markets and building infrastructural support for the purpose. Cultural affinities are seen only as a means to an end and add to the 'acceptability' and 'salability' of North east's products…. Human movements are not envisaged as a means of addressing some of the tangled ethnic and identity problems..." (Das, S. K. 2008: 152)

The anxieties seem to be almost similar to those responsible for the agitational movements calling for eco-consciousness. Sharing a 'disenchantment' with priorities in the growth strategies looking for expanded markets and profits, eco-conscious movements began to develop. The movement-leaders were apprehensive of increasing global damage that might be brought by mindless destruction of eco-balance following the fast pace of the so called 'growth'. The floating of Green peace or Green Parties, the save Narmada movement, etc. are the few examples.

It all began with an initiative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and cultural Organization (UNESCO), when it invited Sir Julian Huxley to head a programme of reviewing and making recommendations on the wildlife sanctuaries in eastern and central Africa. Stuart A. Marks gives us a graphic report[2] on the initiative of Huxley to identify the problems and the possible solutions. "Huxley mentions the 'alarming increase in organized poaching, (and) the equally alarming increase in population.' These factors, together with state-of-the-art methods for controlling tsetse flies and diseases in livestock (removing

* The Lecture was delivered as special lecture in a Two-Day Conference on "Aspects of Community Development in the North-East Indian States", organized by Kolkata Society for Asian Studies, during 10-11 December, 2014.

wild life from vast areas through shooting), administrative inclinations toward technological and agricultural development over practical endeavors with wild animals in their natural habitats, the monetization of 'tribal' economies, were adversely stacked against the survival of the continent's natural endownments of fauna and flora… Huxley sought to frame this problem in objective terms : 'The ecological problem is fundamentally one of balancing resources against human needs, both in the short and in the long term. It must be related to a proper evaluation of human needs, and it must be based on resource conservation and resource use, including optimum land use and conservation of the habitat.' Ecology was 'the science of interrelations.' For Huxley and others like him the balance in those relationships was oriented towards the past, …the 'original ecosystem', which 'has suffered vast damages at the hands of man" (Marks, 1994:113-14).

Huxley might have made his observations on African experience, but it was realized soon that the problem was global. By the fourth quarter of the last century, thinkers and activists alike have shown themselves adept at adopting a Green agenda and developing alternative sources of power, for the possibility of lesser damage to the ecosystem. They felt that a global problem needs a global response. Being conscious of the connections across ecological, economic and political orders, they preferred discovering a language and strategy that will "make radical ecology true radical".[3]

The drive of these demands and movements has been well explained by Peter Brooker, "Ecology derives from the Greek, *oikos,* signifying the unity of NATURE (including human, animal and plant life) and science. Arguably, environmentalist and ecological movements are concerned to make good this original meaning in a condition of harmony and equivalence when nature in its different senses will be free of the alienation and exploitation wrought by the abuse of science and technology" (Brooker : 83)

But how? That is a grave question. One answer will be found, as environmentalists envisage, in re-investigating the paradigms and postulations for ' uniform' development irrespective of both environmental and cultural diversities. What should be done is designing the policy and strategy of 'development' in terms of the "Kinds of Society"[4] or "The Total relationship between man and the world around him"?[5]

Even with these perspectives, the questions 'how', remains unsolved. The idea is not new; the ancient had also understood it well and prescribed strategies in myths and tales. But can adherence to those principles be operative, to day? For instance, the myth, the most significant narrative the ancients had produced, by tracing mythically a relationship between the cosmos and the world around, "are reflections not so much of how things came to be, but how they should be, or how they should remain" (Csapo, E. 2005:143). Investigators, therefore, defined a myth as a 'charter of beliefs', what we get from the noted anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. His classic statement of the function of myth in his short book, *Myth in Primitive Society* (1926), claims that "an intimate connection exists between the word, the mythos, the sacred tale of a tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, the moral

deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities, on the other" (1954:96). He maintains further that "myth, in fact, is not an idle rhapsody… but a hard-working, extremely important cultural force"..., "a narrative told in satisfaction of practical requirements", which "contains practical rules for the guidance of man", and " a vital ingredient of practical relation to the environment". (97,101,147).

Myths, to the ancients, were, "the lore of essential core"[6], a belief system, the ideology based on a world view, that taught people to adjust and establish " a practical relation with the environment." Folklorists know that myths, legends and tales, the three major catagories of folk literature, though fantastic or fictional, release the suppressed tensions in the society. So the researchers search for the context as well as the text. Calling attention to various functional roles of folklore, folklorists find, as William Bascom found, that "A tale is not a dictated text with interlinear translation, but a living recitation delivered to a responsive audience for such cultural purposes as reinforcement of custom and taboo, release of aggressions through fantasy, pedagogical explanations of the natural world, and application of pressures for conventional behaviour." (Dorson, R. M. 1972:21).

All the tales, are, therefore, socially relevant narratives, and contain prescriptions for appropriate acts to negotiate with nature and surroundings, through customs and taboos. Tales, specially the mythical narratives, present metaphorical graphs for building the abacus to act as the base for the architrave, the social frames, for a sound structure. These can be described as social ideology or philosophy for planning a sound future, regulating the present, with lessons from the past.

This has been successfully pursued to counter aggression from outside, and subversion from within till large scale aggression had happened in the times called modern. Globally this had happened in a fast pace with colonization. The independent states, following the throwing out of the colonial baggage, began suffering from a paradox, both political and developmental. For instance, as K. C. Baral, rightly points out, "A tribal from Northeast India struggles to find his/her moorings being caught in the conflicts between multiple structures of power and authority. If the Indian state with its avowed policy of democratization of the tribal polity and promotion of protective discrimination and economic empowerment through development makes efforts at integration of the people with the mainstream, the militants resist strongly such moves propagating separateness, promising the people the possibility of romanticized sovereign tribal homeland." (Baral, K. C. 2006 : 5).

It is true, the tales and customs of a community, big or small, tell of distinct ethno-cultural identity and it is not only the militant groups but many intellectuals share the anxieties of losing their distinct identity base in the face of possible damage to both the natural and social environment due to the changes brought in the course of so-called development. This anxiety seems to be real to them when, as Kobena Mercer puts it, "something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (1994:259). This doubt is expressed, in very clear terms, by an Ao Naga poet and academician

Temsula Ao in one of her essays, "The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become more brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity" (2006:7).

And, with this anxiety, Temsula Ao wants to revisit the world of ancient lore, "the lore of essential core", "To redraft history", in her poems, called " Songs from the Other Life";

These songs
From the other life
Long lay mute
In the confines
Of my restive mind
Unrelenting in their urging
For new vocabulary
To redraft history
They now resonate
In words of new
Discernment
To augment the lore
Of our essential core. (2007.b)

What Temsula Ao calls "The Lore of Essential Core," or the 'lore' received from the ancients, is in essence the knowledge system, both cognitive and prescriptive. It once prepared a people for building a society with a distinct identity. It told all – the history, science, social norms, etc., and prepared the members of the group to know of an 'ideal past' and the method for designing a blue print for a 'transformed future'. In simple words, this knowledge is a set of constructs, however imaginary they may appear, that a society gives to itself to grapple the problems of survival, everyday living and future build-ups.

Thus, a strong literary tradition has emerged in North-East India which poignantly articulates the contesting trends between development and environment; those essentially intersect with each other. The ecopoetic/ecocritic genre of literature shows anxiety about the loss of folklore tradition and changing landscape with diminishing forest and natural resources. At the same time, they cast their gaze at 'development' with the hope that it would not alter the surrounding in an undesirable manner. (Taken from the concept note for a seminar on Ecology and Progress in North-East India, held in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, September, 2014). There is equally a strong concern for the possible loss of cultural identity of a group.

If ecology signifies the unity of nature- human, animal, plant, and all other environmental life, from cosmos to earth – science and society, then it comes ultimately to the knowledge system, defined as 'lore'. After all, ecological science would dictate "the proper approach to the problems involved"[7]. The same purpose is served by 'lore'. It formulates a vision, as well as a programme for determining the patterns of everyday living drawing inspiration from 'the ideal past', and coding the strategies for a 'transformed future'. I have written elsewhere that "It is a cognitive system that has its own dynamics of knowing and making known. Lore, as knowledge, appears as a discourse and its structure reflects the structure of the society which produces it and whose needs it satisfies. Such forms of discourse generate a kind of social authority to ensure social well-being and spawn all the sectors of the knowledge system called folklore. This approach, however, does not negate altogether the claim of 'science', the empirical observation of natural phenomena, in order to use the multiple natural resources to the advantage of the people and the society." (Sen, S. 2010 : 14-15).

I intend to place here only one example. It is a myth obtained from the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, a state in North-east India. This is a narrative that tells of too many things, such as history of settlement, kinship and social norms, administrative arrangements, environmental facts and ritual system. The story runs as follows : Once upon a time four wandering sisters and their men arrived at a spot near a river at Jowai, in Jaintia Hills. The four sisters Ka Bon, Ka Tein, Ka Wet and Ka Doh – and the men decided to stay there overnight. In the dead of the night, Ka Bon heard a sound and woke up. She was horrified to see a stone dancing. She called out everybody and were about to flee with them. The stone stopped dancing and said, 'Oh, children of God, do not run away. Stay with us here. I assure you that no harm will come to you. My brothers and I shall guard you from all evils. We shall watch the four corners. Our maid servant, the river Ka Myntdu, will serve you faithfully[8].

The name of the stone deity was Mukhai. He and his four brothers, U Mushiang, U Muralong and U Mulong as is believed guard the four corners of Jowai where the progenies of the four sisters (*Saw Kpoh* – four wombs, families), live. These stone deities who guard the four corners or gates (*saw duar*) are venerated with sacrifices during a ritual of the annual Behdienkhlans festival as the four mothers, who mothered *Saw Kpoh* are also propitiated in another ritual during the festival. *Saw Kpoh* or the four clans, whose forefathers were the children of the four sisters of the myth, are believed to be the original settlers in the area and are vested with all the administrative powers and functions, both secular and religious. The myth is ceremonially narrated by a teller, consecrated by the *Dalai*, the chief of the area, in a ritual event during the Behdienkhlam festival, when the sisters of the myth are venerated. This practice indicates a principle of ancestor worship. Other rituals of the festival signify nature veneration. A sacred tree called *Khnong,* brought from the nearby forest, tree branched atop all the residential houses, logs representing the mythical sisters,

the four protector-brothers of the myth, the river myntder, are all venerated in different ritual event. The practice of erecting megaliths is also a part of the religious activities.[9]

Out of this complex of socio-religious system also grew the practice of sacred groves, designated as the adobe of gods and protector- spirits. All these practices reflect a nature-man-spirit-god complex. The ideology is based on the eagerness for adjustment with environment and reflects a sound eco-consciousness. The socio-religious customs and taboos, associated with these cult-practices are constructs with such references. Any violation or subversion is considered a sacrilege. All these ideas and practices show how the social network plays a vital role in the sensitive understanding of ecology and its linkages with social welfare.

For all practical purposes, narratives of all kinds, specially the myth, with associated ritual system, are designed with a functional temper, to include what is emphasized today, as the ecological awareness, to "dictate the proper approach to the practical problems involved, … (since) the ecological problem is fundamentally one of balancing resources against human needs… based on resource conservation and resource use, including optimum land use and conservation of the habitat." (Marks, S. 1994: 112-13)

The message is clear : development cannot be done at the expenses of ecobalance, which is both environmental and social. It is true, the prescriptions of the ancients, expressed in myths and other elements of folklore, will not hold now, though it was necessitated in their times. The current problem is simply a problem of adjustment between an ideal past and the requirements of current living. To many as seen in Temsula Ao's concern, it is also an issue of cultural identity. To them a programme for socio-economic development, without any care for preserving cultural distinctiveness will be disastrous. They cry for a careful handling of the problem of adjustment between the need for (modern) development and cultural heritage.

Agreeing to the fundamentals of the issue, some, however differ from an attitude of absolute protection. If we remember the debate sparked by Verrier Elwin's 'national park' policy and Nehru-Elwin *Panchasheel* for tribal development[10], it would be clear why today a Mizo academician Margager Zama, cautions against too much of ethnocentrism which may encourage cultural myopia. Her view is : "After all, culture and tradition are alike in that they are both created by human beings and human experience. They are subject to change with the passing of time." (2006:11)

Anil Boro, a Boro scholar, is more emphatic when he says that progress or development, even the forces of globalization, is not always unwelcome : "We should take up the challenge and see to it that instead of clamouring for unique identities, which are not out there turning the advantages of globalization to our benefit" (2006:15).

The ultimate (and desirable as well), course is, therefore, the course of adjustment, Reciting Julian Huxley we can confidently argue that, "The ecological problem is fundamentally one of balancing" (quoted in Marks 1994:112). Equally important is the approach that I maintained in an essay that the "Development programmes and blueprints

for social engineering are likely to fail, without an assessment of ethnographic data and contours of tradition of an ethnic group." (Sen, S. 2010:52).

A wonderful poetical expression of a Nyishi poet Yumlam Tana from Arunachal Pradesh may be quoted (in Ao, T. 2007 (b) : 106) to highlight the statement above to reach, to the history of change, or transformed future.

I write in English, which is not my language
You see, I am a Nyishi
A tribal claiming to be a man
I am all humanity
(Yet) Nothing to divide me
From my fellowmen.

Perhaps, there can never be an attitudinal approach more pragmatic than this.

Notes

[1] See, for detail, Singh, Manmohon, 2005 : 3-4.
[2] Marks, Stuart A. 1994 : 112-14.
[3] David Harvey, quoted in Brooker, P. 2003 :84.
[4] Raymond Williams, quoted in Brooker, P. *ibid.*
[5] Lyndon Johnson, quoted in Hufford, Mary 1994:1.
[6] An expression used by Ao Naga poet and scholar Temsula Ao. See, Ao, T. 2007 (a).
[7] Sir Julian Huxley, quoted in Marks, 5:112.
[8] See, Sen, S. 2010 :112.
[9] See, for details, Sen, S. 2004,See. II.
[10] See, for a detailed discussion on the issue, Sen 2010 : 123-33.

References

Ao, T. 2006. 'Identity and Globalization : A Naga Perspective,' *Indian Folklife.* 22.
Ao, T. 2007 (a) *Songs from the Other Life : Poems.* Pune : Graswork Books.
Ao, T. 2007 (b) Writing Orality. In : S. Sen and D. L Kharmawphlang (eds.) *Orality and Beyond.* Kolkata : Sahitya Akademi.
Baral, K. C. 2006. 'Globalization and Tribes of North East India', *Indian Folklife.* 22.
Boro, A. 2006. 'Globalization and Local Cultures :The Tribes of North East India', *Indian Folklife.* 22
Brooker, P. 2003. *A Glossary of Cultural Theory.* London : Arnold.
Das, S. K. 2008. Between South and Southeast Asia : Recasting India's Northeast in the Age of Globalization. In : A. K. Ray & S. B. Chakraborty (eds.) *Society, Politics and Development in North East India.* New Delhi : Concept.
Dorson, R. M. 1972. *Folklore and Folklife.* Chicago : University of Chicago Press.
Hufford, M. (ed.), 1994. *Conserving Culture.* Chicago : University of Illinois Press.
Malinowski, B. 1954, *Magic, Science, and Religion and other Essays.* Ny : Garden City.
Marks, S. A. 1994. Managerial Ecology and Lineage Husbandry : Environment Dilemmas in Zambia's Luangua Valley. In : M. Hufford (ed.) *Conserving Culture*. Chicago : University of Illinois Press.
Mercer, K. 1994. *Welcome to the Jungle.* London: Routledge.
Sen, S. 2004. *Khasi Jaintia Folklore : Context, Discourse and History.* Chennai : National Folklore Support Centre.
Sen, S. 2010 (a) Of Hills, Dales and Groves : Khasi Jaintia Folklore and Ecology. In : *Folklore Identity Development.* Kolkata : Anjali Publisher.

Sen, S. 2010 (b). Blazing the Trail : The History of Mentalities, The Folklife and the Socio-Psychological Issues of Development in North East India. In : *Folklore Identity Development.* Kolkata :Anjali Publisher.
Sen, S. 2010 (c) Verrier Elwin in India's North East Frontier. In : *Folklore Identity Development.* Kolkata : Anjali Publishers.
Singh, M. 2005. 'North east 2020', *Yojana* December.
Zama, M. Ch. 2006. 'Globalization and the Mizo Story', *Indian Folkllife* 22.

Bio Profile of the Author
Former Head, Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies
Former Director, Folklore Research and Archive,
North East Hill University, Shillong
E-mail : drssen@rediffmail.com