

# FILMS FROM NORTHEAST INDIA: A CULTURAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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*Films from Northeast India are fairly new areas of research that is gaining quick momentum, especially with films from this region being screened at various National and International Film Festivals and also bagging National and International awards. Nature and the indigenous life of the people from this region are intricately linked and this intimacy with nature is reflected in films. Films from this region can help in understanding the complex man-ecology relationship at a time when most environmental narratives are inclined towards portraying an anthropocentric, ecological apocalyptic vision of the world. This paper examines a culture and ecology that are both endangered and yet unexplored, that is new and yet very old, that is on the threshold of the liminality of body/mind, nature/culture, spirit/life, the same nature of which is reflected in films like Village Rockstars, Rong'kuchak (Echoes), III Smoking Barrels and The Pangti Story (documentary).*

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While writing about his film *Rong'kuchak (Echoes)*, Dominic Sangma, a director from Northeast India stated "I remember when I was a kid we would shout out to the forest and it would call us back. I asked my father the reason for it, he told me it was a voice of our forefathers that was responding to us."

Since archaic beginnings, humans have construed their life and living in relation and in (inter) dependence to the physical environment. The beginning of cognitive revolution gave birth to myths, legends, oral stories, folklores, gods and religion, rituals and beliefs. Nature and culture are not binary opposites of each other per se, but are products of human-nature interaction and evolution. Sergio Manghi in "Forward in Wider Perspective." *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* writes that the human mind is placed "in the very heart of natural history, in the self-generating grammar of living process and of their incessant, remarkable metamorphoses" Through times, from mythical stories and oral narratives, paintings and architecture, literature and films, the fundamental interconnectedness between nature and culture has been symbolically expressed.

Cultural ecology, as a study of the relationship shared between man and nature and adaptations to the ecological changes which in turn shapes any given culture at a particular period has found much relevance in the field of literature. A silent spectator and a silent victim, many eco critics today trace the representation, misrepresentation and non representation of nature in literary narrative process as integrally intertwined to anthropocentric and androcentric activities. This eco critical perusal of literary texts has shown the shared ecological experiences in the face of cultural variance. As Hubert Zapf in his book *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts Environmental Culture* writes, "Literature as a medium of cultural ecology thus specifically focuses on the interactivity of mind and life which is staged in literary texts as a liminal phenomenon on the boundary between culture and nature, self and other, anthropocentric and biocentric dimensions of existence."

Literature, as an art form has and is undergoing immense evolutionary changes and films are the extended arms of literature where stories and narratives adapt aural-visual medium of representation. This has given a paradigm shift in the way of perceiving as also in the way of representing the human/culture, mind/body, spirit/life dual/liminal relationship. Cultural dialogues are universally different but the shared ecological experience is common and when presented in films, it becomes universal experience. Adrian Ivakhiv, an eco critic writes that films have the ability to form a new bond between humans and the physical environment by bringing before the audience a world beyond their immediate perception.

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Having stated thus, literature and films from Northeast region of India is more or less a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon and of an even more complex making. Despite the linguistic, ethnic, cultural and literary diversity, it is oft times considered a homogeneous built by people from outside the region. Narrowing the focus on study of films, films from this region are not commercially viable. Linguistic and cultural differences, lack of funding, filmmaking facilities and cinema halls, are also among the myriad reasons why films from this region lack popularity amongst the local audience. Besides, the popularity of mainstream Bollywood, Hollywood and Korean cinemas, which are easily available on movie streaming sites like Amazon Prime, Netflix or even Youtube, have created a generation of cinephiles who can hog on movies from home. Most of the independent filmmakers have zeal to make known their stories outside and many films from this region have received national and international awards but lack of advertisement, coupled with the stereotypical attitude towards these films as being inferior and sub standard to mainstream films are reasons for its unpopularity amongst the masses.

Films from Northeast are not specifically eco themed. They are woven around narratives of political unrest, insurgency, identity, folk culture and the like. Just as traditional literature echoes human-culture relationship and adaptability with nature, most films reflect the same. Usually shot on location with nature as the backdrop, deep ecological concern and adaptability to it in the face of industrialisation, urbanisation and deforestation is a characteristic displayed by films from this region.

Rima Das' *Village Rockstars* is a film that traces the rural life of her native place in Assam. A self taught filmmaker, *Village Rockstars* tells the story of a village 10 year old girl Dhunu whose only dream is to own a guitar and form a band. Living in a flood prone area, for Dhunu and the rest of the villagers, swimming is a survival skill they will need to learn, if they are to adapt to the onslaught of monsoon floods. Set against this is Dhunu's struggle with societal gender role that she is expected to live by. Rima Das has captured various shots of Dhunu's predicaments standing in the lap of nature depicting a liminal discourse between the character and the environment, between thoughts and action, all captured in a seconds frame. Dominic Sangma, another independent filmmaker, who hails from the Northeastern state of Meghalaya is carving a steady niche for himself in films. His film *Rong'kuchak* (Echoes) reflect the aching sentiment of Lanche, a Garo poet, who realises the urgency of inventing a script, that would be of the Garos (The Garos, like most tribes from the Northeast do not have a script of their own and are reliant on the Roman script). Sangma has mostly used slow, long shots in the film and the final scene becomes a memorable one where the poet, questing to restore a culture that is quickly ebbing into oblivion, builds an interconnectedness between culture, identity and ecology, between the tangible and the physical, as the poet symbolically walks towards his roots, his people and his tribe, who crown him and welcome him, perhaps a Saviour figure for his people.

*III Smoking Barrels*, a film by Sanjay Deb, is a blend of 6 languages and a set of 3 narratives depicting the socio-political issues of the Northeast region. Insurgency and abduction, drug peddling and killings, illegal poaching and hunting, this film juxtaposes the rural and the urban, the dense forests with its secrets and the city streets with its noise against the adaptation of the characters to their unfortunate circumstances and the situations, creating a sense of enmity and friendship with nature all at the same time. This film delineates the essential human dependency on nature and its resources for shelter and livelihood, raising a deep ecological concern against the contemporary social and political concerns in the film.

Belonging to a different genre, *The Pangti Story*, a documentary, filmed by Sesino Yhoshü is the Amur Falcon story, the migratory bird that flocks in thousands every year during autumn to Pangti, a village in Nagaland. The Amur Falcons were hunted by the villagers in hundreds and thousands and had become their means of livelihood. With the ban on killing imposed, Pangti village has gone on to becoming a conservation site from a hunting ground of the Amur Falcons and the hunter villagers have become guardians of the migratory birds. This trajectory is not only the story of protecting migratory birds but it is also the story of surrendering one's hunting culture, culinary habits and livelihood into adapting an entirely new way of life. The ecological locale becomes significant as it determines the future discourse of any culture at a particular period in time.

The themes and narratives used in the making of the films from this region has a universal appeal and the global audience, besides seeing them as exotic specimens also recognizes the universality of the themes and the story these films offer. The visual depiction of nature in these films, can hence elicit the kind of change

in the consciousness of the audience. These films can offer a holistic and an alternative reading of the films while recognizing the complex interactions that prevail among the material, the natural and the perceptual factors in a man's life. Films from this region will be able to actively engage and educate the audience in addressing the ecological importance and the biocentric approach to life that is the urgent call of our age. The response of the global audience, to films that are far flung and near alien to their understanding and the fact that these audiences are able to involve in making meaningful engagements out of it, reflects upon the universality of the cultural ecological understanding of the sub conscious human mind, albeit the level of understanding and experience will lie at different scales.

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