Indian Knowledge System in the Context of North East India: Tracing the Literature

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Abstract

The association of North East India with the mainstream Indian Knowledge System is known and established through different scriptural documents. However, the demographic setup of this region is such that it can be cited as the most divergent cultural area in India. Hundreds of tribal communities live here with their distinct cultural, religious and social belief systems. They carry their indigenous knowledge systems. Unfortunately, in the pan-Indian scenario, these knowledge systems do not surface. Nonetheless, the literature produced in this region preserves and acts as a repository of these knowledge systems. The paper demonstrates how literature from this area asserts its indigenous identity by moving back to its roots. The paper also stresses the need for these knowledge systems to be established in parallel with the mainstream Indian Knowledge System.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Indigenous Knowledge System, Other, Alter-narrative, Ethno-spiritualism, Nature, Identity.

The word *Indian Knowledge System* refers to "practically everything about India" (Mahadevan et al, 2022, p.8). Yet, the term IKS (Indian Knowledge System) brings to our mind the ancient Vedas, Puranas, Upapuranas, Kautalya's *Arthashashtra*, Yoga, Ayurveda, etc. The knowledge included under IKS refers to a time when the geography of India spanned across Myanmar, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The knowledge systems of that time can be identified as indigenous knowledge systems belonging to various parts of this subcontinent, later identified as

India. If we accept this knowledge as indigenous, then this knowledge system should cover not only the above-mentioned texts and fields but also the indigenous knowledge systems of each tribe and community living here. This gesture immediately widens the horizon of what is known as the Indian Knowledge System.

North East India did have connections to this prevailing IKS. The proof of these connections can be established through the existing myths, religion and history. For instance, the *Yogini Tantra* and the *Kalika Purana* were composed in Assam. Beema from the *Mahabharata* married Hidimba, a Dimasa woman and their son, Ghatotkas, participated in the Kurukshetra war. The Dimasas introduce themselves as descendants of Ghatotkas. Chitrangada, the princess from Manipur, was married to Arjuna. They had a son called Babrubahona. However, this engagement with IKS appears too limited when we take into account the vast tapestry of indigenous knowledge systems found in North East India. In the book, *Indigenous Knowledge: A Resource Kit for Sustainable Development Researchers in Dryland Africa*, indigenous knowledge is introduced in the following manner:

> Indigenous knowledge (IK) is, broadly speaking, the knowledge used by local people to make a living in a particular environment (Warren, 1991). Terms used in the field of sustainable development to designate this concept include indigenous technical knowledge, traditional environmental knowledge, rural knowledge, local knowledge and farmers' or pastoralists' knowledge. Indigenous knowledge can be defined as "A body of knowledge built up by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature" (Johnson, 1992). Generally speaking, such knowledge evolves in the local environment, so that it is specifically adapted to the requirements of local people and conditions. It is also creative and experimental, constantly incorporating outside influences and inside innovations to meet new conditions. It is usually a mistake to think of indigenous knowledge as 'old-fashioned,' 'backwards,' 'static' or 'unchanging' (Langill, 1999, p.3).

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In North East India, all the tribal communities possess and practice their indigenous knowledge. However, in this paper, before moving on to explain the ways of this indigenous knowledge system, I want to point out the political and geographical location of North East India within India**.** If we look at the map of India, we can see that North East India is connected to India by a narrow corridor. In terms of customs and traditions, too, the people of North East India live with their own cultures and societies, which are remarkably different from mainstream India. After independence, North East India was annexed to India and made a part of the Indian nation. However, the locational identity of North East India is problematic because we cannot place North East India in the binary division of coloniser and colonised. Except for Assam, many of the states were not part of the agitations organised against British rule. Hence, we cannot employ the idea of the postcolonial without difference in this context.

Since its inception as part of India, North East India has been 'othered' for various reasons. This is another done by the 'other' in the binary composition of coloniser and colonised. Hence, North East India does not fit within this binary but holds a third space. As Sanjib Baruah states:

"North East India, as an official place name, carries with it the weight of several haphazard and poorly thought-out decisions made by the managers of the postcolonial Indian state as they were trying to turn an imperial frontier space into the national space of a normal sovereign state" (Baruah, 2020). Therefore, North East India becomes a space of postcolonial 'othering'. As it shares borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar, the central government seems to give special attention to this region, and the people living here tolerate decisions taken by the central government for the sake of security. In the majority of instances, the internal issues are also solved without the opinion of the native people. In this context, the situation of these people cannot be compared with that of postcolonial Indians, as the people of this region are in a state of 'Trishanku', as K. Satchidanandan writes, "This is a neither/nor condition that Sura P. Rath calls 'Trishanku'. 'The products of this hybrid location are results of a long history of confrontations between unequal cultures and forces, in which the stronger culture struggles to control, remake, or eliminate the subordinate partner'" (2002, p.52). Hence, the assimilation of North East India with India in terms of geography, culture and politics is an act of coercion, not voluntary.

Keeping these realities in mind when we address the issue of indigenous knowledge systems practised in this territory, we should consider their uniqueness. Since this is a paper that primarily addresses the subject of indigenous knowledge systems, the study will use and refer to available discussions in this area. The nature of the work is largely directed towards understanding and interpreting indigenous knowledge about North East India. Thus, this work will necessarily use surveys of accessible literature and available critical and literary interpretative schemas to arrive at an understanding of the significance of the knowledge system of the North East region.

The indigenous knowledge system of any community is marked by its close relationship with nature because it exists in total collaboration with nature. In North East India, indigenous knowledge develops where the folk people reside with their perception of man-nature-supernature. Supernature, here, means their collective perceptions of faith, fear and belief. Many phenomena that they cannot fathom, they refer to the supernatural world, and they live in harmony with that world with an immense sense of reverence. Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo defines the supernatural world in this manner: "A supernatural world constitutes a space that ordinary human beings, i.e., individuals who lack a special gift and esoteric knowledge, cannot normally reach during their lifetimes. Supernatural (non-human) space does not necessarily denote an upper or a lower world; it can also refer to defined spatial categories to which humans ordinarily have no access" (2011, p. 10). In the case of the indigenous people in North East India, the supernatural phenomena they encounter are connected to nature. They know different strategies to negotiate these situations, which come under the purview of their knowledge systems. These strategies are transmitted to the next generations orally. In this context, we can see that the Indian Knowledge System is also transmitted orally, but much of it is available in the form of manuscripts. However, the indigenous knowledge systems of different tribes of North East India are available only in the memories of the people. Many dialects that they speak do not have scripts; therefore, the question of written documents does not arise. In this context, can we pose the question of whether literacy represents the narrative and orality represents the alternative? It is a fact that the oral culture maintained by these people finds space in the periphery, not at the centre. Yet, it provides an alternative perspective on the Indian Knowledge System. Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane articulate this proposition in this way: "Social change becomes possible through rethinking and redescribing the social order and possibilities for the future. Since there is no such thing as a private language, redescription is a social and political activity. This 'rethinking' of ourselves emerges through social practice and also, more often than not, through social contradiction and conflict. In so doing, it brings new political subjects and practices into being" (2016, p. 608). In this frame of reference, alternative realities and alternative narratives always introduce society to a new

realm. However, this alternative narrative doesn't always need to be a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative. At the same time, Buell's idea of alterity reveals how each narrative is discursive and consequently ends up producing discourses. She argues:

> I assume that ethnicity/race and religion are discursively produced as well as socially and historically contingent. That is, instead of assuming that religion and race are either filled with some essential transhistorical content (otherwise known as a primordialist view) or are reducible to self-serving political tools (otherwise known as an instrumentalist view), I treat religion and race/ethnicity as concepts that are formulated, maintained and revised through argument as well as through social practices and institutions (qtd in Roberts, 2007, p.7).

According to this view, an alternative standpoint is intrinsic in each narrative. Even so, it is necessary to look at the notion of counter-narrative to know the differences between an alternative narrative and a counter-narrative.

Marianne Wolff Lundholt and David Boje while analyzing different approaches to counter narrative argues in their article entitled "Understanding Organizational Narrative-Counter-narratives Dynamics: An overview of Communication Constitutes Organization (CCO) and Storytelling Organization Theory (SOT) approaches": "The second study is *Considering Counter-Narratives* by Bamberg and Andrews (2004) who focused primarily on how individuals use their own life stories of personal experience (e.g. narratives about maternal influence, dealing with failure in infertility treatments, and older women and sexuality), to position themselves about dominant and/or master narratives. Bamberg and Andrews (2004, p. 1) defined counter-narratives as a concept that 'only makes sense about that which they are countering. The very name identifies it as a positional category, in tension with another category" (p. 19-20). In this regard, Homi K. Bhabha's idea of counter-narrative is also relevant. He suggests, "Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries -- both actual and conceptual -- disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (1990, p.300). Nonetheless, the indigenous knowledge systems existing in North East India do not pose a challenge to any category. They do not counter existing Indian Knowledge Systems; rather, they exist in their own space. Against this backdrop, Richard Bauman's observation is highly relevant as he comments, "Narrative is used not merely for solidarity, but also for divisiveness or at the very least, to demarcate differential identities" (1972, p.34). The alternative narratives passed on through oral tradition pose a 'differential identity' not only through the medium but also through the content. The oral narratives introduce us to a new territory of myths, belief systems, nature and super-nature. However, the dominant presence of mainstream IKS and the societal changes among the tribes seem to contribute to the slow disappearance of these alternative narratives. The question is: how do we access this world, because the survival of these narratives depends upon people and their memories? It is herein that the role of literature produced in this area becomes significant. Literature from this area makes this knowledge available to us with no intention of countering the master narrative of IKS. Essays such as "Rites in Passing" by Moji Riba, "U Thlen: The Man-Eating Serpent" by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "The Story of Creation" by Toshi Chopel, and "On Creation: Myths and Oral Narrative" by Mamang Dai demonstrate the multiple faiths, beliefs, customs and ethical systems within these various tribal communities.

Moji Riba, in his essay, talks about the role of the Nyibu, the priest, in the religious lives of the Apatani people. The Nyibus can exercise a significant amount of power, controlling the spiritual lives of these people. He also mentions the importance of oral transmission in disseminating ethical lessons. "U Thlen: The Man-Eating Serpent" displays a myth of the Khasi community, which survives as a living legend in the Cherrapunji area even today. Toshi Chopel's essay delineates the Lepcha community's myth of creation, which echoes the Genesis in the Bible and Brahma's creation of the world in Hindu mythology. The notable thing is the position occupied by elements of nature, such as mountains, trees, rivers, and the sky, in the story. It proves how the locations where they live determine their beliefs and norms.

Mamang Dai's essay asserts how myths and oral culture are still indispensable parts of the lives of people in her tribe. In the essay, she reiterates how stories are a storehouse of meanings and culture.

> "Who said this should be done? Who instructed men and women to erect a guardian gate at the entrance to every village? Who told us that the leaves and branches of certain trees are auspicious? One gateway leads to another. The Greek word mythos means 'talk' or 'story.' And like the original meaning of 'story' derived from the word 'storehouse,' a story begins to unfold as a storehouse of many meanings..." (2009, p.3)

Dai's statement reveals how these stories are a receptacle of indigenous knowledge within that particular community. She also reaffirms the fact that these stories act as binding forces by connecting an individual to his or her community as they grow up listening to the same stories. The essay also explains how these stories create unflinching beliefs, faith, and respect for nature. Dai states, "Yet, tell a villager about a shooting star and the old woman will say, 'Yes, yes, the stars are flying, but that

is Awawa's daughter flashing her hairpin at the demon pursuing her across the sky" (2009, p. 6).

To assess the contribution of literature to the preservation of this oral tradition, a novel entitled *When the River Sleeps*, written by Easterine Kire, a Naga writer, is analysed. The novel depicts Vilie's journey to fetch the heartstone from the sleeping river. The novel begins with the protagonist Vilie's dream. In his dream, Vilie struggles to grasp the heartstone from the sleeping river. After waking up, Vilie realises that it was a dream, but he starts to tell the story to Rokolhoulie, a young boy from his village, because Vilie knows that the young people are better listeners. This tradition of teaching the young generation through the medium of storytelling is quite old among the Naga tribal folk. Morungs, the youth dormitories, functioned as institutions among the Naga tribes in earlier times. The elderly people of the tribe taught different skills to the youth through the medium of storytelling in the Morungs. Vilie too observes his listeners as he tells the story of the sleeping river to many people. The narrator remarks, "He had told and retold the story to different bands of hunters who had come to him in the forest where he lived. Some of them shook their heads in disbelief. Others, like the young Rokolhoulie, listened in astonishment, absorbing every detail of Vilie's tale" (2014, p. 2). As Mamang Dai once mentioned, "Ours is an oral tradition, you know. I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories that were getting lost, and when you talk to people, even small things can trigger these memories off."[1]

Vilie stays in the forest, alienating himself from his village after the death of his beloved, Mechuseno. Mechuseno is believed to have died under the spell of a spirit. One day, while coming back from the forest, she tells her friends that a tall black man is following them, but no one except her sees him. After reaching home, she develops a fever, and she shrieks, saying the man has taken hold of her just before her death. Therefore, all the villagers believe that her death is caused by evil spirits, and she is buried outside the village gate. Since then, Vilie builds his hut near Seno's graveyard, proclaiming that he has married the forest, whereas his mother and other family members insist that he marry.

Vilie's journey to the sleeping river is full of challenges. He meets human beings and animals that are hostile to him, but he can tackle them with his human power. However, to handle the encounters with the spirits, he has to use his indigenous spiritual knowledge. In one of his stopovers, Vilie is attacked by a tiger, and he tries to counterattack it with his gun. However, very soon he realises that the tiger is not scared off by the gunshot. He discovers that it is a were-tiger. Immediately, Vilie addresses it as a human because they believe that some men of their tribe are born with the spiritual capacity to transform into tiger spirits. Vilie appeals to them, uttering their names and introducing himself as their clansman. He also confronts the widowed spirits while collecting the magical stone from the river. The magical stone bestows extreme power on the possessor, but the possessor has to be a morally upright and honest person. This shows how their beliefs and actions are associated with an ethically enriched life. These instances in the novel refer to the notion of ethno-spiritualism. Speaking about ethno-spiritualism in the context of African traditions, Stephen Bigger writes:

> Ethno-spirituality starts with the assumption that indigenous peoples were not ignorant savages but potentially wise within their level of knowledge. Missionary accounts obfuscate the picture as they were out of their intellectual and cultural depth and were indoctrinated into a hegemonic view of the value of Western Christianity. Over two centuries, they subtly interfered with indigenous beliefs, so we cannot posit a historically pure African pre-Christian faith. Lack of scientific education and knowledge encouraged elemental speculation about ourselves, the environment, the weather, and the heavens, which, over time, would have adapted to new knowledge. Our task is to re-evaluate this traditional wisdom without Christian or colonial assumptions (2009, p. 2-3).

They coined this term to counter the act of labelling these cultures as paganism and heathenism by the colonial masters. In the context of the North East region, too, after the onslaught of British colonialism and later Indian nationalism, the tribal people became victims of denigration by the powerful classes. Hence, the establishment of the fact that they practice ethno-spiritualism, which is different from mainstream spiritual faiths like Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., can help in the upliftment of their social and spiritual identity. The novel provides ample examples of ethno-spirituality within the tribe. The magical stone that Vilie can collect from the sleeping river after fulfilling all moral criteria can be interpreted as evidence of the belief in ethno-spiritualism that human beings are capable of supernatural power and can become godlike if they live a virtuous and incorruptible life. Vilie brings back the dying Ate (a young girl who was like a daughter to him) to life through the spiritual power bestowed by the magical stone. Vilie expresses how the heartstone imbues him with the power and courage to revive her. He tells Ate, "The heartstone seemed to be speaking to me, though I had moments of stubbornness. It gave me courage, and when I used its name again and again, I felt my small, weak voice becoming strong--- even magnified! It all seems like a dream now" (2014, p. 198).

The novel explores the multiple knowledge systems existing in those societies. Another significant reservoir of knowledge they carry is their knowledge of the ecosystem. There is a chapter entitled "Forest Etiquette" in the novel. Vilie's Nepali friend Krishna reminds him before his journey to the sleeping river, "Travel carefully, Saab, the forest is dangerous to those who don't know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it" (2014, p.20). In many instances in the novel, Vilie treats himself with herbs found in the forest when he falls sick. He makes a paste from medicinal herbs and applies it to his injuries several times. While travelling through the Rarhuria, the unclean forest, Vilie develops a fever. He finds shelter in the forest and eats medicinal herbs to recover from the fever. As a result, the fever subsides, and he continues his journey. Vilie once ponders over the role of the forest in his life: "The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it, and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the hearts of men. He felt truly wedded to her at this moment" (2014, p. 51). Whether it is an animal, tree, or the spirit of the forest, Vilie attempts to live in full cooperation with all, and the relevance of this practice can never be denied, even in our modern lives. Their spiritualism teaches them even to consider the river as a spirit. His friend Kani interprets that Vilie is large-hearted and teachable and "more amenable to spirits than the others" (2014, p. 108); hence, he is successful in collecting the heartstone. Vilie replies, "Indeed, the river is a spirit. Spirit responds to spirit. Your gun is useless against the things of the spirit that are not of flesh and blood" (2004, p. 108).

The novel also takes its stance against anthropocentrism. Gavin Rae, in his essay entitled "Anthropocentrism", defines: "Anthropocentrism is the belief that the human being exists at the centre of existence. While this can take many forms, each form of anthropocentrism shares the foundational premise that the human being is, in some way, unique among other things or aspects of existence. For this reason, it establishes a binary opposition between the privileged human and others" (2016, p.1). In this context, when we consider Vilie's life as portrayed in the novel, he appears to be insignificant in many of his encounters with natural elements. For instance, when he and Krishna's family are attacked by the wolves, the narrator describes their powerlessness as the entire family is about to be devoured by the wolves. Vilie saves them with his gun. Throughout the journey, Vilie can survive because of his ability to adapt to any natural environment. Additionally, Vilie's encounters with different spirits also show how he is small and insignificant in comparison to them. The attack by the widow spirits when he and Kani go to collect the river stone is also formidable. The narrator describes,

"They heard different sounds behind them: first, it was the cackling of old, old women, the sound of malicious victory. That was followed by laughter, the gurgling laughter of babies and children, innocent and enticing, urging them to look back. As the men carried on running, the laughter turned to high-pitched shrieks as the widow spirits tried to threaten and frighten the two men" (2014, p. 104-105). Instead of showing the human being as the most powerful entity, the novel depicts the vulnerability of individuals. In this way, the novel also paves the way for interpreting it from the perspective of posthumanism. Pranami Bhattacharyya, in her article "Ecology of the 'Other': A Posthumanist Study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*", argues:

> Vilie, the protagonist of *When the River Sleeps*, serves as a posthuman figure (Braidotti 2013b) who is instrumental in opening up 'the foreigner that lives within us' (Kristeva 1991, p. 1) as well as the ones outside—an introspective journey both within and without. He is freed to imagine 'other' possibilities, which his human society did not allow or facilitate. In this way, Vilie's ecology is a resonance of Natureculture (The Companion Species Manifesto, Haraway 2003; Malone and Ovenden 2017) because it puts into question the dualism deeply rooted in the intellectual mores of the humanities and sciences and constantly co-creates by intrinsically intertwining discourse, matter, and semiotics (2014, p.2).

In this way, the novel compels the readers to think beyond the dynamics of human-centred worldviews.

A similar novel, which stands out as an example of a storehouse of indigenous knowledge, is Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. The novel focuses on the supernatural belief systems that govern those societies. There is a character called Hoxo, and the novel provides an interesting story about his birth. One day, Hoxo's father, Lutor, and his friends return from a hunting expedition carrying a baby. They tell the villagers that the baby has fallen from the sky. No one questions them, and thus Hoxo is accepted into the community. The Adi tribe to which Mamang Dai belongs in Arunachal Pradesh also places great importance on myth. In the novel, in the first chapter of the second section, a shaman appears; he is the 'Miri', the custodian of the word for the Adis. He narrates the creation myth and stories among the Adis in the following way:

> In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. Keyum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became the Pathway. Out of this nebulous

Zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being (2006, p. 56).

The creation myth for the Adis has immense significance. The collective memory and imagination of the Adis are shaped by it. Mamang Dai writes about how these stories bind them together: "How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie within our stories (2009, p. 2). This novel also uncovers the ethno-spiritual belief system, which is in itself a robust and comprehensive knowledge system existing within the community.

Literature from Assam also projects the rich tribal traditions of the state. Beginning from Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Birendra Nath Bhattacharjya, Rong Bong Terang, Dhrubajyoti Bora, to contemporary writers like Mousumi Kandali and Geetali Bora, all have provided a vivid picture of tribal lives in their literary works. Even so, to throw light on the contemporary perspectives on the society and culture of tribal people, two recent stories, "Didaola Moromor Didaola" written by Gitali Bora and "The Black Magic Woman" written by Mousumi Literature from Assam, also project the rich tribal traditions of the state. Beginning with Rajanikanta Bordoloi, Birendra Nath Bhattacharjya, Rong Bong Terang, and Dhrubajyoti Bora, to contemporary writers like Mousumi Kandali and Geetali Bora, all have provided a vivid picture of tribal life in their literary works. To highlight the contemporary perspectives on the society and culture of tribal people, two recent stories, "Didaola Moromor Didaola" written by Geetali Bora and "The Black Magic Woman" written by Mousumi Kandali, are analysed. In "Didaola, Moromor Didaola", the protagonist, Boibhobi, revels in the beauty and abundance of nature in contrast to the narrowness of the city. She has a transcendent experience looking at the unlimited sky while her feet are submerged in the cold water of the Didaola River. Boibhobi visits Haflong as it is the native place of her friend, Akash Langthasa. Nonetheless, it serves as an occasion to introduce her to a completely new world. This story also reflects on the tribal oral culture as Boibhobi listens to the oral history of the Dimasa from Akash's grandparents. The narrator comments: "These spirited tales are the soul's messages of a simple tribal society"[2] (2002, p.17). Boibhobi knows the city as a place where people tarnish her image by creating fake accounts in her name on pornographic websites. Boibhobi is disillusioned about the dichotomy between the civilised and the non-civilised. After her brief stay in Haflong, she is longing for more trips to Haflong. She can understand the openness, simplicity, and love of the Dimasa people. The proximity to nature teaches them

the lesson of cooperation and collaboration. That is why Ringmi, a Dimasa girl, tells Boibhobi, "Don't worry. I am Dimasa. Do you know the meaning of Dimasa? Dima means water, and sa means children. That means we are the offspring of water. Water does not harm its offspring. It washes away our pain, sadness, and sins" (2022, p.13). The text also upholds the idea of 'natureculture'. As Emily Potter and Gay Hawkins say in their write-up entitled "Naturecultures: Introduction":

> However, in the multiple milieux of everyday life, humans and non-humans have always been caught up with each other in ways that make a nature/culture binary impossible to sustain—something that many non-Western cultures have long acknowledged. As Stephen Muecke reminds us, 'we have only ever managed to philosophise with the help of things: the turning stars, apples which fall, turtles and hares, rivers and gods… They all have a part to play, forming collectivities which have to decide who can live with what and how'[3].

In the story, the so-called cultured and educated are engaged in making schemes to trap their known people, whereas in the Dimasa village, an unknown girl from the plains is embraced with love and care.

The other story, "The Black Magic Woman" by Mousumi Kandali, portrays Assamese women from the perspective of a British officer, John McCosh, in the pre-independence era. He is curious about the local 'Kabiraji'[4] way of treating sick people. He visits many such practitioners and families to gain full knowledge about the practice. He is surprised to see many women practitioners who successfully cure sick people. He is startled to see the unusual ways of treating sick people and finds the women of the region distinct and mysterious. He comes to know about Mayong, the place of black magic in Assam. He meets many women from the region who are quite different from the white English women he has been familiar with. The narrator describes, "A woman with a figure similar to that of idols made of burnt terracotta appeared in front of him. Her chest was covered with a green bodice. She wore a traditional red embroidered mekhela that reached her knees. Her bare arms shone like ivory even in the darkness. She was carrying a large cloth to cover the patient. She was surprised to find him there, but without any inhibition or fear, she stood close to her sick father" (2022, p.6). The sahib undergoes a near-death experience after taking betel nut and paan offered by the same woman. He has recovered after drinking the cold water she gave him. McCosh goes through a great conflict in his mind regarding the real identity of the woman. His doubts are alleviated by Kabiraj's views on women. The Kabiraj says, "…beware of women. Whatever class and caste she may be— beware! Nobody can tell what a *tiri*, a woman, is plotting. Our women know black magic.

The old name of our country is Kamrup, and our women were called Mohini… Did you get it?" (2022, p.12). Thus, McCosh prepares a report where he mentions these women as black magic women. He writes, "The women of this country… are very fair… many of them would be considered beautiful…the women roam about in public divested of the artificial modesty practised by native ladies in other parts of India. Unfortunately, their morality is at a low ebb. The inhabitants of most provinces look down upon the Assamese as enchanters, and the women come in for a large share of suspicion— indeed, they are all believed to be enchantresses" (2022, p. 13). The story represents the irony that knowledge, when possessed by women, becomes black magic, and they transform into enchantresses. The narrator notes in the context of McCosh's situation and comments, "However, John McCosh was also a man. Like every man, he too could visualise a woman only in two extreme avatars, either a pure, virtuous goddess or a witch or enchantress. No man can accept that a woman can have both virtues and vices" (2022, p.11). The writer reveals that she happened to come across this real report of the British officer in the library of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, where he comments that Assamese women are enchantresses who practice black magic (2022, p.28).

The second part of the story narrates the narrator's own experiences in the capital city, Delhi, in the year 2015. It depicts how, even after a century, the perception of the mainstream Indian society regarding Assam and the other Northeastern states has not changed. She recounts her bizarre experiences in an area in Delhi where even the rape of girls or women is considered an insignificant occurrence. People stare at her when she walks around wearing jeans and t-shirts. Even in her rented house, some intruders make her obscene proposals. The story suggests that time has changed, but the discourse regarding North-East India and their conceptions about the women belonging there have not changed. The same discourse of marginalisation and alienation continues under the pretext of cultural differences. When McCosh arrives in Assam, he is informed about the flora and fauna found in the place. The narrator states, "Jackson had supplied him with all the necessary documents needed to carry out the survey: A mine of information collected by Mr Scott, Buchanan and other locals and written by hand. Looking at the treasure trove of knowledge and data, he was ecstatic. How many articles would he now be able to send to the Asiatic Society Journal or the medical science journals for publication?" (2022, p.4). This means the region is full of resources and knowledge that can serve as material for medicinal research, but the powerful ones are using that knowledge without acknowledging the expertise that the indigenous people have in those fields.

The sense of this deprivation resonates in the literature produced in this region. Temsula Ao, another prominent Naga writer from the region, states: "The cultures of the NE India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernisation...If the trend is allowed to continue indiscriminately and mindlessly, globalisation will create a market in which Khasi, Naga, or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalisation in this sense will reduce identity to anonymity" (2006, p.7). Their creative writings also reflect these concerns. The armed forces recruited by the Indian government to control the secessionist movements in this area have led to further complications. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) has created havoc in many places, harming innocent civilians. Hence, Ao writes in her poem, "My Hills":

> But today,
> I no longer know my hills,
> The birdsong is gone,
> Replaced by the staccato
> Of sophisticated weaponry (2013: p. 157)

A similar concern is expressed by Mamang Dai in her poem "An Obscure Place"**:**

> The History of our race
> begins with the place of stories
> We do not know if the language we speak
> Belongs to a written past
> Nothing is certain[5]

Many literary writers express the suffering of the tribes due to the loss of their tribal identity. They also stress the need to reconnect with their original cultural identity. Thus, writers such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, and Easterine Kire bring in elements from their original culture to build their literary ventures, which also turn their literary works into repositories of their indigenous knowledge systems.

In 2021, an animation workshop was held at NEHU, Shillong, to turn the Wancho folktales into animated forms. The aim was to preserve and transmit the oral narratives through the medium of animation. Wangchan Losu, one of the participants and a storyteller, remarked in the workshop: "These days, the children go to school-they get admission until they grow up, and by that time, children have no time to hear the stories. So, these days

there is a huge gap between the younger generation and the older people [6]. Mamang Dai, in her collection of poems entitled *River Poems*, includes a poem called "The Missing Link", where she laments the fact that there are no records of their past, but at the same time, she insists on the need to gather and recollect:

> "And in the villages, the silent hill men still await
> The long-promised letters, and the meaning of words"

She appeals for the removal of all the prejudices that have been attached to the tribal cultures by the mainstream culture. Therefore, the above discussion demonstrates that the indigenous knowledge possessed by the tribal communities is not inferior in any aspect to the mainstream Indian knowledge system. Hence, the native inhabitants must collect, preserve, and project these systems as a storehouse of knowledge in parallel with the mainstream knowledge system. Besides that, we should move forward remembering the fact that any construction in language is discursive. To quote Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane: "Ethnic identity is a discursive construction: that is, a description in language, rather than a reflection of an essential, fixed, natural state of being (Hall, 1990, 1992, 1996) ...Ethnicity is concerned with relations and representations of centrality and marginality in the context of changing historical forms and circumstances" (2016, p. 611). Hence, instead of looking for exact replicas of the ancient indigenous knowledge systems, we should be pleased to have them in their present forms.

Notes

1. https://indianshortstoryinenglish.com/reviews/mamang-dai-the-legends-of-pensam
2. The translation of this story is done by me for the article.
3. https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2009/05/01/naturecultures-introduction/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=naturecultures-introduction
4. Kabiraj refers to those people who heal sick people through the method of Ayurveda.
5. https://www.elearning.panchakotmv.ac.in/files/20A1481415909225750.pdf
6. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0972558X241230661

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