

**Desideratum for Ecological Sustainability:  
A Study on Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Land and its people are inseparably assembled to constitute the ecosystem of any topographical region. Being naturally gifted with an attractive topography, the North East region of India has produced literary texts into which nature and its significance in human life have automatically negotiated their ways. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are the preservers of natural resources by maintaining an equilibrium with nature. But, the post-independent scenario of the land has undergone drastic changes both environmentally and socio-politically. The aim of this study is to decode the eco spiritual qualities of the tribals with reference to Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. Dai's concern, in her work extend from harmful effects of deforestation, human encroachment on forest lands, the human-induced dangers which flora and fauna have to endure, human relationship with non-human beings and deification of nature. The study further highlights the vision of abolishing social ideologies and hierarchies that perpetuate ecological destruction, and to use traditional as well as scientific knowledge to ensure ecological stability.*

**Keywords:** *Eco spirituality, Sustainability, Topography, Deforestation, Stability.*

The obligation to conserve natural resources and protect global ecosystems in order to support health and well-being is known as environmental sustainability. Forward thinking attitude is the important element in sustainable developments. In fact, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines it as “meeting today’s needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” (Sphera) Many green ideas and business responsibility fall under the broad category of sustainability. Ecocriticism is a literary theory that studies science, literature, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other topics in order to better understand how people see nature. It makes an effort to examine how the environment is expressed in literary writings and theoretical discussion. The theme of nature has been prominent in many English-language literary works. The destruction of the ecosystem throughout the world has been greatly influenced by colonialism, and for a very long time, people believed that nature was some kind of endless supply. Numerous works of Indian English fiction also have this topic. Many authors make it their main topic, while others make it secondary to their main story. In order to better understand ecocriticism, I wish to employ Indian English literature in this essay.

The Northeast Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, which together make up around 260,000 square kilometres, are well-known for their abundance in natural resources and cultural variety. Its position is also extremely geopolitical due to its proximity to the foreign lands of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Tibet, and Bhutan. This region has a better connection to and appreciation for nature than the rest of the country. As the environment has been a crucial component of their way of life, Northeast India has developed its own vernacular architecture that has changed over time and is mindful to the local climate, people, and materials. The importance of sustainability and its development has never diminished.

Arunachal Pradesh is recognised as one of the major ‘biodiversity hotspots’ of India and the entire world, for its extensive variety of flora and fauna. This northeastern state is home to a variety of indigenous tribes along its valleys. One of these societies includes the Adi tribe, whose members live in perfect harmony with the natural world. They continue to live traditionally, totally reliant on nature, without disrupting the area’s ecological equilibrium. However, Arunachal Pradesh’s current situation is undergoing quick changes. The ancient way of life and belief system of the Adis, which in the past were in harmony with pristine nature, have been severely damaged by the socioeconomic, political, and environmental developments of this state.

Due to the presence of numerous ethnic groups with a variety of cultural practices, dialects, and religious beliefs in northeast India, it is referred to as a melting pot of different races, castes, and cultures. One of India’s most underrepresented regions is this one. A collection of literary writings that is wholly distinct from that of the rest of India may have developed as a result of the region’s geography and the blending of several ethnic groups. The literature in English from the northeastern section of India has been stereotyped, just like the area itself. However, if we conduct a critical analysis of the literary works produced in this region, we will discover that the majority of the writers including Mamang Dai, Temsula Aao, Aruni Kashyap, and Easterine Kire are intentionally address geopolitical and environmental issues like resource exploitation, ecological degradation, and drastic climate change in their works.

Mamang Dai, as a member of the Adi community, is naturally acquainted with their historical traditions, worldview, and collection of myths, stories, and fables. She is a noted poet, journalist, and a former civil servant of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai respectfully depicts the Adi tribe’s relationship with the natural environment while retaining its ancient practises, tales, and beliefs in all her works. One of the ethnic sub-groups of the Tani people, the ‘Adi’ tribe,

may be found in a number of districts of Arunachal Pradesh, including East Siang, West Siang, Upper Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, and Lohit Namsai. By telling the simple, harmonious stories of the ignorant ethnic group living in the wild, lush, and green Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, a site recognised for its biodiversity hotspots with vast range of flora and animals, Dai hopes to dispel the old dust of “stereotype” created for this region. However, the country’s post-independence environment and sociopolitical structure have seen significant changes. The altered landscape of the area has drawn the attention of Dai’s literature, and her most recent book accurately illustrates the challenges that the Adis in this area face as they work to modify their lifestyles for survival despite all the difficulties.

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* is a novel that has a strong ecological concern. History, myth, tradition, memory, and fiction merge together in this novel, which showcases the unique ecology of Arunachal Pradesh. The clash between tradition and modernity and the degeneration of traditional values during the colonial period as well as the ecological degradation of the land can well be studied from an ecological viewpoint. The novel advocates the restoration of the age-old bond between man and the nature as a way of retaining the identity of the tribal communities in the contemporary world of globalization and modernization.

An anthropological study that supports tribal spiritualism is found in *The Legends of Pensam*. Dai emphasises the generosity of her kin in the Prologue, “I was born in the mountains, in a village where boys kicked rocks around pretending at football (3). The book is filled with shamanic and mountain ceremonies, highlighting the tribal clans' profound faith in the enduring consequences of these practises. For instance, everyone in the Adi tribe believes that Biribik, the water serpent, represents all spirits, and that anytime there is an odd sight in the river, something horrible would undoubtedly happen in the village. The sufferings are then treated and cured using an old Serpent ritual. In fact, the novel’s recurring motif is this. The important aspects of ecospirituality that are discussed in this book include pahari pratha, or mountain rites and spiritual practises, connected to Northeastern tribes, as well as folklore and myths. Dai considers the Adi’s ecological and spiritual concerns in all her works.

Dai emphasizes the Adi community's position as being stuck between myth and fact. She skillfully weaves together four interconnected pieces of tribal lore: ‘a matter of time’, ‘a diary of the world’, ‘a song of the rhapsodist’, and ‘daughters of the village’. which caused readers hearts to race. The book features likeable individuals whose established beliefs and traditional rituals centre on their precarious lives. The novel’s prologue opens with a myth about a woman who fought a powerful force to weave a tapestry. Regarding the storylines presented in the work, the initial portion comes off as hallucinatory, fantastical, unrestrained,

and open-ended. When the protagonist Hoxo opens his eyes after being unexpectedly dropped from the sky, he discovers bamboo, a green waterfall, and walls of trees that are covered in greenery. Lutor, the renowned Ida clan head and a resident of the settlement, discovers him. As a result of their superstitious beliefs, none of the locals inquire about the infant. None of the locals question about the infant due to their superstitious beliefs. Unfortunately, Lutor encounters Birbirik, a water snake with a horned head that resembles a malicious spirit, which leads to his death later during a hunting adventure. Here we discover stories inside stories about the mythology, spirits, and culture of the Adi tribe. This section of the book describes the character's enigmatic deaths amid the hills deep and dark trees.

In another story Pinyar the widow says, "Faith is everything" (35). After experiencing her husband's betrayal, losing her kid, and having her home burned down, she was weary of her existence. As we can see, "It seems my destiny is cursed" (28). The final tale in this segment depicts the terrible reality of outsiders entering the uninhabited areas of the Adi tribes and how this has affected the local's perception of them as a disease. Their people was devastated by this abrupt transformation since the declining beauty of nature seemed unfathomable to their impressionable eyes. As Hoxo says, "We saw a new glimmer in the distance. Our footsteps led us down unknown paths" (42). However, the desire to maintain their origins and live a traditional tribal lifestyle was rekindled in their hearts as a result of the social changes.

The second part of the novel starts with the entrance of migluns (Britishers) in the Adi lands. These newcomers started to rule the region by building roads, assuming political authority, and propagating Christianity, ushering in 'civilization' in a region that had previously been uncivilised. To understand more about the culture and traditions of the tribal people, Mona and Jules, a couple from other regions, travel to the village. They both take part in the village's customary celebrations and rituals, and they both enjoy the folk music performed by the locals. They return from the area with a wealth of impressions, tales, and experiences from the Adi people, making the trip worthwhile.

The third part of the novel tells the love tale of Nenem, a mythical figure who falls in love with David, a British officer; their relationship lasts for a time until they are split up. Nenem, a nature lover, is unwilling to uproot herself from her own country and move to another for the sake of love because David has been assigned somewhere else. This demonstrates how the indigenous people rely on a close relationship with nature to survive. Nenem states: "No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own" (109). With an angelic heart and a dovelike mind, she represents a legend. Losi, her daughter, is born after she marries Kao. When her hamlet floods after an earthquake, she is forced to leave it and relocate. Her life is

suddenly filled with uncertainty. She begins to feel unhappy, suffering swirls inside her feeble heart, and she eventually exits this world. The life of Nenem illustrates how being cut off from one's roots brings early death and how one's existence is connected to the wonders of nature.

The novel's fourth section of the narrative sheds light on the continuous changes in the neighbourhood that terrorise the populace. As the trumpets of modernity blow, innocence is lost, beauty is fading, and the atmosphere is foul-smelling. Through the characters, the hatred towards the modern age is underlined. As Larik says, "This terrible road is all they have for us in 50 years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Diseases" (156). The locals maintain their usual customs, culture, and beliefs despite the changes, demonstrating their steadfast affection for the beautiful area. The Adi tribes rich oral legacy, distinctive indigenous culture, and communal living are all shown in the book. Members of the older generation are shown in the text whistling in protest at the shift and to protect their indigenous heritage from being wiped out. As a result, the villagers move back and forth between living a traditional and contemporary lifestyle. In the course of the novel, Dai vividly depicts the Adi tribes colourful culture and history, inspiring awe at their efforts to preserve their pristine culture by writing down oral tradition for future generations.

Dai describes the topography and anthropology of the North East India in the Author's note to *The Legends of Pensam*:

Arunachal Pradesh in North East India, bordering Bhutan, china and Myanmar is one of the largest states in the country, and also one of the greenest. It is the homeland of twenty six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-cans... The mightiest of its rivers is the Siang... Siang valley is the territory of the Adi tribe who are the subject of this book. (qtd. in Satapathy and Nayak)

Verrier Elwin, one of the greatest defenders of the North East, mentions the same valley in one of his important ethnographic works. "Siang, the happiest of the NEFA divisions, is the home of bright colours, lovely weaving, dancing, singing and an enchanting people formerly known collectively by the Assamese word Abor which means independent, but who now call themselves Adi or hillsmen". (Elwin)

The basic goal of ecocriticism is to evaluate any literary work in terms of how it relates to the environment. It looks at how the natural world and the environment are portrayed in literary and cultural writings. Ecological imbalance, environmental degradation, and their effects on human civilization are the primary concerns of ecological studies. This coexistence of the natural and human worlds has been questioned in a variety of discourses, from ecological studies to ecocriticism. Glotfelty, in the *Introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks*

in *Literary Ecology*, states “ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.” (Glotfelty) Chingangbam Anupama, in her scholarly essay *An Ecocritical Approach: A Study of Selected North East Indian Poets*, points out that “ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgment upon the writings which marks the relation between nature and man or effects of culture on nature.” (Anupama 59-67) Prof. Thomas K Dean of the University of Iowa includes culture in ecocriticism and says: Eco-criticism is a study of culture and cultural products like art works, writings, and scientific theories that is in some way connected with human relationship to the natural world.

One of the most significant changes to the region has been the fast urbanisation of North-Eastern India, which has led to the adoption of a smart city development plan by nine cities. In order to turn these traditional cities into smart cities with infrastructure and services for all demographics, an inclusive governance was formed. For these smart cities, it has been highly successful to boost economic growth through sustainable development, such as the use of renewable energy, recycling programmes, and efficient waste management. Smart cities are now being created in Aizawl, Guwahati, Shillong, Agartala, Imphal, Pasighat, Kohima, Itanagar, and Gangtok with a sustainable emphasis on their economies, tourism, resource management, energy sources, biodiversity, and urban transportation.

As the name implies, bioclimatic architecture incorporates the local microclimate into construction plans for environmentally friendly outcomes. It improves the balance between social inclusion, environmental conservation, and economic development. Even if the majority of the North Eastern vernacular architecture is environmentally, materially, and energetically sustainable, the region will gain immensely from continuing to use these practises. Maximizing the use of natural and renewable resources, designing for climate change, reducing the use of artificial energy and water, and having effective building systems in place are the fundamental tenets of sustainable building design.

In the Northeast of India, bamboo is one of the most plentiful and sustainable resources. Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh are the two wealthiest states in India for cultivating bamboo, each with 53 types. Bamboo is primarily utilised for building and structural purposes, as well as to replace wood in industrial, handicraft, and culinary goods. Numerous studies have demonstrated the value of bamboo in reducing soil erosion and enhancing soil water retention, among other things. Additionally significant carbon sources and sinks are bamboo forests. Bamboo is able to isolate carbon more quickly, which aids in limiting forest fires thanks to its fast biomass buildup and efficient solar energy fixation. In the North-East Region, bamboo is an essential component of sociocultural and economic life.

The Northeastern region of India has a history of placing a high value on the environment in both its lifestyle and culture. There are still a lot of important gaps in our current understanding of other aspects of sustainability, despite the fact that environmental conservation has been passively practised here for more than 5,000 years in ancient India. Deforestation, quarrying, overharvesting, and pollution are only a few of the environmental hazards that have resulted from the search for development in impoverished countries. By incorporating all local communities and governing authorities, resources may be used sustainably with the right sustainable management and education. They can work together to turn the Northeastern region into a place where India can develop its future.

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