

North-East India Indigenous Mysticism as a source for addressing Contemporary Ecological Crisis

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Introduction

The contemporary world faces a multifaceted ecological crisis that demands innovative and sustainable solutions. One promising yet underexplored or less explored source of wisdom lies in the indigenous mysticism of Northeast India. This region, rich in cultural diversity and ecological heritage, offers profound insights into the interconnectedness of human, divine, and natural realms. By exploring the mystical experiences and worldviews of indigenous communities, we can uncover principles that not only resonate with contemporary ecological needs but also provide practical approaches to environmental conservation and sustainable living.

Indigenous mysticism, often overlooked in mainstream ecological discourses, encapsulates a holistic and relational understanding of existence. Unlike classical mysticism, which tends to emphasize a personal, often exclusive union with the divine, indigenous mysticism is inherently inclusive and integrative. It weaves together the spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of life, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the environment. This perspective is particularly evident in the indigenous cultures of Northeast India, where spiritual practices are deeply intertwined with daily interactions with the natural world.

In this article, I delve into the mystical traditions of Northeast India to uncover how these ancient practices can address the pressing ecological challenges of our time. We begin by exploring the general concept of mysticism through the lenses of renowned scholars like William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Raimundo Panikkar. This foundation allows us to appreciate the unique characteristics of indigenous mysticism, which we then examine in detail, focusing on the tribes of Northeast India. Through an analysis of indigenous religious practices, rituals, and worldviews, I highlight the profound ecological wisdom embedded in these traditions. I argue that indigenous mysticism, with its emphasis on the sacred interconnectedness of all life, offers valuable lessons for contemporary ecological efforts. This exploration is not merely an academic exercise but a call to rediscover and re-practice the sustainable ways of living that have been overshadowed by modernity and globalization.

In reconnecting with indigenous mystical traditions, I find a pathway to restore our relationship with nature, respect its intrinsic value, and promote ecological balance. This wholistic approach, which integrates spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions, is crucial for addressing the ecological crisis we face today. Through this article, I attempt to illuminate the relevance of indigenous mysticism in fostering a more sustainable and harmonious world.

1. Understanding Mysticism

I will take the help of three scholars who are well-known in the field of mysticism and explain in brief its multi-faceted dimensions before I turn to indigenous mysticism. William James (1842 – 1910), a well known psychologist of religion in his celebrated book – *The Varieties of Religious*

Experience highlighted four marks of mysticism or characteristics of mystical state of consciousness, such as – **Ineffability**: that mysticism defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. **Noetic Quality**: that mystical states are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. **Transience**: that mystical state cannot be sustained for long. **Passivity**: that although mystical state may be induced by some voluntary activities like fixing attention, going through certain bodily performances, once mystical consciousness is set the mystic feels that he/she was grasped and held by a superior power.¹ This explanation oscillates with the swinging of classical Christian understanding of mysticism and it may be disputed by the contemporary mystical theologians on account of its remoteness and abstract nature.

One of the best known writers on Mysticism in the twentieth century was Evelyn Underhill (1875 –1941) whose work - *Mysticism* became a classic in the study of mysticism. She defines mysticism as:

the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order...This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called ‘Mystic union,’ attains its end. Whether that end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy, the desire to attain it and the movement towards it - so long as this is a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation - is the proper subject of mysticism.²

Again, she says with more specificity, “Mysticism, in its pure form, is the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and that the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it. Not to *know about*, but to *Be*, is the mark of the real practitioner.”³

Raimundo Panikkar rejects classical understanding of mysticism for its exclusiveness and aloofness from normal human life, and furthers a more inclusive and wholistic understanding of mysticism. For him, mysticism is simply the experience of Life, not our own life but of Life, which is *not* the privilege of the chosen few but human characteristic par excellence. It is *not* extraordinary or esoteric phenomenon which is out of the ordinary or outside the normal range of human knowledge or something special – pathological, paranormal or supernatural. Mysticism is *not* a specialists’ field but something that belongs to human beings as such. Every person is a mystic – even if only potentially so. True mysticism, according to Panikkar, is thus, not dehumanizing. The experience of Life as mysticism is more or less harmonious union of the three forms of consciousness – divine, human and the world – a *cosmotheandric* experience which is more the fruit of a *being* than of *doing*, the awareness of being as an act, rather than as the outcome of action. Panikkar sharply criticizes mysticism described as indifferent to human suffering, but emphasizes mysticism as directly touching the whole of human condition. Mystical experience is a communion with reality that involves all our senses, the intellect, and the soul. In a *cosmotheandric* mysticism, God, human and the world form an indissoluble trinity. Mystical

¹ William James, *The Variety of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), pp. 380-381.

² Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, Third Edition, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1912), p. x.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

experience cannot be an individual experience alone; it always involves others as much as ourselves. Panikkar emphasizes the social aspect of mysticism as being sensitive to human suffering, ecological crisis and the likes.⁴ Panikkar's understanding of mysticism is in tune with indigenous mystical experience where the emphasis is laid on the wholistic experience of life, not a spiritual experience of human being alone but the meeting of three realities, the mystical union of divine, human and creation.

William James represents suitably *classical mysticism* where emphasis is laid on personal intuitive direct experience of God which is more or less like that of the Hindu *samādhic* trance. He reduces mystical experience to individual pietistic spiritual experience. Mystical theology of Underhill can be seen as a link between classical mysticism and contemporary understanding of mysticism represented in this paper by Panikkar. Underhill retains the extraordinariness of mystical experience which is attained by people who follow 'mystic ways'. The *contemporary mysticism* represented by Panikkar deviates from the classical mysticism with its *wholistic intent* – mysticism as touching all aspects of human life and the whole creation, and its *inclusiveness* where mystical experience is considered as *a way of life available to all* who are genuinely for it. We shall see as we go along that the 'contemporary mysticism' represented here by Panikkar is quite in tune with the mystical experience of the indigenous people.

2. Indigenous Mysticism of North-East India

Extensive study had been done on mysticism in various religious traditions, but mystical experience of the indigenous people has attracted less attention. Apart from few and inadequate studies done on the mysticism of indigenous people of Africa, America and Australia Aborigines, as I briefly discuss below, there is more or less no work on this. Speaking on the American indigenous mysticism, John A. Grim of Yale University says, "Mysticism, although differently expressed in particular indigenous lifeways, manifests the intimate relatedness of person, community, spirits, and ecosystem. This interactive quaternity is ritually embedded in indigenous lifeways and symbolically unfolded in cosmological narratives."⁵ Indigenous worldviews do not see the earth as simply an *objective other*, or a reality separate from human beings, but a complex web of persons, communities, and ecosystems charged with spiritual power where "the foundational interaction of humans with their local landscape is the matrix in which indigenous mystical knowledge of the sacred occurs."⁶ Thus, Grim emphatically states that, "Indigenous mysticism is not withdrawn from society or ecology; rather this mysticism is engaged in dynamic ethical responsibilities and ritual privileges."⁷

Australian Aborigines have the same kind of mystical experience of connectedness with nature. According to Joan Hendriks and Gerard Hall, the 'natural mysticism' of Indigenous Australian peoples is not the ecstatic, unrepeatable experience of a chosen individual, but the ordinary, everyday, abiding experience of the sacred and interconnected unity of all beings with the earth, cosmos and ultimate reality. One is not separate from this reality; in fact, there is no one - nor for that

⁴ For detail study cf. Raimon Panikkar, *Mysticism, Fullness of Life* (New York: Orbis, 2014).

⁵ John A. Grim, "Cosmology and Native American Mystical Traditions" in *Theologiques*, (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2001), p. 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷ John A. Grim, "Native American Mystical Traditions: An Introduction" in *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources*, edited by Steven T. Katz, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 544.

matter no Other - separate or separable from creation and the natural world.⁸ The same trend is seen in African thought as well where mysticism continues to describe the realm of interaction between humanity and the divine or supernatural. “The orientation is social and utilitarian”, observes Jerusha T. Lamptey, Professor at Union Theological Seminary, “and the manifestations occur within the structure of indigenous rites; mystical practices aim to fulfill needs in society, and they do not exist as a separate body of practices.”⁹ He stresses the social emphasis of African indigenous mysticism saying that African indigenous mysticism retains a social, worldly focus, deriving its purpose and value from its functionality in effecting change in the society, rather than in the individual only.¹⁰

I attempt here to understand indigenous mystical experience especially in relation to the indigenous people of North-East India. Mysticism in the Indigenous spirituality is the experience of oneness where divine,¹¹ humans and creation share together the richness of wholistic reality. These three realities – divine, human and nature are mystically connected. In other words, mysticism for indigenous people is the meeting of these realities that enables experiential perceiving of the suffering of the natural world. The wholistic continuum relationship between divine, human and nature is the pinnacle of indigenous peoples’ mystical experience. Again, mysticism here is *relational* and *unitive*. It is *relational* as it emphasizes the integral relationship between entities in the whole existence, pointing to the interconnectedness of all realities. It is *unitive* as it acts as the invisible uniting string that binds together diversified cosmic entities into one wholistic continuum.

2.1. Mystical Experience: The Core of Indigenous Spirituality

It may not be too much to say that indigenous people’s religious experience, whether as individual or community, is by and large characterized by mystical elements. Indigenous people all over the world have a unique worldview - which is uncharacteristic of most of other communities - a wholistic, non-dichotomial and relational worldview, the conception of realities as integrally related. According to James Cox, who had done commendable works on African indigenous religions, the African indigenous religions are co-extensive with their societies, because religion is an undifferentiated part of social life. Reciprocity between the community and the spirits marks the central core of indigenous religious activity.¹² The traditional worldview of the different tribes of North-East India, such as, Mizo, Khasi, Naga, Garo, Boro, etc. is simply a unified non-dichotomial worldview where realities are considered as integrally related. The relationship and interconnectedness between humans, the divine, and nature is

⁸ Joan Hendriks & Gerard Hall SM, “The Natural Mysticism of Indigenous Australian Traditions”, in http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/158315/Henriks-and-Hall_Indigenous_Mysticism.pdf (13.11.2014).

⁹ Jerusha T. Lamptey, “Mysticism in African Thought”, in *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Maryanne Cline Horowitz, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), p. 1559.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1560.

¹¹ The term ‘divine’ is used here instead of a more popular generic term ‘God’ for one specific reason. Indigenous all over the world generally believe in the existence of one Supreme Being which can be referred to as ‘God’. However, apart from the Supreme Being, they also believe in the existence and importance of other divine beings and a number of benevolent spirits who are as active as, and indispensable or rather more so in some areas of life to the indigenous people than the Supreme Being. But interestingly, though they are worshipped, prayed to or invoked upon, they are hardly considered as God. By using the term ‘divine’, I intent to include all of these – the Supreme Being and other divine beings as well as the host of benevolent spirits.

¹² James L. Cox, “Characteristics of African Indigenous Religions in Contemporary Zimbabwe”, in *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, edited by Graham Harvey, (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 231.

mysterious, and therefore beyond explanation in human terms and categories. This mystical relationship defines indigenous spirituality, which is why it is always wholistic in nature and encompassing in its intent. For indigenous people, mystical experience is not compartmentalized to moments of deep meditation, *samādhic* trance, or possession by the spirit, though such specialized spiritual experiences do occur, particularly during rituals. Indigenous people live their daily lives in constant awareness of the active divine forces surrounding them and their deep connection with both animate and inanimate objects. This mystical sense of oneness with the divine and the created order lies at the heart of indigenous spirituality.

2.2. Spirit Possession: An Occasional Indigenous Mystical Experience

We may say that Indigenous religion is not rich in measurable doctrines and dogmas, traceable history and philosophical speculation, but, enormously rich in religious experience where such experiences are guided primarily by their constant interactions with spirits and nature. One of the most important features of indigenous religion is what may be termed as ‘spirit possession’. Spirit possession mostly happened during ritual practices “in which one, or a few, or even several, of the participants in a public ritual behave in ways which believers interpret as signifying that ‘spirits’ have taken ‘possession’ of them. In that condition, they are for them the ‘mediums’ of unseen beings.”¹³ Among the various North-East Indian tribes the *shaman* who had the gift to contact with God and spirits was in high demand. These *shamans* were the medicine men and the priests who were the ones who experienced spirit possession and were very important for the community. They were the ones who could tell the cause of sickness and suggest the remedy; they could practice divination and protect the people from danger. They were the ones who could call the spirits and commune with animals. Today, shamanism is still very much alive among many North-East tribes, especially among the non-Christian communities. The shamans are active among Nishi and Apatani tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, Khasi Pnar of Meghalaya, etc. providing security and healing to the indigenous people.

The spirit possession phenomenon as an important religious practice shows the union and communion of human with the divine. This mystical experience is helpful and important for the people in addressing various problems and suggesting ways and means by which such problems can be tackled meaningfully. Such a strong mystical experience is a source of security, contentment and refuge for the Indigenous people all over the world.

2.3. Mystical Bond between Human and Animals

One of the unique features of the indigenous religious experience in Northeast India is the mystical relationship some people have developed with animals, particularly the tiger. Certain ‘priests’ or ‘medicine men/women’ have an inexplicable and mysterious bond with tigers, where both the human and the tiger can sense, communicate, and feel each other’s emotions, even sharing suffering when one is in pain. These individuals are known as ‘tiger men/women.’ In this mystical relationship, the human appears to hold a superior position, as he/she can command the tiger to do his bidding. However, if the tiger is hurt, the human will also feel the pain in his/her body, if the tiger is killed, the human will also die instantly. This relationship is deeply mystical and cannot be fully explained in human terms or categories. Such connections were common among several Northeast tribes in the past and still persist today. This phenomenon is

¹³ Jan G. Platvoet, “Rattray’s request: Spirit possession among the Bono of West Africa”, in *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, p. 80.

particularly found among certain Naga tribes, such as the Ao Naga and Sumi Naga, etc. While the tiger is the most common animal involved in these mystical relationships, other creatures, like pythons, are also part of this unique bond with humans. What we can discern from this mystical phenomenon is the unprecedented closeness that can develop between humans and animals - where human beings regard animals not merely as co-creatures or, in a deeper sense, as part of the family, but as beings with whom they share life in its totality, achieving a profound oneness. Such is the strength of this relationship.

2.4. Mystical relations with natures

The indigenous peoples of Northeast India perceive reality as harmoniously and mystically interrelated where seemingly distinct entities are united into a cohesive whole. The divine-human-nature continuum is a defining feature of their sacred worldview, as Nirmal Minz notes: "A nature-human-spirit continuum is the key to the tribal vision of life. All religious rites, observance, festivities are based on this wholistic vision of reality. Tribal religion accepts the integral relationship of nature, human and spirit in their experiences."¹⁴ Nature and indigenous people are inseparable. Their worldview is naturalistic where supernatural is perceived as present both in the animate and the inanimate. The earth, and the forest, the river and the hills, the birds and animals constitute the life of the indigenous people who, dependent upon them, derive their knowledge, construct personality, folklore, culture and also religion.¹⁵ Wati Longchar maintains that for Ao Naga of the North East India, "the Supreme Being is an integral part of the land; and at the same time the land is not external to God. Without land, the Supreme Being ceases to work."¹⁶ He continues saying that for the indigenous people of North East India, "the land and the Supreme Being are inseparably related. The land is the symbol of unity of all living creatures and the spirit and the Supreme Being. The misuse of the land implies chaos among creatures. It is like killing one's own mother."¹⁷

According to Bolinkar Sohkhlet, Khasi-Pnar believes that inter-communication between humans and divine is possible through natural elements. Forests, hills and rivers are the ones through which such interrelationship and communication with the divine is facilitated. They consider forests and groves as well as some hills and rivers as the special sanctuaries of *ki ryngkew ki basa* (divine tutelary objects or benevolent spirit), through which God manifests his/her power. So, these objects facilitate a deeper bond between God and human beings.¹⁸ Thus natural objects are considered as the meeting point of divine and human or in other words divine, creation and human meet mystically in these objects.

Such a mystical experience of wholeness gives the indigenous people sense of belongingness to nature and God. It helps them *not* to see nature as object of sensual enjoyment but as mysterious

¹⁴ Nirmal Minz, "The study of tribal Religion in India", in *Re-Visioning India's Religious Traditions: Essays in honour of Eric Lott*, edited by David C. Scott and Israel Selvanayagam, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), p.122.

¹⁵ Mahendra K. Mishra, "Sacred Worldview in Tribal Memory: Sustaining nature through Cultural Actions", in *Language & Ecology*, (Vol. 2, no. 4, 2009), p. 1.

¹⁶ A. Wati Longchar, "Tribal Theology: Nature and Method and Perspective" in *Journal of Tribal study*, Vol. 5, No. 1, January-June, 2001, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bolinkar Sohkhlet, "Phenomenological study of the understanding of God (*Blei*) as emerging from selected myth and rituals of the traditional religion of the Khasi Pnar", (Unpublished D.Th. thesis submitted to SATHRI of Senate of Serampore college, 2007), pp. 100-106.

living beings with which mystical relationship bond is established. Wati Longchar reminds us of the centrality of land to the indigenous people of Northeast India and how they are inseparably connected with it, receiving the sustenance as well as deriving their culture and religion from it. Thus, loss of land for the indigenous people becomes loss of culture and religion. Aos and Sangtam Nagas' conception of Supreme Being, *Lijaba* which means 'the real of the real earth' or 'the one who enters the earth' as coming from the soil or entering the soil clearly depicts the connection these peoples have with the land.¹⁹ He says that "most of the tribes in North East India have myths which say that they are born out of the earth. Many Naga tribes, the Mizos and Garos say that their forparents emerged from stones. The land holds not only the clan, village and tribe as one, but it also unites the Supreme Being, spirits, ancestors and creation as one family."²⁰

The earth is conceived symbolically as the spouse of the Supreme Being, mother of all creatures, the land and everything in it are regarded as having life and power; it is a place which gives an identity to the tribal community, a sacred place and a temple of the Supreme Being. So the land is an integral part of the Supreme Being.²¹ For many indigenous peoples of Northeast India, such as the Mizos, land is not only the source of their existence but also a dwelling place for divine beings. The Mizos believe that a divine being resides beneath the earth, while many benevolent spirits inhabit the land's surface. In Mizo indigenous religion, priests invoke a god who is believed to dwell beneath the earth. Another prominent god, Khuavang, is said to have lived on the mountains, not in the heavens above.

Some of the most fundamental religious beliefs of the indigenous peoples highlight the mystical relationship that exists between the divine, humans, and nature. Beliefs in mana, fetishism, omens, divination, taboos, totems, and similar concepts indicate the numinous interconnectedness of realities in the minds of the indigenous people of Northeast India. In these beliefs, humans and spirits, or divine beings, share an inseparable relationship with elements of the created world, such as mountains, trees, rivers, rocks, uniquely shaped stones, bird beaks, and vegetables. This relationship depicts a mystical bond that weaves through these realities like an unseen yet deeply felt and experienced thread. For example, many of the Garo clans are named after animate and inanimate objects such as land, animals, insect, vegetables, fruits, etc.²² showing an inseparable *totemic* relationship between human beings and these natural objects. The presence of mystical relationship between tiger and certain men/women as discussed before underlines a close mystical relationship between humans and animals. The connections they develop with both animate and inanimate objects shape their perceptions of creation and their relationship to both the created world and the creator.

Thus, it can be asserted that the diverse indigenous peoples of Northeast India uphold the ultimate oneness of all creation. They view these varied entities not merely as physical objects but as vital religious and spiritual resources. Wati may be right when he says that for the

¹⁹ Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education – An Indigenous Perspective*, (Kolkata: PTCA/SCEPTRE), p. 99.

²⁰ A. Wati Longchar, "Tribal Theology...", p. 9.

²¹ A. Wati Longchar, *The Traditional Tribal Worldview and Modernity*, (Jorhat: N. Limla Lkr, 1995), pp. 64-65.

²² Cardina R. Marak, "The divine in nature according to A'chik Songsarek and its relevance for ecology", unpublished M.Th. Thesis submitted to the Senate of Serampore College (University), 2013, p. 40.

indigenous people of North East India “the whole universe is a religious universe. Rocks and boulders, trees and rivers are not just empty objects, but religious objects; the voices and songs of animals speak of a religious language, the eclipse of the sun and moon are not simply physical phenomena of nature, but it speaks to the community that observes it, often warning of an impending danger and misfortune.”²³

These examples from the indigenous religious experiences of Northeast India (a list that could extend endlessly) illustrate the mystical interconnectedness of the divine, human, and all of creation. Such profound feelings of togetherness and belonging mark the indigenous sacred worldview, reflecting a rich heritage of mystical union and communion among all realities. Thus, the mysticism evident in the experiences of indigenous peoples is not indifferent or irrelevant to the contemporary socio-political and economic exploitation they face, nor to the indiscriminate destruction of nature. Due to this interconnectedness of existence, indigenous mystics can directly perceive the pain and suffering of the natural world.

2.5. The Uniqueness of Indigenous Mysticism

The indigenous peoples’ mystical experience is unique in that it encompasses not only the union or communion between humans and God but also includes creation as an integral part of this relationship. This broader scope has the potential to cultivate a more holistic and liberative spirituality. The distinctiveness of indigenous mysticism lies in its wholeness of purpose and experience. The indigenous worldview attributes life to the environment and all its elements due to the pervasive presence of spirit, enabling them to interact with one another. Human beings and environment, both plant and animal kingdoms, are in constant communication and communion, sensing and responding to one another. From this mutual attentiveness emerges a sense of harmony, oneness, and wholeness among the various components of the cosmos. Such an ongoing and intense mystical union and communion between humans, creation, and the creator is rare in other spiritual traditions.

Again, Indigenous mysticism is not centered solely on God but also emphasizes interaction with spirits, whose roles are equally significant in indigenous thought and life.

Another distinguishing feature of indigenous mysticism is its emphasis on social transformation of the community, rather than solely on personal spiritual upliftment. This focus makes it particularly relevant in the context of struggles for justice and peace. Lamptey highlights the difference between Christian or Islamic mysticism and African indigenous mysticism, noting that mysticism in Christianity and Islam often involves meditation and asceticism, where individuals withdraw from the physical world to undergo a subjective experience of the divine and personal transformation. In contrast, African indigenous mysticism is socially and worldly oriented, aiming to transform society as a whole rather than focusing solely on individual transformation.²⁴ In other words, for indigenous peoples, mysticism is *a way of life* that permeates the entire society, rather than an extraordinary religious experience reserved for a few individuals.

Mysticism, as understood by indigenous peoples, is neither irrational nor impractical in addressing daily life, nor is it irrelevant in the context of the struggle for justice and peace. It is

²³ A. Wati Longchar, “Tribal Theology...”, p. 10.

²⁴ Jerusha T. Lamptey, “Mysticism in African Thought”, p. 1560.

not a parapsychological phenomenon or occult practice that holds little significance in the post-modern world, nor is it a *samādhic*-ecstatic experience reserved for a select few with extraordinary mystical gifts. While elements like ecstasy, miracles, visions, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing are part of mystical experiences, they should not be regarded as synonymous with mysticism. Furthermore, indigenous mysticism is not limited to feelings and emotions alone - it leaves ample room for intellect and reasoning. In this sense, indigenous mysticism is inclusive, wholistic, life-affirming, and deeply relevant for addressing today's ecological crisis.

3. Indigenous Mysticism as a source for addressing ecological crisis

Northeast India's indigenous mysticism holds profound insights that can contribute to solving today's ecological crisis. Indigenous worldviews provide an alternative understanding of humanity's place in the world - one that recognizes the interdependence of humans, the divine, and the natural environment. This mystical relationship is rooted in a reverence for all forms of life, resulting in a life-affirming approach to the natural world. The ecological crisis we face today - driven by industrialization, deforestation, climate change, and pollution - requires a radical rethinking of our relationship with the Earth. Indigenous mysticism offers both practical and spiritual resources for that rethinking.

There is no need to reiterate the gravity of the ecological crisis we face today. The northeastern regions of India, inhabited mainly by tribals (indigenous people), seem to have maintained a better ecological balance compared to most parts of the country. However, heavy deforestation and rapid developmental works such as construction of roads, urbanization, and industrialization have disrupted this balance in Northeast India.

Currently, India's forest cover is 21.71% of the country's geographical area, whereas the Northeast region boasts a forest cover of 66.52%. According to the India State of Forest Report 2021, the top five states in terms of forest cover as a percentage of total geographical area are Mizoram (84.53%), Arunachal Pradesh (79.33%), Meghalaya (76%), Manipur (74.34%), and Nagaland (73.90%) – all from Northeast India. However, this report may be misleading because it seems to consider 'green coverage' as 'forest cover' rather than 'real forest coverage.' When we consider true forests that are habitable by animals and birds, Northeast India may not be significantly better than the rest of the country. The region's heavy rainfall, coupled with a lower population density and its mountainous nature and soil conditions, accounts for the greenery in the Northeast. However, local practices such as hunting wild animals and birds for consumption and heavy fishing have led to the depletion of wildlife in the region. In terms of the presence of terrestrial and aquatic animals and birds, Northeast India may not be far better than the rest of the country.

To address such a situation, I feel that we have resources within us and what is important is to re-discover and re-practice those resources that have been curtailed for quite some time now. Due to conversion into Christianity, majority of the tribes in Northeast India left their traditional religions. Along with the indigenous religions, gone were the resources that helped our forefathers and foremothers maintain ecological balance. There are significant changes happened after a number of tribes left their traditional religion and swayed away by modernism:

- (a) The wholistic worldview has been replaced by the Western Christian dualistic perspective
- (b) The sense of oneness with nature has diminished
- (c) Respect for trees and animals has faded
- (d) In many cases, the deep connection with nature has been reduced
- (e) The belief in a God who dwells in the earth, rocks, rivers, trees, vegetables, and animals has disappeared, replaced by the literal understanding of “Our father who art in heaven”
- (f) A “this-worldly” attitude has been replaced by an “otherworldly” focus
- (g) Indigenous mystical experiences with both God and nature have faded, replaced by Christian mystical experiences with God alone
- (h) A focus has been shifted to “God and human relations” rather than “God-human-creation relations”
- (i) Monetary profit has become the primary driving force, leading to large-scale deforestation

And much more...

It is important now to re-discover the indigenous wholistic mystical spirituality to feel the pulse of the nature again. Contemporary Christians in Northeast India emphasize on mystical union with God. The many revivals that swayed the Churches in Northeast India produced the desire in the minds of the people to have mystical experience with God. Countless testimonies are recorded claiming such mystical experience with God. The Christian mysticism known to and practiced by Christians in Northeast India is by and large classical mysticism that emphasis on personal contact with God in a mysterious way. We have to move further away from this and inculcate the indigenous mysticism which is our own that will help us re-establish our lost relationship with the natures.

The relevance and implication of the indigenous mysticism to address ecological crisis include:

1. Mystical connection with the land

The indigenous people of the Northeast India have a deep connection with the land. Land is considered as the dwelling place of God, an integral part of God, separation of God and land is impossible. This sends a strong message to protect the land. The people considered themselves as being out of the land, they worship a God who is present beneath the earth. Thus land, people and God are united as one. Destruction of land in any form due to developmental works, etc. is equal to self-destruction and destruction of the presence of God. So, mystical connection between God, land and human teaches us how to treat the land with care and love. Destruction done because of human selfish profit-oriented mentality is unpardonable offence in the eyes of the mystical experience of the Northeast India indigenous people.

2. Kinship with Nature

For many indigenous communities in Northeast India, nature is not merely a backdrop or a passive resource but an active, divine presence that connects them to the sacred. Forests, rivers, hills, birds, rocks, and other natural entities are seen as agents of God—abodes and sanctuaries where divine beings dwell. These objects act as intermediaries between humans and God,

serving as sacred meeting places where divine blessings are sought, and God's voice can be heard.

This understanding of nature goes beyond simple reverence; it forms the very foundation of the indigenous worldview. The natural world is imbued with sacredness, and without it, the relationship between humanity and the divine would be severed. Indigenous communities believe that these natural entities must be protected and nurtured because they sustain not just the physical world but also the spiritual connection between humanity and the divine. Without forests, rivers, or animals, the link between humans and God would be disrupted, leading to spiritual impoverishment.

This deep kinship with nature fosters a strong ethical responsibility to care for the natural world. The sacred value placed on natural entities becomes a compelling source of inspiration for ecological stewardship. Indigenous people recognize that the destruction of nature leads to a rupture in the cosmic balance, affecting not only the material environment but also the spiritual harmony between God, humans, and the rest of creation.

3. Kinship with Animals and Insects

In the indigenous belief systems of Northeast India, animals and insects are not just biological creatures but bearers of spiritual significance. Beliefs in *mana* (spiritual power), fetishism, omens, divination, taboos, and totems reflect a worldview in which humans, animals, and all other beings share a deep interconnectedness. This interconnectedness blurs the lines between the animate and inanimate, suggesting that everything in creation is imbued with life and spirit.

Totemic beliefs are especially significant, with many clans taking their names from specific animals, insects, plants, landforms, or other natural objects. For example, a clan might be named after a bird, a river, or a particular species of plant, symbolizing a deep kinship with that totemic entity. These totems are not merely symbolic; they represent a profound spiritual bond between humans and the natural world. This bond implies responsibility - humans are bound to protect and honour the animals or natural objects that are sacred to them, for these totems embody their ancestral identity and spiritual heritage.

The totemic relationship serves as a reminder that humans are not separate from the rest of creation but part of an intricate spiritual continuum that includes animals, plants, and even inanimate objects like rocks or rivers. Each totem represents the sacred link between human life and the natural world, reinforcing the idea that humans are stewards of creation. This kinship, therefore, fosters a sense of ecological responsibility, urging people to care for the natural entities with which they share this spiritual bond. By honouring their totems, indigenous communities affirm their connection to the universe and fulfill their role in maintaining the balance and harmony of the cosmos.

This mystical kinship provides a powerful framework for rethinking humanity's relationship with the animal kingdom in the context of the ecological crisis. In contrast to the Western anthropocentric worldview, where animals are often seen as inferior or merely instrumental to human needs, indigenous cultures grant agency, dignity, and sacredness to animal life. Animals are not seen as lesser beings; rather, they are recognized as spiritual participants in the broader

ecosystem. This perspective could serve as an antidote to the modern ecological challenges of species extinction, habitat destruction, and the commodification of animals. By viewing animals as co-inhabitants of the earth, indigenous wisdom promotes a view that recognizes their intrinsic worth and advocates for their protection, not just for ecological reasons but as a spiritual necessity.

The concept of mystical kinship with animals carries profound implications for contemporary environmental ethics. It encourages a sense of responsibility and protection, suggesting that the conservation of animal species is both a spiritual obligation and an ecological imperative. This understanding is vividly illustrated by the life of Chawngkhupa, a Mizo Christian mystic, who was known for his deep connection with the natural world. Chawngkhupa would release crabs caught in crab traps, saying, "When I release them, they sing 'Hallelujah' as they swim into deeper waters." On several occasions, it was reported that he sought warmth and safety by sleeping among wild animals such as tigers. He was even said to communicate with creatures like tigers, pythons, and bees. Such accounts offer a glimpse into the profound mystical relationship that indigenous people, like Chawngkhupa, maintain with the natural world, emphasizing respect, coexistence, and protection.

In this mystical worldview, animals are more than just creatures to be observed or utilized; they are spiritual beings with whom humans share a sacred connection. By embracing this perspective, we are encouraged to foster a more respectful and harmonious relationship with the animal kingdom. Indigenous wisdom reminds us that animals, like humans, have their own place within the divine order of creation and deserve to be treated with the care and reverence that comes with that understanding. This mystical connection, rooted in indigenous traditions, offers not only spiritual insight but also practical guidance for addressing the ecological crisis by promoting the protection of animal species and the preservation of biodiversity as part of a broader spiritual and ecological harmony.

4. Divine-Human-Nature Relations as an Example of Cosmic Harmony

Indigenous cosmology integrates the divine, humans, and nature into a harmonious whole. In many indigenous belief systems, natural features like rivers, mountains, and forests are seen as the abodes of deities or spirits. This sacred geography teaches that humans are not masters of the Earth but custodians who must maintain harmony between the divine forces and the natural world. Rituals, prayers, and sacrifices are performed not only for human benefit but also to ensure the well-being of the land, animals, and elements.

This principle of cosmic harmony has profound ecological implications. In the indigenous worldview, disrupting the balance of nature is akin to disturbing the order of the cosmos, leading to disorder, famine, and disease. Indigenous practices that respect the limits of natural resources - such as controlled hunting, forest preservation, and sacred groves - reflect this understanding of balance. In the face of today's environmental degradation, this ancient wisdom teaches that ecological health is essential to the overall health of society. Policies that seek to restore natural balance, such as reforestation, sustainable agriculture, and wildlife conservation, resonate with the indigenous notion that nature must be respected as part of a greater, divinely-ordered system.

5. Spiritual Response to Ecological Crisis from an Indigenous Mystical Perspective

James Gustave (Gus) Speth, lawyer, author, and a senior US advisor on climate change says, “I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don’t know how to do that.” This calls for spiritual involvement to fight against ecological crisis.

Indigenous mysticism offers a holistic spiritual framework for addressing the ecological crisis. Unlike many religious traditions that focus on individual salvation or transcendence, indigenous spirituality emphasizes collective well-being and a this-worldly approach. The fate of the human community is intertwined with the fate of the natural world, and therefore, any ecological harm is also spiritual harm. Rituals, songs, and stories are passed down to remind each generation of its responsibility to the land and its creatures.

In responding to the ecological crisis, indigenous mysticism teaches that healing the Earth requires a spiritual transformation. This transformation begins by recognizing the sacredness of the natural world and understanding that environmental destruction is not just a physical issue but a spiritual one. Indigenous perspectives urge us to adopt a reverential attitude toward nature, fostering a spirituality that sees environmental care as an act of worship. This can inspire movements for ecological justice that are not just political or economic in nature, but deeply spiritual, calling for a renewed relationship with the Earth rooted in respect, care, and sacred obligation.

Conclusion

The indigenous mysticism of Northeast India offers profound spiritual insights into how humanity can address the contemporary ecological crisis. Rooted in a worldview that sees nature as sacred and interconnected with the divine, this mysticism challenges the modern, utilitarian approach to nature that has led to widespread environmental degradation. By understanding the land, animals, and natural elements as divine embodiments, the indigenous people of Northeast India offer an alternative framework that promotes harmony, reverence, and stewardship over exploitation and destruction.

At the heart of this indigenous wisdom is the belief in the inseparability of humans, nature, and the divine. The mystical connection with the land, kinship with animals, and recognition of the sacred in rivers, forests, and mountains all point toward a holistic vision of the world—one in which ecological health and spiritual well-being are deeply intertwined. Indigenous cosmologies teach that the destruction of nature is not only an ecological problem but also a spiritual crisis, disrupting the cosmic balance that sustains life. This understanding urges humanity to rethink its relationship with nature, to see environmental care not just as a scientific or economic task but as a spiritual responsibility.

Furthermore, indigenous traditions emphasize the importance of collective well-being and a this-worldly focus that contrasts with the often individualistic and transcendental orientation of other religious traditions. In the face of biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecological degradation, indigenous mysticism provides an ethical and spiritual foundation for ecological justice. It calls

for a return to a reverential relationship with the earth, urging us to protect and preserve the natural world as an act of both ecological necessity and spiritual devotion.

In a world driven by materialism, greed, and exploitation, the indigenous wisdom of Northeast India offers a necessary corrective - a reminder that the earth is not something to be dominated or depleted but a sacred, living entity that deserves our respect and care. As we face the escalating environmental crisis, the teachings of indigenous mysticism can inspire a deeper ecological consciousness, one that sees the earth not as a commodity, but as a divine partner in the shared journey of life.

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