Chapter- 5

Function of Folktales in Environmental Education

Life is one and the world is one and all these questions are interlinked. Population explosion, poverty, ignorance, and disease, pollution of our surroundings, stock piling of nuclear weapons and biological and chemical agents of destruction, are all parts of a vicious circle. Each is important and urgent ... The modern man must re-establish the unbroken link with nature and with life. He must again learn to invoke the energy of the growing things and to recognize as did the ancients in India, centuries ago, that one can take from the earth and atmosphere only so much as one puts back in to them. In their hymn to earth, sages of the Atharva Veda chanted; I quote, ‘What of thee I dig out let that quickly grow over, let me not hit thy vital organs or thy heart.’

Indira Gandhi, Conference on the human Environment in Stockholm, 1972

5.1. Introduction :

The last one decade has seen an unprecedented sensitivity in matters relating to the relationship between environment and ecology. Through the centuries people have learnt how to interact with their surrounding environment and how to survive in a world where nature played a hostile role to the humans and proved itself to be more powerful. People have also struggled hard to make use of their surrounding environment. The human-ecological interaction has been involved multifaceted issues like deforestation, environmental pollution, sustainable development, desertification, loss of biodiversity, problems of sanitation, loss of soil and soil fertility, water shortage and
contamination, ozone depletion, population explosion, trans boundary pollution, inadequate health care and water supply etc. The human activities triggered by rapidly changing socio-economic patterns due to technological advancement are chiefly responsible for deterioration of the world’s environment. Hence it is considered necessary to successfully instill an environmental ethics in human mind and a comprehensive understanding of environmental issues so that they are prepared to deal with environmental problems in the real world. Countries all over the world have adopted a range of strategies for implementing programmes of environmental education to raise awareness. The main objective of environmental education is to create a holistic approach to the learning process whereby people in general acquire knowledge, attitudes, skills, values and motivation to become active participant in protecting and improving the quality of environment while attaining an ecologically and socially sustainable future.

5.2. The Need of Environmental Education:

In the context of the relocation of attitudes towards natural resources and the intricate relationship of people with nature the need of environmental education has been increasing day by day. Now it has become a prominent part of primary, secondary and tertiary education in Asia and the Pacific. Policy makers have adopted different mechanisms to cater to their specific needs. In line with the growing interest and activity in environmental education, the demand for educational materials and study aids has also increased. But the lack of clear integration of environmental education objectives with National Education and environmental policies is a constraint in developing the locally and personally relevant intellectual skills. It has resulted in a lack of coherent strategies and long term planning. Recently many government and non-government organizations have come forward to meet this challenge For example, in Malaysia, the Academy of Writers was enlisted to produce story books that will instill environmental values and attitudes amongst primary school children. A similar initiative has been made.
in the South Pacific sub-region where there have been several efforts to produce locally relevant environmental education material at the primary and secondary school levels. The Center for Environmental Concerns in the Philippines, offer a course that includes elements of community-based rehabilitation technology, community based environmental monitoring, and participatory approaches to environmental education. The dissemination of environmental information to promote environmental awareness has also emerged as strong complementary practice to environmental education. (Rao and Reddy, 23-29, 2008)

Keeping in view the need of concern for the environment and its preservation, the Constitution of India makes it a fundamental duty of all citizens and enjoins upon them to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers, wild life and to have compassion for living creatures. Protection of environment is a value which, along with certain other values must be inculcated from the very early years of life and sustained all along the life. Children may be helped in understanding and internalizing the concern for adoption of a sustainable life style.

5.3. Environmental Education through Folklore:

Environmental communication involves the sharing of information, insights and opinions on environmental issues, trends and conditions and solutions using any means of communications using the modern as well as traditional media. For many years, environmental communicators have recognized the value and power of using folklore and traditional belief, such as songs, tales, drama, puppetry, proverbs etc. to take environmental messages to the public. Thus folklore plays a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas apart from its traditional role of entertaining, preserving and teaching moral values. In spite of technically advanced forms of mass media, many people still relate more readily and easily to traditional media, which are closer to their local cultures, and are often more interactive and participatory than the regular forms of mass media.
To understand the significance of folklore in Environmental education the views expressed in the editorial column of *Indian Folklife* Serial No. 28 January 2008 is worth mentioning. Reinvestigating the paradigms of the colonial postulations about science and development, Dr A. Saikia remarks, the colonial era had demonstrated the inevitable strength of science as the only way to understand nature has always been under scanner. What was missing in the whole history of the 19th century is colonial attitude towards natural resources and the intricate relationship of people, who were dependent on these resources for their survival, with the nature. In the post independent period, with the growth of India’s environmental history, despite occasional expression of doubt about the nature of historical documents to speak the language of the everyday experiences of the people, the people remained at a safe distance from the nature’s home . .. But the everyday life of people is more than that. (Muthukumaraswami, 2008, 3)

With the tremendous expansion of science and technology there is a gradual realization all over the world that still there are so much to learn from the people who are rooted in the nature and whose sense of collectivism, respect and reciprocity with their surrounding ecosystem are not yet driven by market forces or by the narrow sense of individualism and instant culture under the fashionable wave of globalization. This provides some ground to think or rethink about the people’s belief system. Folk beliefs may be sacred or secular, as a dimension of folklore tradition in understanding as well as popularizing conservation to natural resources or even biological diversities which are conceived as the priority concern on the international environmental agenda. In spite of various contested voices concerning many intricate issues, such as, Traditional knowledge, IPR, politics of power structure, access and sharing of benefits etc., there is a general agreement that there are various important lessons to be learned from the cognitive and empirical dimensions of folklore tradition for conserving the natural resources aiming at the sustainable development of the communities in specific and mankind in general. (Kothari et al 1998, Ramakrishnan et al 1998).
There are significant contributions which deal with such sensitive issues like folklore and general ecology. Similarly historians of environment have in the last decades become more sensitive to the questions of popular perception in matters of folklore and ecology. An increasing number of works have been produced reemphasizing the need of locating crucial documents from the area of traditional knowledge in understanding man and nature relationship. Folklore in the form of tales, sayings, songs, ballads, dances and other music and poetry can be highly illuminative of man and nature relationship. Often it has been asserted that many of our fundamental scientific ideas and policies about nature draw from myths and modern folklore. We manage our natural resources on the assumption that a balance of nature that never existed and is frequently invalidated by scientific observations, but oddly still shapes much of the foundation of the science of ecology. The accumulated traditions, in the form of folklore could throw significant light towards re-understanding of ecology particularly in the age of technology. This has become a more relevant subject in South and South-East Asia. (Muthukumaraswami, 2008, 3)

5.4. Folktales in Environmental Education:

Lawrence Buell suggests four criteria for evaluating a piece of literary text as embodying an environmental consciousness:

i. The non-human dimension is an actual presence in the text and not merely a façade – thus implying that human and non human worlds are integrated.

ii. The human interest is not privileged over everything else.

iii. The text shows humans as accountable to the environment and any actions they perform that damages the ecosystem.

iv. Environment is a process rather than a static condition. (Buell, 1995, 7-8)

Reading of a text with environmental focus leads to the exploitation of theory into praxis, locating reading within an activist framework. Folktales,
one of the major forms of folk literature can help in evaluating the intrinsic relationship of human and natural world and exploring the human culture and nature interaction in the traditional folk tales one can develop a nature consciousness and carry out a responsibility towards mother earth. Here in lies the eco significance of Assamese folktales in present day context. The usual scientific approach is unable to check the present rate of habitat destruction, while it may be possible to do so on ethical grounds. Until and unless the legislations and policies are underlined with a set of ethos or guiding beliefs with regard to biodiversity and the environment as a whole, protection of natural systems or the healing of those which are damaged may remain an unachievable goal. Thus, the time has come when societal attitude towards environment has to be reexamined, so that human aspirations, economics and politics could be reshaped to check the wanton, unsustainable exploitation of nature resources that are finite. The familiar folktales if selected properly have immense possibilities to function effectively in this direction.

Some ways how folktales can be functional for environmental education are stated below:

1. It occasions people reconnect with the land. Ecology is about going local, eating local grains, planting local fruit trees, dressing with local fabrics, using local resources. When the people are aware of the benefits of the locally available herbs and other natural resources, they start preserving this as valuable assets. If certain values are assigned to these tales, preservation, not destruction of ecology will be started.

2. India is one of the last big repositories of ecological traditions and has plenty of local skills and expertise in the fields of medicine, water harvesting, forest management, agriculture, animal care, textile, architecture to share with the world. The Folktales as repository of traditional knowledge system can provide relevant eco-friendly mechanisms, which is called by the environmental scientists.
3. The tales can help one experience the wisdom of the traditional people who have always lived in harmony with nature. The sense of close proximity with nature make the children realize the necessity to go back to nature and not to detach from it. A tale impregnated with environmental message is more useful than one day of motivating lectures on environmental ethics with magical apocalyptic figures that leave kids helpless. Thus storytelling may introduce environment education with a new and positive approach.

4. It develops awareness and the knowledge necessary for children to become stewards of the earth and at the same time promotes environmental culture and brings environmental education to life. It encourages people to become role models for environmental change.

5. It helps in reviving the emotional relation with and response to nature rather than mere rational-intellectual one. The fundamental life connectedness of all life-forms and nature as well as the interdependence of natural and human life gets represented in the tales and these provide a form of thinking about the natural world. Thus folktales play a role in transforming people from anthropocentric to eco or bio centric individual.

5.5. Environmental Storytelling: A Brief History:

People have always been telling stories from time immemorial. The art of tale telling might be humanity's most ancient performing art form. Prehistoric man's rudimentary drawings scratched on the walls of caves might have been made to illustrate stories and help the storyteller with the narration. Caves 'walls would have been then kids' first illustrated story books.

If storytelling is as old as humanity, environmental storytelling or the art of using narration to teach people to care about the environment is very recent: not more than 20 years old. It started in the 90s when educators felt the need to enliven their Environmental Education programs in schools, and
nature centers with storytelling. The first stories to be considered environmental were stories that talked about animals. But soon it was realized that environmental education went beyond talking about animals. It is much more than talking about human animal relationship. So in Environmental education the tales with environmental message have been selected.

All primitive people around the world lived close to nature and cared for the natural world. The tales narrated by them have lots of animal characters that help children connect with the natural world. Their creation myths help children share indigenous people's awe for the universe and its wonders. But there again came limitations. Most stories, though coming from people who have a close relationship with nature, are not always relevant in environmental education, many of the stories having been created to transmit cultural values. Nevertheless, if adapted, some of the myths and tales of the world types have a lot of scope and can be used to promote the environmental education of our children.

Recently a new wave of environmental storytellers has appeared. Some are naturalists who want to use the power of a good story to tell about the wonders of the natural world; others are environmentalists who use the medium of stories to impart conservation messages or to teach an ecological concept like diversity, adaptation, sustainability, interdependence, the effect of pollution on the environment etc.

There are tales that, unlike indigenous tales, give scientific information. But here also there are a few drawbacks as fact tales often run the risk of being too factual and fail to capture kids' vibrant imagination and spirit. So in adopting the tales to communicate environmental message by reconnecting people and nature through oral narratives one should be very careful so that the purpose might be fulfilled without disturbing the interest and concentration level.
5.6. Function of Assamese Folktales in Communicating Environmental Messages:

Assamese folktales have stronger potentialities to function in communicating the message of ecological balance in the context of present day society. In the study the following points have been taken into considered.

1. Traditional Assamese tales can address the issues relating to the kinds of problems that would arise when an important animal such as a lion or bird is harmed or hindered.

2. In most of the folktales the lesson of what happens if the human is grateful for the animal's aid and the consequences for being ungrateful is also communicated.

3. Assamese Folktales are imbued with the lesson of help offered by the animals and thus provides the listener an opportunity to compare the type of aid humans give to animals focusing on the current attempts to protect endangered species.

4. The common people’s belief about certain animals and taboo against killing of some of the species of certain kind is transferred to the present generation through folktales.

This chapter only supplements the above notions taking a few examples from the realm of Assamese Folktales. The ethical basis of various resource utilization and conservation strategies adopted by the ancient people can easily be communicated emphasizing the need of reviving those values in the present day situation with the help these oral traditions.

5.6. a. Developing Love and Concern for the Non Human World through Storytelling:

Many tales are about animals for which children have a natural fascination and empathy. The tales invite children to explore new cultural horizons and learn many facts about other people’s friendship with the animal worlds.
Folktales from indigenous people may serve this function of tale telling by generating a sense of care and concern for the non human world living in their surrounding environment.

In the domain of Assamese tales the researcher finds the tales with the motifs of helpful and friendly animals. Also animals expressing their gratitude are abound in tale collection. There are a few tales which communicate the message of consequences of being too ungrateful to non human beings. For example, the friendly domestic pets are presented in the tales like The Mongoose, The Helpful Dog, The Merchant’s Tiya, The Frog, The Singara Fish, Officer Fox etc. Listening to such tales has deep psychological impact and may fill the mind with a sense of love and empathy for the animals leading to the desire of safeguarding such animals from danger at any cost.

Sample Tales:

The Mongoose:

The old couple had a pet mongoose. One day he was in charge of their baby while they were out of home. Unfortunately the baby was bitten by a snake. The mongoose had to fight with the snake but he could not save the life of the child. Then it was going in search of a herb to bring back the life of the child. On its way, he came across the master coming back home. Seeing the blood on its body the master took it otherwise and killed the mongoose. Thus before applying the magic herb it had to lose its life. Realising his mistake the old man started weeping. (Source: Ballads and Tales of Assam)

The Merchant’s Tiya:

A merchant left his affairs in the charge of a tiya bird. The bird directed the merchant’s servants to set fire to the paddy field. When all the paddy got fried the tiya’s fellow birds ate them up and left their dung in the barn of the merchant. When the merchant returned his servants reported the matter to him and he immediately did away with the bird. But when he entered the barn he found it full of gold. (Source: The Ballads and Tales of Assam)
Sial Tamuli or Officer Fox:

A fox steals sugarcane from an old farmer’s orchard. The farmer pretends to be dead, and as the fox advances, captures it. The fox promises its captor the merchant’s daughter as bride and is let off. The beast takes a rattan, chews areca nut and visits the merchant and put across the proposal that the widowed daughter of the merchant’s servant to be given to its ‘grandfather’. It further tells the merchant that on the wedding day there should be no drum beating for that would offend the groom’s friends. The fox then ask the farmer to put a little rice powder and gur in cups made of banana bark and float them down the river. The merchant notices these and thinks the groom must have invited a large number of guests. At evening the fox invites its fellow-beasts, puts a torch in the mouth of each, and starts for the merchant’s place. As there is drum beating the foxes run away and the matchmaker takes the merchant to task for his lack of consideration. When the marriage is over the fox rushes home and sets the farmer’s rickety cottage on fire, returns directly and announces that an unexpected fire has consumed all the wealth of the farmer. So the merchant causes houses to be built and money given and the farmer lives happily with his wife. (Source: The Ballads and Tales of Assam)

The Frog:

An old man catches a frog while fishing and brings it home. As the man is about to beat it top death the frog cries out. ‘Grand father, don’t kill me, I shall be your grand child and work for you.’ So it is not killed. It goes out to the field with a pair of bullocks. The king comes with his men and passes over the field. The frog hides under a clod and gives him a thundering. The king’s men take away the bullocks. The frog comes home in a huff, takes some fried grains, goes out and sings:

I go along the way and eat fried grains,
If anyone comes him also I give some.

At this a large number of insects, mosquitoes, wasps, and wild animals follow the frog and they all go and challenge the king. The latter is forced to sue for
peace and gives the frog his daughter and half of his kingdom. (Source: *The Ballads and Tales of Assam*)

**The Fox and the Prince:**

A prince meets a fox lying in his way. He asks it to get off but it does not budge. The prince goes away in a huff and stays the night at an oil presser’s. He ties his horse to the post of the oil press. Next morning when he goes to take his horse the oil presser lays claim to it as an offspring of his oil press. The prince reports the matter to the king but he has no witness to back him. He remembers the fox, goes to it and requests it to help him. The fox rolls in ashes and comes to the court after some considerable delay. The king asks, ‘Why are you so late?’ ‘There was a fire in the sea. It took me sometime to put it out.’ The king bursts out laughing at this preposterous plea. The fox retorts, ‘How can an oil press give birth to a horse?’ the king sees his point and restores the horse to its rightful owner. (Source: *The Ballads and Tales of Assam*)

**The Tiger in the Trap:**

A tiger is caught in a trap and requests a man to let it out. On the beast’s promising not to harm him the man lets it out. The tiger wants to eat him and the man asks, ‘Can a tiger eat its benefactor?’ The tiger replies, ‘Yes.’ The man proposes three witnesses. A tree is of the tiger’s opinion. A stream is also of the same opinion. Then comes a fox. It wants to know in what state the tiger was found. As the tiger enters the trap the fox tells the man, ‘Do not let it out, and beat it to death.’ (Source: *The Ballads and Tales of Assam*)

**The Tiger and the Crab:**

A tiger and a crab are friends. They together raise some vegetables. The crab invites the tiger to a meal. The guest is asked to put its tail into the crab’s hole so that the rice and the curries can be pulled up from below. After serving a few courses the crab catches of the tail and will not release it. In mortal pain the tiger cries out to a peasant lad (a widow’s son) for help. On its promising
not to harm the lad serves the tail with a stroke of his knife. The grateful tiger promises to supply its benefactor with a deer every day, but this must be kept a secret from others. On one occasion the lad is forced to give away his secret and the tiger carries him off. In the forest the lad’s stomach makes a sound because he is hungry. The tiger asks what it is and is told that it is the six-score crabs which have been eaten by him. The tiger leaves its victim directly. The lad arrives at the shelter of some wild buffalos. He finds on the ground the foam of milk, drinks it and after having cleaned the place hides in a near by tree. When the buffalos return they find the place cleaned and are pleased. They discover the lad and make him their chief. They kill one of their herd, give the horns to the lad and tell him that one is the horn of joy they will consider him safe, if he blows on the horn of anger they will know he is in danger and will come to his rescue. One day a hair from his head floats on a river and is swallowed up by a barali fish. When the fish is caught and cut up at the king’s place the hair is seen by the princess and she wants to marry the man with such hair. A pet crow of the princess takes a ripe mango, flies into the forest and cries:

Who it is that blows on the horn of joy and the horn of anger?

Who it is that would eat the ripe mango?

The lad responds and as the crow drops the mango and he stops to pick it, the bird makes off with the horn of anger. When he becomes helpless the king’s men take him away. At evening the buffaloes find out his whereabouts from the trail of torn clothes he leaves. The lad declares the buffaloes are his possession. The king tests him by asking him to ride on them. He does so. So he gets the king’s daughter and kingdom as well. (Source: The Ballads and Tales of Assam)

Analysis:

The magnitude of friendship with animals reflected in these tales serves the function of arousing love and care for the animal friends and motif of not to do any harm to the animal kingdom on the listeners. The tale of mongoose is
also very pathetic and heart rending at the same time stimulating love for the animal friends. The mongoose is a symbol of true and reliable friend who had been mistaken by his master. The tale reflects how the master had a sad realization after killing the true friend on the spur of the moment. The tale will be functional in arousing the listener’s compassion for the animal friend. The second tale of the fox and the prince show how an animal friend can help in solving legal dispute and even outwit the human being. The third tale also by reflecting human-animal relationship may serve the function of developing love and concern for the animal lives. The tale of the frog, the fox and the prince and the tiger and the crab show the human characteristics of animals and managerial capacity like an experienced and resourceful human being and may serve the function of arousing fellow feeling for the animal friends considering their wit and intelligence. Marriages of person to animals are also extremely common. The singara fish and the Frog illustrates even the marriages to animals are possible in ancient world. The human and non human dichotomy that has threatened the natural world today can be patched up by these tales.

5.6. b. Making Sense of the Natural World around Them:

The first step in Environment Education is to develop a sense of wonder for the natural world around us. The future generation, first of all must develop a sense of wonder towards the natural phenomenon with a deep sense of appreciation. True caring for the environment will come when people bear a sense of love and gratitude towards their surrounding environment. Love and empathic feelings are the greatest stimulant to the will, not knowledge. Feelings are more important than facts when talking about saving the Earth, preserving the environment and ecology. Interestingly, researches have shown that environmental knowledge through a number of theories, facts and figures that are inadequate in inculcating a sense of respect and responsibility towards the environment. People need to know and feel more about the natural environment as well as social environment only if the ecology is invigorated with emotions because only emotions that affect the heart can bring a change
of attitudes. Children with emotional attachments to the natural environment are likely to become environment-friendly in adulthood. Creating opportunities for children to develop such attachments is the true purpose of Environment Education. The beliefs, values and ways of life that have evolved from living close to nature naturally have the stimulating effect on the people in arousing environmental ethics and creating an attachment and instill ecological values and pro-environmental emotions.

One of the best ways to create these attachments and instill ecological values and ethics is to tell stories that impart pro-environmental emotions. Storytelling has received a lot of attention from educational theorists because it has the capacity to impart knowledge while entertaining and involving the listener. Storytelling gives children a chance to learn in an interesting way about the world around them. Stories can help introduce kids to new concepts, add depth to a lesson, and enliven any topic. For those willing to incorporate the joy of storytelling into their Environment Education lessons, there is a great variety of folktales about the natural word, the sun, the moon, the universe, the trees, the rivers etc.

Living in immediate proximity to the natural environment, the people wondered about the various shapes of the landforms that they saw. The legends and myths helped them explain why a certain mountain was shaped like a cone, the existence of a certain rock, waterfall or a lake in a certain area, etc. This sense of shapes fill the mind of the listener with a sense of awe and wonder towards the mystic being and is further developed to a sense of worship toward natural objects. This mysterious sense restricts the people to do any harm to this natural phenomenon.

Sample Tale

Place Lore:

In Nalbari district, there is a than named Barbari Than located in a 3 or 4 km south-east distance from Nalbari. The popular legend associated with it is that
originally it was a vast uninhabited place full of jungles where a big *Pakari* tree was there. Two snakes lived on that tree. One day, an old lady named Janaki came under the tree to light a *diya*. From that day it was considered as a place of worship. Another legend goes round it that the river Pagladia flows near the *than*. During the flood when Pagladia changed its course, the *than* was not drenched. That’s why it was called *Barbari Than*. The *Basanti Puja* observed in the *than* is state-famous. According to the belief, once the cholera scourged the area as and in order to get relief from the death the local people started worship of *Basanti* and they were saved. From then onwards it has been continued till now. (*Source: Collected from Rabin Chakravarty, Vill. Chaklapar*)

**The Milk Pouring Cow:**

A Brahmin in a village of Rangamati had a cow. The cow used to be missing from its grazing about noon. When it was discovered it was found pouring milk at a particular place. This was observed for several days. Then people dug at the place and found an image of Goddess *Kali*. In certain other versions the image was of a *Shyamrai* (Krishna) or *Sivalinga* that was dug up. (*Source: The Ballads and Tales of Assam*)

**Life Giving Water:**

In *Bardowa*, the birth place of the *Vaishnavite* saint *Sri Sankaradev*, there was a tank. Once a certain woman caught some fish in a pond. After dressing the fish she went to the tank nearby to wash them. As soon as the water touched the fish they revived. This surprised the woman very much and coming back she reported the incident to her husband.

The couple had no children. Want of a child made them unhappy. Days passed. Then one day the little son of a neighbouring family happened to die. The child was given a burial. At night the woman’s husband dug the body up and took it to the tank. As soon as the body was put in the water the child revived. The man brought him home and kept him as his own child. After
some days, however, the matter could not be kept hidden and the child’s parents came to know that their dead son was no longer dead. They came and clamored for the child. It is said that since then the water of the tank lost its life-giving properties. *(Source: Tales of Assam)*

**Analysis:**

These three legendary tales illustrate how the tellers associated mystic sense of wonder with the narration in order to generate high regard for certain natural phenomenon. People believe with absolute certainty that if someone does any harm to such resources sickness or even death would befall him or her. This sense of revere may induce a feeling of protecting these nature resources for the benefit of their progeny and thus helping in maintaining balance in the natural surrounding.

**5.6. c. Protection of Water Resources:**

The environmental scientists tried to evoke a sense respect for water as water is an indispensable resource for the mother earth. ‘Save water save life’ is an oft quoted slogan. But just the repetition of slogan is not enough if a sense of respectful doesn’t grow in people’s mind. The primitive people had a high regard for this water resource and they created many myths and legends connected with the water *spirit*. Again, the necessity of rain water for the mother earth is considered so sacred that even through the tales people tried to incorporate such messages. Two sample tales will prove this.

**Sample Tales:**

**Queen Kamala Kuori :**

Once there was a king in a certain area in Assam. He loved his people and did all that was possible to protect them. His subjects were also very loyal. The king led a happy life with his devoted queen Kamala *Kuori*.

But alas! Happiness does not last for ever. It is like a dew drop on a leaf. There happened to be a severe drought in the country. The fields were parched. There was not a jot of verdure anywhere. People and cattle were
dying of thirst and hunger. The king was very anxious to save his people. He engaged some people to dig a big and deep tank. The tank was deep but where was the water? It was dry. The digging was done deeper and deeper but there came not a drop water from it. The king was lost in thought. The people lost all hopes.

At this time, the king had a dream. Yes, he would be able to save his people, there would come water from the big tank but he would have to sacrifice his beloved queen.

The king woke up. He struggled in his mind. On one side there was the queen, his loyal and devoted wife and on the other side there were his subjects; to protect them was his sacred duty. What could he do? He told about his dream to Queen Kamala Kuori. She heard it, kept silent for a while and then with tears in her eyes, said, ‘King, I must sacrifice myself for all these people, who are like my children. I know you will never be happy without me, but let me go.’

The king stood on the bank of the tank. The people were waiting with grief and suspense. The queen bade goo-bye to the king and stepped into the hollow of the tank and lo! There was water—cool, clean, clear—gushing out.

The king cried out to the victim.
‘O lady of my heart, Kamala,
How much is the water?’
‘O lord of my heart,
To my ankle is the water,’ came the reply.
The water rose up higher. The king asked again,
‘O lady of my heart, Kamala,
How much is the water?’
‘O lord of my heart,
To my knees is the water,’ came the reply.
The water rose up still higher. The king asked again,

‘O lady of my heart Kamala
How much is the water?’
‘O lord of my heart,
To my waist is the water,’ came the reply.

The queen went forward and the water rose up still gig her. The king asked in a tear-choked voice,

‘O lady of my heart,
To my neck is the water,’ came the reply.

The queen went further and now the water came in a sugre. The king asked with tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘O lady of my heart, Kamala,
How much is the water?’
‘O lord of my heart,
To my head is the water.’

The faint voice of the queen came and the beautiful queen Kamala Kuori was lost in deep waters forever. The king and the subjects wailed her loss. (Source: Kamala Kuori)

Analysis:

The tale reflects the common people’s awareness about the water resources and the human response to various factors in nature. The mother earth was so revered that for the protection of it the king didn’t hesitate to sacrifice his own beloved wife. The value of rain water and the preservation of it for the benefit of community environment can be instilled by this tale.
5.6. d. Message of Ecological Balance:

The former generation, though non literate, had deep knowledge and understanding of the importance of harmonious balance of biodiversity for the sake of better living and future sustainability. In the folktale world, plants and trees, birds and fishes, ponds and rivers, animals and humans all live with cordial relation. There is no difference between the human and natural or forest world. Though with the progress of civilization the people started making comfortable living houses the forest at the expense of natural world, still a deep sense of regard for these have been ongoing. There is no difference between the two world in the collection of tales.

Sample Tales:

1. Sarbadhanu was a king. He was a skilled hunter. The king was fond of birds’ meat. He was always busy with the killing of birds. The subjects also followed the king. Thus all the birds of that kingdom were killed by the king and his subjects. As a result, the number of ants increased such an extent that all the trees including paddy plants of that kingdom were spoiled by the ants. For want of tree, drought was prevailed in the kingdom. Famine broke out. Many people had died for want of food. Many of them left the kingdom. Ultimately the king compelled to beg. At last, a king of another kingdom advised the ill fated king that without the proper protection of the birds nobody could live happily and peacefully. (Rabha, Satish. Totola Rabhar Sadhu)

Analysis:

The message of ecological balance for the better protection of life and culture is reflected in this tale. This tale illuminates with the significant aspect of the ancient people’s consciousness about the maintaining of ecological balance to save the earth from natural calamity and extinction.
Sample Tales:

The Birth of \textit{Hudo} Bird:

\textit{Hudo} is a night bird. It is believed to be a sign of misfortune. It never twitters alone. Both the birds twitter together. How this bird came into existence? Why both the birds twitter together? There is a heart rending Missing tale explaining this –

Once upon a time there were two friends living in a village. During the rainy season both went to catch fish by a \textit{sepa}, a traditional fish catching device to the spring at the dawn. There was a \textit{yaksha} in the spring. It used to go to the spring to eat the fishes from the \textit{sepa} before they reached the place.

After few days, the two friends discussed the matter seriously. They could guess the theft of the fishes. They decided that the next day they would come there before the cock crowed and the one who got up earlier would awake the other. Their conversation was overheard by the \textit{yaksha} and he under the disguise of one friend awakened the other friend. He (the other friend) believed him to be the real friend went with him and reached the spring where the \textit{sepa} was placed. When he was about to lift the \textit{sepa}, the \textit{yaksha} cut his throat and drank his fresh blood.

In the mean time the real friend went to his house to call him. Having come to know that the other friend had already arrived at the place, he thought that it was only because of his evil intention. He came almost running to the place and was shocked to notice that the cut head of his friend was moving on the ground. Getting afraid, he started running back followed by the cut head. The friend climbed a tree and the head of the dead friend was moving under the tree. The friend asked from above – what happened to you, my dear friend? The head could not speak more, but uttered the single word – \textit{Bandhu} (friend). The friend from the top responded – \textit{Bandhu} (friend). The head uttered again– \textit{Bandhu} (Friend). Thus uttering the words they gradually transformed in to birds which are now called \textit{Hudo} Bird. The friend on the tree top became the
male and the dead friend became the female birds. As originated from human kind, the birds have the ears like human beings. (Source: Asom Anchalar Janajatiya Sadhukatha, 2005)

**The Birth of Monkey:**

Once upon a time there lived an old childless couple in a village. They adopted one boy child. One day the mother sent the boy to dig the ground for collecting potatoes. The boy didn’t return the cottage that day.

The boy liked to eat potatoes and forgot to come back home. Time rolled on. The boy didn’t return. He became friends with the wild animals and birds. He preferred to stay in the jungle and adapted with the jungle life.

After a few days the old parents went in search of the boy. He was on the top of the tree eating the seeds and fruits. They asked him to come down and go home with them. But he refused to get down saying that he felt more comfortable with that life. The boy kept the bows and arrows, and the Dao under the tree. The old parents brought those with them. The boy lost the life protecting weapon and was afraid to get down from the tree. Thus he started climbing the branches of the trees. Naturally hair began to appear in his body to adapt with the surroundings. The boy in course of time came to be known as monkey. As begotten from human kind the Missing people never killed the monkey. (Source: Asom Anchalar Janajatiya Sadhukatha, 2005)

**Sihu and the Crocodile:**

In the bank of river Suwansiri, there was a very beautiful girl named Tamang. She had a boy friend. But her parents arranged a different match for her. She didn’t want to cheat her former lover. So she came to the river and tightening an iron rod round her neck, and fastening an iron grinder in her belly she jumped into the river. But she didn’t die. She started living deep down the river. Because of the iron rod her face became longer than the other parts of the body and for the grinder the belly portion puffed up.
On the other hand the would be groom of Tamang came to the river and out of grief jumped into the river. While jumping, he fastened a big stone on his back as well as a thorn on his body. But his life was also saved. In due course he became the Crocodile. Because of the stone, a big lump appeared on the back of the crocodile and because of the pickle the whole body has become thorny.

(Source: *Asom Anchalar Janajatiya Sadhukatha*, 2005)

**Analysis:**

These Missing tales have also environmental implication which if used properly will function as typical examples of communicating the message of animal preservation and thus maintaining ecological balance. The fact is that in ancient time people killed the rare species like Hudu bird, monkey, Sihu, Krishna bird, Guawala bird, Gui sap, for flesh. In order to preserve these species a number of tales were created so that the killing might stop. Likewise in order to preserve the rare plants and trees some beliefs were popularized among the people. For such belief, the Mishing people never kill the crocodile and Sihu. These tales, if narrated with the purpose of conveying the message of preserving the rare species, will help in conserving biodiversity. The sanctity attached to few animals and prohibition of the killing of even poisonous snakes and destroying monkeys proves the hold that the down to earth people’s idea of life protection has in their minds.

5.6. e. **Instilling Environmental Ethics:**

To help young people to address the question of responsibilities towards environment and management of environmental problems, some attention on inculcation of moral and ethical values is required. Values that is significant in judging the righteousness of one’s action can be installed from the domain of oral folklore.
The narration of a few selected tales may introduce and inspire certain ethics that are necessary for environment protection. If the strong ethics can be incorporated in the mind of people they will no longer proceed to do any harm towards their supporting nature.

Sample Tales:

The Tale of a Hunter:
(A Tale from Kameng Border)

Once there was a kind hunter. He went to hunt for his village people, but never eat any kind of meat. Hunting was his hobby. The meat was distributed among the village people. Once, one of his close friends asked him to go and search for deer’s meat for a marriage feast. He searched and searched but failed to get one. At the evening he came back without one. He thought that if he were to submit his failure, his fame as a hunter would be lost. So at last he decided to kill his domestic goat to offer his friend as deer’s meat. He snatched the goat to the nearest forest and about to kill it. But then he found that he had not brought any utensils to keep the meat. So he went back home for utensils. When he reached the forest he saw that the goat dug the ground and tried to put the dagger into it. In the eyes of the goat, the hunter could read the sign of fear and sorrow. The hunter thought at once, ‘The fear of death that haunt the human beings also haunt the animals. They also suffer from the same pain and agony at the time of killing. They can also feel and sense the pleasure and sorrows of life. I have already killed a number of animals. I am a sinner. I am guilty of killing so many animals. So I am not worthy of human being. So it is better to die for a sinner.’ Thus lamenting the hunter let loose the goat and went to the top of the hill to commit suicide. But when he jumped he was taken up by god to heaven and lived happily there.

The other man in a village saw the fortune of the hunter and he thought that if the hunter could get the heaven after committing sin why should have I been not received by god? So he went to the top of the hill and jumped, but
unfortunately he was not received by god because of his unkind and selfish attitude. (Source: Asom Anchalar Janajatiya Sadhukatha, 2005)

The Two Woodcutters:

In a village there was a wood cutter. He went to cut trees to the forest and earned his livelihood. One day he went to cut trees and accidentally his axe fell on to the water. The water was very deep. Having lost the axe, he went mad and began to weep. Suddenly he noticed the water god was rising with a golden axe and asked the wood cutter if that was his axe? The wood cutter answered negatively. Then he dipped in to the river and arose with a silver axe and asked him if that was his axe. The second time also the wood cutter responded negatively. The third time the water god rose with his own axe and he could recognize his axe and very excitedly he wanted to receive his own axe. As he spoke the truth, the water god offered him all the three axes and from then onward he need not go to cut trees as he became a rich man by the mercy of the water god.

Near his house there was another hunter. Coming to know the story of water god he also went to the forest and dropped his axe into the river. The god rose up with the golden axe and asked if that was his axe and he readily replied in the affirmative. The water god grew very angry at his greed and at once vanished with the axe never to return again. The second wood cutter started weeping at his misfortune. (Source : Aesop’s tale)

Analysis:

These two tales convey a significant message. The realization of the hunter at the first tale and the morally good character of the wood cutter of the second tale have earned reward while the greed of the second hunter and the second wood cutter in the respective tales are shown punished. Hunting or wood cuttings are not environmentally sound activities. But if it is done out of necessity and in minimum quantity it would not exert dark impact, but if it is done out of greed and covetousness then it will cause big damage to the
natural world. The issues like environmental degradation leading to global warming have their origins in the error, greed and avariciousness. These are detected as two vices that are at the root all wrong doing. So the moral conveyed by these two tales can instill an ethics in the mind of the listener that would help him grow a matured adult free of greed and covetousness. If the number of such people increases in a greater degree the natural world will be saved from extinction.

The Big headed Man :

Once upon a time there was a couple in a remote village. The male was very proud and never paid any attention to other’s advice. He considers himself to be the wisest one and on many occasions he had broken the taboos of local areas. His boastful nature offended his wife and she developed a secret relationship with his brother.

By their village there was a pool under a peepal tree forest. He always boasted that that nothing would harm and befall him. While the other people of the village revered the tree ands the pool believing their sacredness orally transmitted, he never accepted them as true and said that he was not too fool to belief such a taboo. His brother and wife were not happy about this boast.

His wife rebuked him for this but he did not take kindly to being rebuked by a woman. He slapped her on the face. There was an outcry and his elder brother intervened. He said to him, ‘It is not proper that you have beaten your wife. She and I have saved you from the wrath of the ancestors of the land. If it were not because of us, you would have perished a long way back. You should be grateful we did this to save you.’

Instead of being grateful, he poured scorn on his brother and accused him of having an affair with his wife. He then kicked his wife out of the marital home and ordered her to go back to her parents. He said he would stay with his children. At first he thought that it would be easy for him to do this. When this
task became too heavy for him, he sent his children to his mother. His mother refused and said that it was his fault that his wife had left. After trying for another two weeks, he gave up. He decided to reconcile with his wife. He also feared that the wife might not accept to come back with him so he decided to take their children with him. He told his brother about the forthcoming journey. The brother warned him to observe the local taboos as he went after his wife. The young brother said that he would. He set out on his journey the following morning. He came to a fig tree and took figs from it and then said that the figs were bad and cursed the fig tree. After a short distance, he felt that he had to relieve himself. He went into a forest where people are forbidden from relieving themselves. When one of his children warned him against doing this, he beat him up. Immediately after relieving himself, the fasces started following him. He went up a tree and they followed him. Every time he tried to evade them, he failed. They finally came to his in-laws who were very happy to see him come with their grandchildren. A cock was killed for him and his children. As they were having their meal, the fasces came and started singing, reminding him that he had relieved himself in a forbidden forest. He became so distressed and confused that he took the fasces and swallowed them. This is the day the man lost all respect. His wife divorced him and his in-laws kicked him out of their homestead and said that they would bring up their grandchildren. They said that he was not fit to be a family man. The man lost his family because he refused to listen to advice. (Source: Jaymati Devi, Vill. Kairara, Nalbari)

Analysis:

The tale implies the importance of listening to one’s advice regarding the breaking of taboo. This arrogant man has to lose his family as he didn’t pay heed to other’s sayings. The same is true when it comes to environmental issues. It pays to take heed when advice is given because a wrong may be done today but the consequences of such a deed may take long to manifest themselves. At times in life nothing may happen if people do bad things. It
suggests that it is not proper to continue doing wrong despite being warned. The wrong doing of one in the past would always come to haunt the perpetrators.

This man had polluted a given forest but he had to pay a lot for his defiance. The point of the story is that at times some forests are at the source of rivers. To relieve one in such places would mean that the water that would be used by those downstream would not be good for their health. Hence, they would suffer from stomach like cholera and dysentery, which may prove to be fatal. One should consider it his duty to protect the water sources for ensuring a better living.

Table 5.1
Conservation-oriented Taboos in Tribes and other Ethnic Groups of Northeastern India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal(s) Protected Through Taboo</th>
<th>Tribe/Ethnic Group</th>
<th>State in N.E. India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deer, wild boar, and other animals in mating season; pregnant female and young animals; leader of a group of deer/wild boar.</td>
<td>Various tea garden communities, Hrankhawl, Hmar &amp; Debbarman tribes</td>
<td>Assam, Tripura, Mizoram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elephant, Tiger, Monkey, Owl, Vulture, House Crow, Raven</td>
<td>Various tea garden communities</td>
<td>Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elephant, Song birds, certain snakes</td>
<td>Hrankhawl</td>
<td>Assam, Tripura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monkey, Otter</td>
<td>Pnar</td>
<td>Assam, Meghalaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elephant, Eagle, Parrot, Hill Mayna</td>
<td>Dimasa</td>
<td>Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoolock Gibbon, Tiger, Python, Wild Goat, Bulbul (bird), Frog</td>
<td>Rongmai naga</td>
<td>Assam, Manipur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tortoise, Snail, <em>Channa morulius</em> (fish), Small eel, Some catfishes, Snakes</td>
<td>Ningthouja clan of Meitei</td>
<td>Manipur, Assam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Egg and meat of all animals, some catfishes, small eel, *Channa morulius*, Snail

| Egg and meat of all animals, some catfishes, small eel, *Channa morulius*, Snail | Khuman clan of Meitei | Manipur, Assam |
| Field rat | Khabanganba clan | Manipur, Assam |
| Sparrow | Moirang clan | Manipur, Assam |
| Parrot, Owl, Elephant, Monkey, Jackal | Muslim trapper | Assam |
| Sparrow, Jackal, Crow, Eagle, Vulture | Muslim nomad | Assam |
| Monkey, Elephant, Songbirds | Muslim nomad | Assam |
| All poisonous and non-poisonous snakes | Worshippers of Goddess Manasa | Assam |
| Herons, Egrets, and Cormorants in heronries during mating/nesting season | Most communities in valley areas | Assam |


5.7. The analysis provides some indications relating to the link of ecology and folk belief systems expressed in the tales that serve the function of suggesting resource conservation either directly or indirectly. A continuous strain of attaching man with nature is perceptible in the tales analysed here. Assam is rich with animal tales. While some of these tales involve only animal characters, many involve cooperative relationships between people and animals that are ultimately beneficial to both. Others demonstrate the consequences when people and animals fail to peacefully coexist. Mostly, through, the study of helpful animal in folktales one can recall the time when people and animals shared the earth and when humans respected their animal companions. However, the ever-growing list of endangered species and ongoing concern with the fate of surrounding environment reveals that humans and animals do no longer share the cooperative relationship portrayed in the folktale world. More often than not, human beings are in conflict with their environment and the animals in it. Folktales perform a significant role in
bringing home the lesson of the essential relationship between human beings and animals in folklore and the relationship between people and the environment in the present world and thus making them learn to revive their attachment with the natural world for the sustainable development of the society. The systematic and methodological search for more such tales has the prospect of appropriation of natural resources and preservation of them.

References and works cited:

Seitel, Peter: See So That We May See: Performances and Interpretations of Traditional Tales from Tanzania. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press. 1980

Cour, Ajeet: Folklore: The Intangible Cultural Heritage of SAARC Region, Vol. II. Pub. Foundation of Folk Writers and Literature, 2009


Muthukumaraswami, M. D.: Indian Folklife, NFSC, Serial No. 28, January, 2008

Kothari, A., N. Pathak, Communities and Conservation: Natural Resource


Ramakrishnan, P. S., Conserving the Sacred for Biodiversity Management,

U.M. Chandrashekara: New Delhi, 1998


Syngai, D.: Sacred Groves of Meghalaya in *Biodiversity- North East India Perspectives* (Kharbuli, B., Syiem, D. and Kayang, H. Eds.). North Eastern Biodiversity Research Cell, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India, 1999


**Web Resources:**

http://www.indianfolklore.org

www. Hinduism.about.com/od/artculture/a/bauls.html

www.americanfolklore.net/brer-rabbit.html

Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics 12, 2002

*****