

## Greening the tender souls – environmental ethics in Children’s Literature: study of select Assamese texts

**Dr. Jayanta Madhab Tamuly**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya (MSSV)

Nagaon

Assam, PIN-782001

[Email-jayantatamuly829@gmail.com](mailto:Email-jayantatamuly829@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This paper attempts to examine how children literature, particularly children fiction in Assamese, carries out the environmental ethics. Environmental ethics consists of the core principles of respect for nature, environmental justice, sustainability, stewardship, strong awareness about the protection and conservation of nature and environment etc. As literature is one of the most popular, effective and influential mediums of communication, literature should play a crucial role in propagating and disseminating these ethics. While coming to children literature, it is of more significance, as the tender minds are the matured saviours of the future. Children tend to respond better to literature than to expository texts. So fictional writings for children carry wider potentiality of catalysing the elements of environmental ethics in the tender souls. This paper examines the literary projection of environmental ethics which include discussion of major areas of ethics, devices and techniques used for such propagation and the use of language in this attempt. Two Assamese children books have been selected for the analysis. Articles in books and Journals have been used to carry forward the discussion. Inputs of Ecocriticism and Environmental Psychology have been used as the theoretical foundation of the research.

**Key Words** - environment, ethics, children literature, fiction awareness, responsibility,

## Introduction

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy that explores the moral dynamics of the relationship between human and the environment. Environmental ethics introspects into fundamental questions that tangle between the debate of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism /biocentrism. Environmental ethics serves as a crucial moral compass for navigating the complex challenges facing our planet, from climate change and biodiversity loss to pollution and resource depletion. It challenges us to rethink our relationship with nature and consider the long-term consequences of our choices. Traditional ethics mainly concerns intra-human duties, especially duties among contemporaries. Environmental ethics extends the scope of ethical concerns beyond one's community and nation to include not only all people everywhere, but also animals and the whole of nature – the biosphere – both now and beyond the imminent future to include future generations.

The core principles of environmental ethics are varied, reflecting the different philosophical perspectives within the field. Still they can be summarised as the following ones-respect for nature, ensuring that the burdens and benefits of environmental policies are distributed fairly across all communities-regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, Sustainability-the emphasis on meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, Stewardship- a sense of responsibility for caring for the environment and protecting it for future generations and the precautionary principle. Environmental ethics thus expands the scope of moral consideration to include non-human entities, such as animals, plants, ecosystems, and even the planet as a whole. Environmental ethics says that we should base our behaviour on a set of ethical values that guide our approach towards the other living beings in nature. It is about including the rights of non-human entities in our ethical and moral values. Humans exist because of all other non- living elements of the environment. Therefore conservation of natural resources is not only the need of the day or time but also our prime duty. This represents a significant shift in perspective, moving beyond anthropocentric viewpoints to embrace a more ecocentric or biocentric approach.

Environmental ethics extends the concepts like justice, fairness, and rights within the human realm, to the natural world ([www.iere.org](http://www.iere.org)).

At the level of ideas, environmental ethics challenges the dominant and deep-rooted anthropocentrism of modern mainstream ethics and extends the object of our duty to future generations and non-human beings. At the practical level, environmental ethics forcefully critiques the materialism, hedonism and consumerism accompanying modern capitalism, and calls instead for a 'green lifestyle' that is harmonious with nature. It searches for an economic arrangement that is sensitive to Earth's limits and to concerns for quality of life. In the political arena, it advocates a more equitable international economic and political order that is based on the principles of democracy, global justice and universal human rights. It argues for pacifism and against an arms race.

### **Children Literature and Environmental Ethics**

In constructing Ecocritical ideologies in the tender minds of children, the role of literature is enormously weighed for its contribution. In comparison to other mediums of communication ,literature is more effective and influential medium to propound environmental ethics in the minds of the children .It is because literature is fictional ,imaginative ,free from straight advices ,simple in language and the ethical teachings are always offered under the storyline .Children tend to respond better to literature than to expository texts ,and consequently they are more apt to read stories than textbooks. Moreover, children cannot take part in awareness rallies, do not understand nor take part in formulation or implementation of the conservation or protection policies initiated by governments or other diplomatic bodies. Therefore, children cannot be active participants of the traditionally conducted initiatives that call for environmentalism .They can be engaged in the environmental issues only through interesting and non-diplomatic activities.

Any children book, especially fiction, is always of great interest for the children because of their storyline, freedom of the play of imagination, simplicity of language, blending of reality and fantasy etc. Use of frequent illustrations and growing popularity of picture books intensify the scope of reader's engagement with literary text which consequently impact on easier and more effective communication of environmental issues. "Picture book illustration is a carrier medium

for people's thinking activities, through the design of picture book illustration, it can achieve to make unilateral passive reading to the state of actively obtaining information" (Lu and Huo ,119).This possibility of broader active engagement is what rationalises the urgency of locating literature in the paradigm of environmental ethics. Children literature bears immense pedagogical possibility to study the aspects of environmental ethics in children texts .

Children's literature is developed first and foremost with a preferential target audience and particular age range in mind, one that is understood to be an important stage of growth and development, being particularly relevant to the individual. Contact with children's literature is often referred to as being a seminal developmental experience, which is capable of collaborating in the construction of reasoning, the perception of vital experiences and the integration in the social practices of children and adolescents (Ramos and Ramos, 2016).This statement makes it clear that children literature is target oriented and it aims at development of the children .Hence, imparting environmental ethics is one of the major objectives in literature for children. Literary productions for children contain developmental qualities, both in terms of conceptualization of the world and the relationships between the individual and their physical, social and cultural setting. Despite the importance given to the aesthetic and emerging aspects of children's literary texts nowadays, its pedagogical component is a preferred feature for many authors, resulting in objectives of development and education for a wide range of value systems, among which one can highlight the protection of the environment.

John Stephens, while talking about children literature, referred to three ideologically grounded perspectives. The first of these continues to promote mastery over nature, whereby the natural world exists for the benefit of humanity and must be subordinated to its desires and needs. The second assumes or promotes an attitude of caring, wonder and understanding of the natural world, or an awareness of environmental issues. There is only a limited degree of embeddedness, however, and humans are positioned as outside of nature and as the source of value and meaning. The third perspective draws on a nature-associated position which has affinities with deep ecology: intrinsic value is ascribed to all living beings, and human beings are not attributed with any kind of privileged status (Stephens, 40).

### **Discussion of the select texts**

The present research discusses two Assamese Language children books –*Bonot Rangar Mela* and *Mani Bani Aru Ekhan Phuloni*. Both these fictions are written by Santonoo Tamuly. Santonoo Tamuly is one of the prominent writers of Assamese Children Literature who has been relentlessly associated with this genre for almost fifty years. He is the editor of *Mouchaq* – a children magazine that has been running for glorious forty three years. Apart from this, Santonoo Tamuly has been writing children stories and novels. He was awarded by Sahitya Akademi for his comprehensive and commendable contribution to the field of Children Literature.

*Bonot Rangar Mela* and *Mani Bani Aru Ekhan Phuloni* are unique due to their representation of the spontaneity of relationship between man and nature. In *Bonot Rangar Mela*, Munu, the protagonist of the fiction, roams around the outskirts of the Kaziranga National park riding on a domesticated buffalo. The story of the picture book follows how one day Munu encountered a rhino with her baby trapped in a ditch, which was dug by the poachers to cut the rhino horns away. Munu, with the help of his father and the villagers, rescued the trapped animals and sent the mother and the baby back to the jungle.

The very first ethical aspect of *Bonot Rangar Mela* is the emphasis on the issue of rescuing wild animals and sending them to their original habitat. In a state like Assam, where poaching is one of the most serious concerns, Munu is presented as a compassionate boy bearing immense care and concern for the wild animals. He is solely focused on rescuing the animals and sending them to their original habitat. In this process, the child is also motivating the elders in rescuing and sending the rhinos to the jungle. It is projected as a spontaneous ethical responsibility of the child. It might be an outcome of Munu's constant contact with nature as he keeps on roaming in and around Kaziranga playing his *pepa*. The interplay between connectedness, experiences and action is clearly reflected in the character of Munu. As nature provides him freedom, space, delight and peace, the child too develops a sense of responsibility towards nature and the natural entities. The role of his parents is also very significant in this aspect as Munu's always encourages his son in all initiatives he opts for nature. Santonoo Tamuly here shows that respect towards environment and environmental entities is the very first ethical quality children should develop in their conscience. It is because of the innate respect towards nature, Munu develops the concern of rescue and re-settlement of the trapped rhino. Close contact with nature instinctively inculcates this respect in the minds of children. Environmental psychological theory

suggests that contact with nature is important because it promotes a child's creativity and imagination, intellectual and cognitive development and boosts social relationships. Direct contact with natural environments positively and significantly improves children's cognitive, affective, and moral development (Kellert, 22). Moreover the role of parents is also highlighted through the story as Munus' father is his constant companion in the mission of rescuing the trapped animal. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (11) children learn by observing the actions of their parents and the consequences that follow. Children whose parents demonstrate environmentally responsible behavior are more likely to engage in these practices themselves. Santanoo Tamuly reflects this interrelated cause-effect relationship through the father-son relationship in *Bonot Rangar Mela*.

*Bonot Rangar Mela* is found to interconnect the soft skills of children with environmental protection. Instead of hard skill –as evident in case of the elders, children can use soft skills to achieve their goals. Munu, in *Bonot Rangar Mela*, utilises his skill of communication and convincement instead of engaging directly in the rescue task. With his pepa, Munu keeps on sending the message of the sufferings of the rhino. He convinces his father to initiate the rescue operation and also to engage the villagers. The inculcation of the collective responsibility in rescuing an animal in danger, stands for the fiction's insistence on the rights of wild animals. Being a child, Munu could realise that rescuing or sending the animal back to the jungle, was a task that is not possible for him. Therefore, he assembles the villagers with the help of his father. In this context, the writer is found to be aware of the fact that unnaturally imposed heroism spoils the beauty of a children text. Children do not have that much physical courage, nor do they have that skill or expertise to rescue an animal like a rhino. So, the writer does not engage his protagonist in the rescue activity directly. Rather, with the use of his soft skills, he motivated the elder residents. He could make them feel the importance of the action. Munu does not fall into the category of a hero with superhuman qualities, rather is someone with all limitations but with a desire to provide the justice and rights to the animal.

The broad concept of environmental justice includes the rights of animal to their respective shelter. In the Indian context, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, 1960 considers the failure to provide an animal with sufficient shelter as cruelty. Violators may face fines or imprisonment. The Act also prohibits confining animals in ways that restrict their movement.

Though Munu is not aware of such policy provisions, he is of the view that animals should get back to their original habitation. It also falls within the broad concept of environmental justice. While the presumption is that the transfer to better environments would aid in the protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration of these animals, the point was not that the animals will look and feel better for any kind of human benefit. The remedy of habeas corpus seeks to release the animals from a human environment so that they could be, to the extent possible, left alone to be animals (Stilt). A Theory of Habitat Rights for Wild Animals represents the first attempt to extend liberal property rights theory across the species barrier to animals. It broadens the traditional focus of animal rights beyond basic rights to life and bodily integrity to rights to the natural areas in which animal reside. John Hadley argues that both proponents of animal rights and environmentalists ought to support animal property rights because protecting habitat promotes ecological values and helps to ensure animals live free from human interference (Hadley, 2015). Right to life and right to habitation are prime requirements that should be realised and respected by everyone. Irrespective of human and non-human beings, right to life and right to the respective habitation should be enjoyed. Munu's constant effort of rescue and re-settlement reinforces the ethical need of human beings that everyone should curate the sense of understanding and respect to the right of shelter of every entity in the universe.

Ethics always highlights on values of respect and dignity. Through literature, writers try to inculcate the values of dignity of the environmental resources and respect to them. A life-centred system of environmental ethics is opposed to human-centred ones precisely on this point. From the perspective of a life-centred theory, we have prima facie moral obligations that are owed to wild plants and animals themselves as members of the Earth's biotic community. We are morally bound (other things being equal) to protect or promote their good for their sake. Such obligations are due those living things out of recognition of their inherent worth. They are entirely additional to and independent of the obligations we owe to our fellow humans. Munu's internalisation of the respect is very spontaneous. In the novel, it is reflected in his action of playing the *pepa* (traditional Assamese hornpipe instrument made of buffalo horn) to the animals of the jungle. Munu believes that listening to the *pepa* every creature of nature becomes happy. It delights everything in the nature –he finds monkeys jumping, flowers blooming, birds singing or tiger cubs dancing in the tune of his *pepa*. For Munu, Nature is indistinguishable from his day-day

life. The intrinsic value of environment is so understood and internalised by Munu that he hardly cares their utility in his life; here the novel acquires the ecocritical, ecocentric view.

The second concept essential to the moral attitude of respect for nature is the idea of inherent worth. We take that attitude toward wild living things (individuals, species populations, or whole biotic communities when and only when we regard them as entities possessing inherent worth. Indeed, it is only because they are conceived in this way that moral agents can think of themselves as having validly binding duties, obligations, and responsibilities that are owed to them as their due. According to the principle of moral consideration, wild living things are deserving of the concern and consideration of all moral agents simply in virtue of their being members of the Earth's community of life. From the moral point of view their good must be taken into account whenever it is affected for better or worse by the conduct of rational agents. This holds no matter what species the creature belongs to. The good of each is to be accorded some value and so acknowledged as having some weight in the deliberations of all rational agents. The duties owed to wild organisms, species populations, and communities of life in the Earth's natural ecosystems are grounded on their inherent worth. When rational, autonomous agents regard such entities as possessing inherent worth, they place intrinsic value on the realization of their good and so hold themselves responsible for performing actions that will have this effect and for refraining from actions having the contrary effect.

*Mani Bani Aru Ekhan Phuloni* extends the scope of this respect to delicate environmental resources like seeds of flower, birds, the sprouts, ants etc. The novel centres round the efforts of a brother sister duo to grow up a kitchen garden in their compound. The writer delicately portrays all the minute details of the process with a profound emphasis on environmental ethics. Both Mani and Bani are passionately concerned about the right and worth of all natural entities ranging from the flower seeds to the ants .They follow utmost care in the seed germination process keeping in mind that the seeds of the flowers do not get hurt nor damaged .Their active engagement with the process and the delight they accumulate out of the sowing and growing process signify how compassionate they are towards the entities of nature .Both Mani and Bani are so engrossed in the process that readers hardly trace the difference between the human and the natural world . Children themselves do not carry the binaries created by anthropocentric ideology .So Bani was concerned about the cold of the seeds ,he even brought a thermometer to

measure the cold of the water where the seeds were soaked .This small but suggestive incident proves how children consider environmental entities equal to the human ones This equality is what environmental ethics look for .Arne Næss argues all forms of life have “the equal right to live and blossom” (Næss,96), and Lawrence Johnson contends the interests of all living entities ought to count equally towards what morality requires of us (Johnson 1991). Advocates of ecocentrism maintain we also should regard non-living things as equal to us. For instance, according to Aldo Leopold, the boundaries of equal moral consideration are to be expanded to include soils, water, as well as plants and animals—in one word, the land (Leopold 1970).

Rejection of cruelty is complimentary to respect and dignity to one’s existence .In *Mani ,Bani Aru Ekhan Phuloni* ,Santanoo Tamuly shows how the children protagonists reject all possible violent means they encounter in the process of the building the garden. Instead of killing the ants that attacked their newly grown seeds, Mani and Bani-decided to “cheat” the ants by diverting their attention to other food items in the form of rice powder. This cute fact indirectly propagates the idea of non-violence to natural entities and right to life of every being .The seemingly ordinary activity actually stands for the writer’s attempt to indoctrinate the feelings of respect and worth to each and every existence of nature. The honest confession of the small child Bani sums up their internalisation of the intrinsic value and respect towards nature when she says, “Actually, I never want to kill even an ant”. The same technique is applied to the grasshopper - *forings* also .Though the *forings* attacked their newly grown flower plants, they did not opt for violent, aggressive mechanism to fly them away .Rather they waited for the natural mechanism where nature itself destroyed the *forings*. Here it is found that both the child internalise the knowledge of the ecological balance mechanism of nature. This understanding of balance mechanism is essential to realize the intricate web of interconnected ecosystems which is crucial for maintaining the delicate equilibrium in nature.

The respect is extended to everything –to birds ,*forings* ,saplings ,plants ,seeds etc .Mani and Bani hardly distinguishes between human and non-human entities .Things which are conventionally considered to be very ordinary and hardly enjoy any worth or values ,are equally important for them. Children consider everything of nature as of their own status ,own dignity .So ,the story of building or curating a kitchen garden sounds like the curating or building process of a human house. Their deep sense of joy, wonder and accomplishment looking at the

growing plants and the blooming flowers represent the bonding they develop with nature as well as how they foster deep love and responsibility to it. Santanu Tamooly's use of simple but expressive language, especially in situations of wonder, excitement or contentment –very aptly justify they philosophy of egalitarianism the novel is propagating.

The concept of intrinsic value is a primary concern within the broad compass of environmental ethics. According to the natural-historical value view, natural entities, including species and some ecosystems, have intrinsic value in virtue of their independence from human design and control (Katz,267) and their connection to human-independent evolutionary processes (Rolston, 1986). This is the conception of intrinsic value that Soule appeals to in his normative postulate: "Species have value in themselves, a value neither conferred nor revocable, but springing from a species' long evolutionary heritage and potential" (Soule, 728). In *Mani ,Bani Aru Ekhan Phuloni* ,characters are found to carry forward their internalisation of this intrinsic value .All the characters love or respect the natural entities just the way they are ,their utility or their relation with the benefit of the human beings is of least concern for them. Mani and Bani associates all human emotions or instincts like cold, pain, joy, anger or resentment with the natural entities .They feel as if the seeds, the flowers or the birds too feel sorrow, anger or experience joy or cold like them. Establishment of this co-relation is the result of their internalisation of the intrinsic value of nature –the value or the dignity a thing has in its' own right. It stands for the rejection of Anthropocentric view that only human interests need to be taken into account .Rather ,with an ecocentric view ,the novel develops that any natural entity should be respected or valued due to their inherent worth .It also supports the ethical claim of rights of natural /environmental entities .

## Conclusion

Environmental ethics calls for building up value foundations towards nature and its constituent elements. The principles reinforce the urgency of curating a specific perspective and develop a way of material practice that pave the way for respect, dignity and justice to nature and its entities. Santanoo Tamooly's fictional writings for children are undoubtedly successful in achieving this goal .His careful use of simple language, conversational style and consistency in using dignified phrases while describing natural entities add beauty to his literary works. Anthropocentrism, animal liberation/rights theory, biocentrism and ecocentrism all provide

unique and, in some sense, reasonable ethical justifications for environmental protection. Their approaches are different, but their goals are by and large the same, and they have reached this consensus: it is everyone's duty to protect the environment.

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