

**“OH, MY BELOVED FOREST! FORGIVE ME,  
FORGIVE ME”: READING AND REFLECTING ON  
*IYAT EKHAN AARONYO ASIL*  
(THERE WAS A FOREST HERE)**

Bijaya Sarmah

Whose life is worth more- human lives or that of an animal or a tree? Is human-suffering or well-being given more weight over all other living entities? Are humans part of nature or against it? How do we relate to the natural world- as a means to escape the civilizational odds, our loneliness, to experience bewilderment and ecstasy or to reciprocate? Do our imaginaries or desires to create beautiful, lush, exotic landscapes affect the lives of people already live in those spaces? Are we, by accepting the established definitions of nature that apparently keeps humans out of the frame, giving tacit allegiance to the mainstream conservation strategies or are we becoming complacent about the consequences of development shenanigans and the power politics? Human and nature relationship has been complex, often challenged and redefined in environment and ecological history. Constructing an adequate theory of intrinsic value for nonhuman natural entities is the most recalcitrant problem for environmental ethics (Callicott, 1985). The cosmological perception of nature perceives all living entities as part of nature, nested with kinship and affinity. Reproducing the thoughts of Plato, Aristotle and other Greek philosophers, this attitude believes human beings and other living creatures are a part of a totality or a cosmic world (Morris, 1991). It is in this way, Black Elk, the Oglala Lakota holy man found some sort of kin relationship with the sacred Indian pines, connecting through four spirits and established the holy pine as both spiritual and animate; in the same way that the Mishmi in Indo-China border believes that both Mishmi and tigers were born to the same mother, perceives tigers as the most revered and feared animal for whom killing tigers was prohibited unless they became a threat (Aiyadurai, 2020). Like Bomman and Bellie from the *Elephant Whisperers*, who believe forests as their home where they belong, where they raise two elephant calves- Raghu and Ammu, where Bellie cure the pain of losing her daughter; all unitedly conceive spirits, humans and natural phenomena as an interrelated totality and negates separation of humans from nature. Kohn believes that seeing, representing, perhaps knowing even thinking are not exclusively human

affairs, reaffirms that non-human life-forms also represent the world. (Kohn, 2013). With the emergence of science, individualism and capitalism, a shift occurred in the human perception of nature and also how human relates himself to the natural world. (Cronon, 1992; Neumann, 1998; McAfee, 1999; Brockington, 2008). Cronon explains, “there is nothing natural about wilderness. It is entirely creation of the culture that hold it dear, the product of the history it seeks to deny.” (Cronon, 1992). Accordingly, the ideas of nature without humans, pristine spaces for wild animals were enrooted and imposed (Neuman, 1998). Cronon traces environmental movement to Romanticism where the European scholars considered “sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God. Eighteenth century literature such as Edmund Burke’s *Origins of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* 1757, Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime* 1764 sketched nature, waterfalls, mountains and forests as beautiful places, to be gazed in reverence and awe. These contributed towards the imagination of sublime spaces and formal construction of many wild beauty sites in the West such as Yosemite, Yellowstone in USA. Brockington asserts, the global institutions emerged from this ideology and western elites justify the displacement of people by protected areas globally (Brockington, 2008). Wilderness, once considered as barren land-where Adams and Eves were sent as part of punishment to toil, turned into landscapes to be trammelled by “man who is a visitor but does not remain.” Wilderness thus was defined as devoid of human presence, and therefore giving human the control over nature to manage, to subdue it, placing man against nature in centre (Cronon, 1992).

How nature is imagined has a direct influence on how nature is protected. Are we reflecting on what Baviskar (2012) calls as ‘bourgeoisie environmentalism’ which is preoccupied with the concerns health and safety, order and aesthetics over the ‘environmentalism of poor’; that is over the question of livelihoods and social justice? *Iyat Ekhan Aronya Asil*<sup>1</sup> reflects on how this mechanistic, anthropocentric image of nature has been penetrated into the urban spaces of the city, Guwahati where people are mostly driven by green fantasies, where flowers, birds and butterflies have lost their space, bonsai become common in many apartments, whereterrace mini Edenic gardens almost replace big trees in boundaries. The book *Iyat Ekhan Aronya Asil* has been set against the backdrop of humongous transformation of the city Guwahati, taking over every inch of space, swallowing up surrounding forests, farm lands, rivers, ponds, birds and mammals. The diversion of rural resources for infrastructure projects that serve urban populations has now

accelerated, with the government easing the transfer of forests, water and land for catering to urban consumers (Baviskar, 2012). The author finds herself in an indistinct position (between conservationists and people rights' activists to fight for social exclusion); whom to believe, whom to blame for this unabated devastation. She can't deny people occupying animals' space, herself being a witness to the increasing numbers of homeless tigers and elephants; frequently spotted in the busy roads of the city in search of food and shelter. But she cannot see eviction, displacement of people who are tired of struggling with everyday life-challenges, either. The story develops with Madhuri, a part-timer worker at writer's place saying, "I cannot come for a few days. We have been ordered to vacate our houses." The author asked in disbelief, "Who asked you to leave. Isn't this your own house?" Madhuri responded, "We have been staying here for 22 years. Now the government has sent people and said, it's a court order, they will demolish our houses, hence, we've been asked to pack our stuffs. Police and men from forest department came and said this last evening." The writer interrogates "Now, the government can't wash their hands by evicting them from their home." She continues, "If these people are the illegal settlers, then who gave them the electricity? How did they get access to cooking gas and all? Why do then politicians, leaders come here during elections and ask for votes? Why do they count these people while they distribute blankets and mosquito nets? Where will they go now? And what exactly the government and administration wish to do?,,,," These questions were an attempt to address the complex politics, power-dynamics behind eviction, behind government decisions.

*Lives around eviction notice, police and bulldozer*

Of lately, instances of eviction drive and upsetting scenes from eviction-protest sites in Assam have been on news or social media feeds as well as at the peak of academic debates. From a kid pleading a police officer for not dismantling his house until he got his stuff packed in Silsako eviction to death of Moinul Haque in the protest site of Dhalpur eviction, from the loss of Anjuma and Fakhruddin's lives in Kaziranga to the loss of heavily pregnant Kulsuma's life who had left her newly born son homeless, motherless in central Assam's Hojai district, it makes forced or induced displacement in Assam the new normal. Eviction whether a consequence of city beautification,

urban development projects or forest and wildlife conservation policies, is accompanied by certain negative consequences – loss of lives, land and livelihoods, loss of memory and belongingness and other socio-economic insecurities. One evictee from Massai Mau eviction of 2005 voiced her pain, "Where I live now is unfit for human habitation. People who had relatives when they were evicted are ok, but others are living in temporary structures by the side of the road. They are like poultry houses. Children have dropped out of school and youth have gone astray. My husband is gone, and my daughter has gone into prostitution" (Vangen, 2009). One can get familiar with the eviction-induced consequences, as the story furthers. The lives of people in Panjabari hills seemed to be revolved around - "*eviction kept on hold, eviction to be started again.*" After receiving notice verbally last night, people had started packing their essential stuffs. Madhuri already kept all important documents, temporary land-holdings, ration card and voter ID safely at writer's place. Demolition started on the next day morning with the help of deployed army-police personnel and hired elephants and bulldozers. A few houses were dismantled; Madhuri, Piklu's historical museum was in line. Mansoor broke down his own house as he couldn't wait to see it getting bulldozed. "Cannot see crashing down of the house painstakingly built by my father and the trees planted by mother." Rituraj moaned before leaving. Madhuri along with many were constantly ringing the bell tied on an old holy fig tree so that their houses got saved. She was holding on to hope, at the same time also witnessing other's houses getting bulldozed and counting her house in line. One can sense the pain, level of anxiety and relief when she assured her family, "we can stay here at our home for one more night. It'll take time to reach their house. There were two-three concrete houses". On the second day of eviction, after a few houses were already demolished, eviction had been put on hold. A sight of relief could be seen on the face of Karishma, the daughter of Madhuri who was a HSLC candidate and had already packed all her books reluctantly. Like Karishma, many felt a sense of relief that their houses got saved this time. As if their prayers were heard.

Madhuri, Mansoor, Babla and Bishnu all were living a dubious life. At any moment, their houses could be dismantled. The news of eviction putting on hold could bring them only momentarily relief and hope. Army, police had not left their area, elephants and bulldozers were also not being removed. Madhuri kept on asking the author, "Why there are still police, army and bulldozers. Is it going to be happened again?" The uncertainties, the fear doubled their hardship as they had to keep working amidst eviction chaos. They couldn't bear to take break from their work, in pain or in stress.

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<sup>1</sup>Iyat Ekhan Aronyo Asil, Assamese fiction written by Anuradha SarmaPuzari in December, 2018. The novel bagged Sahitya Akademi Award in 2021.

Even in the morning of the eviction day, Madhuri could not help but to go for work, after finishing regular household chores. Babla with the constant fear of becoming homeless was seen making a home for a couple of pigeons who had taken shelter at writer's rooftop. It seemed as if they were forced to run a regular life amidst chaos. The stories, the scenes reassert the power that the state, the police and the courts, on deciding the fate of the commons living in the hills. Eviction is a state prerogative, where states entitled to dislocate people in the name of public utility, apparently getting intense with the onset of neo-liberal economy. The sight of police everywhere, bulldozer action in the recent eviction drives in Assam restate the narrative.

*Land loss, forest loss and the capital expansion*

The question of land and indigeneity seem to be central to eviction practices in Assam where the pledge has been undertaken to save the land and rights of *khilonjias*. For them, it's an everyday struggle for permanent land-holdings, either they are manipulated or betrayed. As if their lives revolve around permanent settlement promises. "Candidates keep people in hope of getting permanent land holdings, setting up of electricity transformer and subsidised rice, kerosene and mustard oil during election period" writer said in distrust. The hill where Madhuri, Mansoor, Babla were living in, was claimed to be a part of the Amchang forest. In 2004, Amchang reserved forest, South Amchang and Khanapara reserved forest were combined and formed Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. Dileep's grandfather Ronghang-koka recalled how the forest of Amchang got its name. There were plenty of mango trees. In winter, the children used to ask the guard, "Uncle, can we pluck mangoes?" The guard answered, "pluck, pluck mangoes" (ching, aam, ching). Later, the white guards started calling it Amching forest after hearing aam-ching many times; this is what we call today as Amchang wildlife sanctuary. Ronghang-koka sighed at the lost connectivity with the roots, at the loss of abundance of mango trees then, and how it got lost in the administrative mishandling of the state. Ronghang-koka then revealed how his father lost his lands to a few forest and revenue officers in fraud. His father was made to sell his plot, advised by the officers, "since this plot has been into court-cases and all, it will be better to sell it off. Customers are ready to pay a decent amount." It's about sixty years ago. Now, a factory is opened there. Ronghang-kokarightly asked "how is this justified to open a factory by destroying a large acre of lands planted with fruits and trees?" Ronghang-koka reaffirmed the loss of many forest and farm lands to outsiders, to private businessmen. They have now opened Dhaba and restaurants there. He added, "ministers,

politicians have their shares too.....". This reiterates how the state under neo-liberal conservation, is regulating its land, commoditising resources of the commons, and territorialising it through creation of protected areas (Brockington, 2007). The land from where these people are being evicted, getting opened for private industries and market now. This resort-oriented development around protected area has been part of neo-liberal conservation, ostensibly work in collaboration with other international conservation agencies and global capitalist market. McAfee explains how conservation and capitalism endorse re-categorisation of landscape where every aspect of nature from molecules to mountains, from human tissues to the earth's atmosphere are commoditized. In this post-neoliberal environment-economic paradigm, advanced capitalist states and transnational corporations bring market in nature as a solution to growing environmental problems where nature has to earn its own opportunity to survive. It is a testimony of cooperating with powers to protect nature (Brockington, 2008) or selling nature to save it (McAfee, 1999).

Out of pain, anger and fear, Ronghang-koka kept alerting his grandson Dileep, "Dileep, if you want to keep me in memory, do not sell land. Even if you're dying out of food, do not sell land. Our brothers became beggars, became homeless, land will leave you if you sell it. Keep your land, grow plants, grow vegetables, but; do not make the mistake of selling your land in order to become rich." Ronghang-koka further adds, "Today, indigenous people are homeless just like the elephants, tigers, deer, buffaloes and foxes." Dileep lost his father just after moving to Sonapur. He couldn't live for six months in fact. Perhaps his father could not take the pain of losing his land where he laboured, cultivated. This accentuates non-material loss, loss of culture, loss of affinity and belongingness to one's lived place, their symbolic obliteration from their land, which deletes their history, memory and representation, also power and control over their environment eventually (Schema, 1996).

*Concluding annotations*

"Perhaps we don't know what we want, how much we want. Without realising, we have started walking towards an aimless, reckless end- in the name of a guaranteed security. How insignificant is this security in front of nature? One earthquake, a flash flood can collapse big houses, can fracture high brick walls, iron grills, gates and fences." Author sighed in despair where the war between man and nature would come to an end. This book is a vindication of man as part of nature that we often forget in exuding ourselves as the protector, guardian of nature. The writer seemed disturbed by the continuing decline of forests in and around the city Guwahati, disappearance

of birds, at the loss of butterflies, crane and vultures. The huge buildings, apartments and roadside showrooms are incapable of providing shelter to birds, humans and to animals. To the contrary, the narrative of *the hill that veiled a girl* shows how the hill gave shelter to a couple after fleeing, as if nature accepts their love, it did not do any harm. The couple was asked to stay for days in an elevated house; they did not have fear to stay there amidst wild animals. As if it was to test their love, the girl told, “if the guy could keep me safe in the middle of wild animals, his love can be trusted.” The book seems to be a witness of how humans build relationship, kinship with nature. The author considers man as an inalienable part of nature. If forest ceases to exist, we’ll cease to exist as well. It reiterates what Cronon, Adams, Brockington and Neuman say as human beings to be placed within nature, not above it. “How can I express in front of these helpless people that trees are more valuable? Nature is powerful; we are just a part of it.” The writer admitted. The writer finds it hard to make Madhuri, Babla, Ranu understand the complex web of politics, the nexus between politician, forest and revenue officers, police administration, businessmen, and ministers who have already pledged to rob surrounding forests, to make poor people’s lives worse. On being asked whether the evicted people would be rehabilitated or not, Ranjan, a lower rank officer in the forest department answered with a closed-mouth smile, “where the government do has places to rehabilitate such large numbers of people? Once again, this put the motives behind eviction decisions and subsequent consequences into question. The book further foregrounds the helplessness, the anger of forest-guards like Ranjan and Rajbanshi whose hands are tied, cannot help but to be a mere spectator of the destruction of forests and the expansion of five-star hotels, resorts, private nursing homes and residential schools. They can only repent on why they had joined in the forest department. This indeed raises question on the worth of fortress conservation. To what extent, fortress conservation under which the forests are protected through fences and armed forest guards, has been successful to provide safeguards against its demise or destruction? Has it been able to save the demise of thousands of trees that Rajbanshi witnessed in Khanapara hills, was it able to save the forests, the mango trees that Rohnhang Koka was remembering? Can it provide protection against unabated rhino-poaching in Kaziranga even after increase in deployment of more forest armies? The fences, the wires cannot eliminate the politics around protected areas, the selling of nature and natural resources; it cannot eliminate corrupted forest officials per se. On the one hand, helpless and life-struggler people are being evicted in the name of protecting forests. On the other hand, illegal mining, resorts and hotels are growing uninterruptedly.

"Oh, My Beloved Forest!..... Aaronyo Asil (there was a forest here)

Both Raghu and Chanda, members of Mother Nature foundation, brought new hope for whom trees were more valuable than skyscrapers, river, birds and butterflies were more valuable than luxury cars. They believe, they hope—it’s not too late, our hills, rivers and wetlands can be saved. In the same sense, the author could see Madhuri bought plants of margosa and black plum to plant so that others also started planting and perhaps this way, the forest, the hills could be saved. Even though, uncertainty is there about where the direction of city transformation, urbanity and youth is heading. How the future generations will perceive nature and forest? “I am afraid if my child thinks trees as burden, of no profit, if they prefer buildings in place of big trees” or they can weep like Madhuri’s month-old niece cried for a second life of a dead butterfly. The author who cannot help but to silently observe the politics behind eviction that is causing more ecological mayhem; prays in silence “oh my beloved hill, hey forest.... forgive me, forgive me.” Unlike, Manbar Doley shouted at an elephant who had come down to plains in search of food, “baba! Don’t panic. I am with you. Come, come, let’s drive out them the way they’re driving us out” ushering a sight of protest, a protest against forest loss, against politics of eviction and capital expansion.

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*Editor*