

Working Paper /2019/9

**The Eco-critical Contexts of
Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Short Stories**

Dr. Prasenjit Das*



**Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
Guwahati, Assam**

*** Associate Professor in English, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati.**

Contents :

1.	Introduction	2
2.	Objectives	4
3.	Methodology	5
4.	Ecocriticism and the Case of Bezbaroa	5
5.	Reading Bezbaroa Eco-critically	7
6.	The Eco-critical Bezbaroa	9
7.	Conclusion	13
8.	References	15

The Eco-critical Contexts of Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Short Stories

Dr. Prasenjit Das

Abstract

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938) could perhaps realise that the British colonial exploitation was inherently based on greed and utilisation of natural resources for profit. Therefore, the resultant rupture between man and nature remains one of the dominant underlying themes in some of his fictional works. Bezbaroa spent a considerable part of his life as a contractor exploring the forests of Assam, Bengal and Sambalpur of Orissa, together considered part of Eastern India during his time, and the experiences gained thus provided the raw materials for most of his mature writings. This paper is an attempt to locate the links between man and nature in Bezbaroa's short stories in the light of what we today call Eco-criticism. The modern idea of Eco-criticism or Environmental criticism arises within and against the very basic problem of human modification of planetary 'space' starting with the Industrial Revolution and then with Colonialism. Through this paper an attempt has been made to examine how Bezbaroa's concerns in a changing social milieu of his days relate to ours in some prominent ways and whether it is possible to read Bezbaroa eco-critically with an emphasis on his views against the exploitation of natural resources and against anthropocentrism-a concept that has significant connotations in today's parlance.

Key Words: Eco-criticism, Anthropocentrism, Bezbaroa's short stories, Men-Nature Relationship, Eco-critical Bezbaroa

1. Introduction:

Modern Assamese literature received its momentum through the thoughtful choices and efforts made by a coterie of Assamese writers of the 19th century who started to evolve taking Calcutta as the centre of their literary and social activities. Drawing heavily on the English Romantic tradition, they sought to furnish new raw materials to reflect on their land and the people. However, during the 19th century, a patriotic fervour had influenced nearly all the Assamese 'student-writers', through their number was not very large, pursuing their studies in Calcutta which also became the center of a progressive literary and cultural movement for the Assamese people. From there, they regularly expressed their concerns in different Assamese literary journals and magazines, most notably in 'Assam Bandhu' (1885-1886) edited by Raibahadur Gunabhiram Barua, a writer known for his historical essays. During the middle part of the 19th century, other important writers such as Ananda Ram Dhekiyal Phukan and Hemchandra Barua came under the direct impact of the Bengal Renaissance following their access to Western education and civilisation in Calcutta. While Gunabhiram Barua's progressive outlook and patriotism exerted a heavy influence on his contemporaries, his journal also influenced the Assamese writers of the pre-romantic age. In the Romantic age however, another group of writers began to emerge through their contributions to the journal called 'Jonaki' (1889-1899, 1901-1903), which became the mouthpiece to preach their love for the native land or country. Under the meaningful influence of Western romanticism, Assamese poetry and songs too revitalised with the hopes of strong revivalism of the Assamese cultural sentiment. Besides, a careful examination of Western romanticism, spontaneous expression of feelings and an acute historical awareness became the markers for their literary achievements. Most of these writers today deserve serious critical attention as they became instrumental in shaping what we today emphatically call Assamese modernity.

Seen in the aforesaid context, the evolution of the writerly-self of Lakshminath Bezbaroa needs to be carefully investigated. Those who have read his works in original Assamese and in English translation should agree with the fact that the assimilation of Western literary forms with the indigenous Assamese mind and milieu is perhaps best reflected in Bezbaroa's writings. Through his essays, plays, fiction, poetry and songs, Bezbaroa could very effectively respond to the influences visible in the society of his time. His study and stay in Calcutta, enabled him to become a part of the intellectual awakening and the Assamese student-writers studying in Calcutta came together under the what came to be known as 'Asamiya Bhashar Unnati Sadhini Sabha' (or Society for the Development for the Assamese Language) in 1888. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, along with Chandrakumar Agarwala and Hemchandra Goswami plunged into creative and reflective literature of a new type, marking an important developmental phase for Assamese literature.

Although various studies have already been conducted on the different important facets of Bezbaroa's personality as well as his literary career, further studies on his fictional works and personal essays in the light new theoretical perspectives, can open up other important aspects of his works. One such possibility is to present him as an 'eco-critical' writer whose portrayal of nature and his sensitivities towards the natural environment exhibit great significance. It is well known that Bezbaroa became the 'Roxoraj' or 'the King of humour' mainly because of his invectives to satirise the hypocrisies, follies and mentality of the English-educated elite Assamese people and their social behaviour and activities. He created a unique type of Assamese literature mostly centering an imaginary character called 'Kripabar Barbarwa' assigning to Lakshminath the sobriquet of 'Charles Dickens of Assam.' According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji, "To my mind, Lakshminath Bezbaruwa's most intimate and most human work is his Autobiography. Here is disclosed in a very straightforward, and one might say, in a naïve, artless manner, a rare personality, which was that of a great and good man with high ideals in life and thought, and who was at the same time a most lovable man" (Neog, 10).

A cursory reading of his fictional works will show that although in some cases he directly refers to the resources of the natural world, there is nothing so 'eco-critical' in them at least in today's sense. Still, eco-criticism's critique of 'place' more as a human construct and its greater attention to the production of localities by institutionalised socio-economic forces, often help in analysing the fact that under British colonialism, the idea of a 'place' called Eastern India, and most specifically Assam, began to acquire new meaning as a place from whose natural resources profit could be extracted. During their rule, the British exploited natural resources like tea, wood and oil, and mastered the art of running their business on the basis of those resources. Consequently, the natural world of Eastern India, where Bezbaroa was engaged as a forest contractor, was undergoing drastic modifications, and this might have aroused his conscience as a writer of good-natured humour. Bezbaroa's literary career began with 'Jonaki' and extended over about half a century with contributions to other noted Assamese literary journals 'Banhi', 'Usha' and 'Awahan'. As Hem Baruah in his biography on Bezbaroa also pointed out, what informs the writings of Bezbaroa most is his acute sense of Assamese history, which made him cautious about the attitudes of his contemporaries undergoing a drastic change under the colonial regime. It is against this background that I would like to make a possible link between Bezbaroa's works and his eco-critical consciousness.

2. Objectives:

The objectives of the paper are:

- To make a quick survey of the theoretical premises of Eco-criticism and its relation to literary studies
- To discuss Lakshminath Bezbaroa's short fictional works from the perspective of Eco-criticism
- To justify the use of the 20th century eco-critical ideas to read the fictional works of Bezbaroa mostly written in the 19th century

3. Methodology:

While writing this paper, descriptive methodology has been used. Bezbaroa's short stories, which are based on the relationship between men and nature, are taken into account as the primary texts while the theoretical basis for Eco-criticism has been adopted from works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* and *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*.

4. Ecocriticism and the Case of Bezbaroa:

The modern idea of Eco-criticism or Environmental criticism arises within and against the very basic problem of human modification of planetary 'space' starting with the Industrial Revolution and then with British colonialism. William Rueckert was perhaps the first person to use the term 'Ecocriticism' in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism." Though the term indicates various applications of environmental and ecological concepts to the study of literature, Rueckert was largely inspired by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) which is often considered to be the starting point in modern environmental studies. Carson, who tried to bring in issues of environmental crisis with human concerns, also believed that pollution and human culture have contributed most to the degeneration of nature. Gradually, the sense of being 'environed' or 'emplaced' began to yield to a more self-consciously dialectical relation between living beings and habitat. Usually, the problems of ecology and environment are addressed by science but environmental problems also need to be studied in cultural parlance because many of such problems are rooted in the anthropocentric culture. For example, the tendency of extracting benefits from nature, the lack of human awareness towards the sufferings of animals etc. are rooted in human culture simply because anthropocentrism tends to overlook the sufferings of animals. And, here comes the importance of Eco-criticism because it studies environmental issues from the perspectives of man-made culture.

That is why, Eco-criticism emerged as the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyse literary texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.

However, the environmental turn in literary and cultural studies did emerge as a self-conscious movement in the recent years. Lawrence Buell, the American Eco-critic, in his books namely-*The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005) has not only given Eco-criticism an explicit method of analysis but has also examined the characteristics of US nature writing beginning with Thoreau. In his preface to the book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell opines that Eco-criticism studies the endangered state and uncertain fate of life on earth and its implications on literary and cultural studies. Although, we tend to assume that the literary-environmental study is actually based on the notions of Eco-criticism, the movement's increasingly heterogeneous nature, especially its increasing engagements with metropolitan or 'toxified' landscapes, challenges its early preoccupations with literatures of nature and preservationist environmentalism.

Hence, there seems to be a noticeable difference between literature on nature and literature written against the devastation of nature, which in a way justifies the emergence of Eco-criticism. Besides, while discussing the premises of Eco-criticism, we must try to explore how and why it emerged, what are its distinctive concerns, how it is invested for environmental imaging and representations and how the construction of 'nature' is frequently used as part of art as well as lived experience. For example, we can take a close look at William Wordsworth, who in various ways, explored the natural world and in his poem "Tintern Abbey," he even called himself a 'worshipper of nature'. However, a contemporary reader, well aware of the developments in modern Eco-criticism, may also read Wordsworth's poetry as not just reflective of simple love for nature but of a 'proto-ecological knowledge and environmentalist

commitment' according to Buell who makes a befitting reference to Wordsworth to justify his stand against the rise of Industrialism in 19th century England leading to heavy destruction of English countrysides (Buell, 12). It is against such a critical background that I would like to offer an Eco-critical reading of some of the short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaroa.

5. Reading Bezbaroa Eco-critically:

To what extent is it reasonable to read Bezbaroa's works in the light of Eco-criticism or Environmental criticism? The answer to this question can be found in an analysis of the fact that under British colonialism, the various processes of objectification of nature for mercenary gain and greed helped in assigning new meaning to the elements of nature. I would like to assert that Bezbaroa was a product of the rift between man and nature, and consequently his writings too tend to show how, under a changing social discourse, the idea of nature was constructed differently even in those days. In today's context, however, industrial and capitalistic cultures have compelled humanity to find alternatives to the most destructive forms of industrial developments. As a result, environmental criticism often tends to seek recourse to the non-industrial or pre-industrial indigenous cultures that had existed in the various locations of this world. If this point is accepted, we can very well turn towards Bezbaroa's views on man-nature relationship as depicted in his folktales in "Kokadeuta and Nati Lora" or "Burhi Air Sadhu", which carry us away to the pre-industrial and non-industrial Assamese social set-up. The prominent Assamese poet and politician Hem Baruah (1915-1977), referred to his folktales as the 'autobiographies of the illiterate', and hailed them as meaningful records of the social attitudes adopted by people of a pre-industrial period (Baruah, 52). This further leads to the question of natural interdependencies in which creatures produce and shape their environment, as their environment produces and shapes them.

In Bezbaroa's autobiographical works, we find traces of certain 'eco-critical' ideas. For example, his autobiography "Mor Jivan Sowaran"

("Reminiscences of My Life") can be seen as a very interesting exploration of his relationship with nature. This becomes more evident when we find him relentlessly expressing his indebtedness to the grandeur of the river Brahmaputra, the eternal beauty of the riverbanks, the grandeur of the natural world of the villages, the simple life style of the common people in society and so on. In the first part of the book, Bezbaroa talks about how he had spent most of his childhood days in the midst of nature, and that even his own birth on a boat on the sandy bank of the mighty Brahmaputra at Ahatguri, was conditioned by the forces of nature. He also says that while he was growing up, he spent a considerable part of his life exploring the forests of Assam and the experiences gained constituted the subject matter of most of his later writings. Then again, in the later part of his autobiography, he tells how under professional constraints he had to exploit the resources of nature, which led to his own pricks of conscience. Such experiences formed the basis of most of his works which exhibit great literary merit even today because they can be seen as valuable documents of the socio-historical forces prevalent in Assam during that time.

However, the serenity of Assamese life and its people underwent certain specific changes in the 19th century, when the whole of Assam went under British colonial rule, which finally led to the establishment of a strange colonial and capitalistic culture. This also resulted in the Assamese people's experiencing new 'definitions' and 'constructions' of the idea of nature. However, the basic question here relates to whether the common people of Assam had previously thought about nature the way they conceptualised it after the coming of the British. This question may elicit mixed response. Because, even before the arrival of the British, the people of Assam could find out the ways to utilise the resources of nature and even tame it. However, 'destruction of nature' was perhaps not their main motive. Another important point is that Bezbaora's was a large society encompassing Orissa, Bengal and the whole of Assam. Thanks to the patronage of the British that a class of new Assamese intellectuals was emerging and consequently, the British too had

succeeded in securing a place amongst the leading Assamese writers as the harbingers of modernism. Reference can be made of Padmanath Gohainbaruah-the editor of the Assamese journal "Usha" (1828-1862). He had not only received literary pension from the British Government but had also expressed his gratitude to the British for everything they had done for the development of the Assamese people and their culture. His exaggerated praise of the British in his writings infuriated Bezbaroa, which even led to their break up as friends. The important point here is that even while being a part of that elite group, it was quite unnatural for Bezbaroa not to oppose the views adopted by his contemporaries like Padmanath Gohainbaruah.

Under the British rule, new cultural attitudes were emerging and the Assamese society was slowly moving away from the old moorings under the influence of the so-called Western 'modernism'. In such a context, Bezbaroa's upbringing as a writer can be said to have been influenced by two factors-firstly, his observation of men and women, their way and attitudes in their native surrounding of Eastern Assam, particularly in Sivsagar and Laximpur; and secondly, his experiences particularly in Calcutta and Sambalpur of Orissa as a businessman (Baruah, 68-69) which supplied most of the sources of his mature works-most specifically his short stories. Bezbaroa held the view that the function of short stories is to reveal something very essential about life itself in terms of the significance of a few moments or certain segments of man's existence.

6. The Eco-critical Bezbaroa:

The short stories of Lakshminath Bezbaroa can be divided into two categories-one expressive of his social concerns and comic viewpoints; and the other concerned with the individual in its secret and elusive aspects. It is in the second category that we can find the relationship between man and nature and the relationship between man and the animal world as two distinct themes. In stories like "Kanya", "Jalkuwari", "Nakau", "Erabari", "Bihu" and "Mukti", he deals exclusively with the relationship between man and nature. In "Kanya" which is a story of a pair of lovers

from both sides of the river Kanya, their unfulfilled love is represented by the mournful sound of the river: "In the bosom of the Kanya there are a variety of stones, some big, some small. The waters running over them made through days and night a mournful sound. From the distance of about half a mile one could hear that sound." Similarly, in the story "Erabari" some trees in a forest start conversing about the gory tale of a young widow who committed suicide. The story 'Mukti' even portrays a 14-year-old boy Sukumar whose sudden detachment from nature caused tremendous mental break-down leading to his premature death.

In one of his personal essays entitled 'Jivan Juddha' (Lust for Life), published in the journal "Jonaki" (Vol. 4, No10), Bezbaroa is seen going vehemently against the atrocities done against the other natural life forms further justifying his views against the anthropocentric culture. This point can be further elaborated with a reference to some of the stories of Bezbaroa, which take men's relationship to the animal world as his main subject. For example, we can refer to stories like "Lobh", "Marjari" and "Shvan". In the story "Lobh", a man has killed a fish, which had many 'small children', and at night, he dreams of the children with their accusing fingers against him. Finally, the man breaks his angling rod and swears never to touch that again. In "Marjari", a man is annoyed with his pet cat and takes it a long distance away from his home in order to banish it. However, a secret feeling of guilt disturbs his mind. In "Shvan" a dog becomes the occasion of the conjugal storm and happiness of a couple. Through such examples, we can very well argue that Bezbaroa was much ahead of his time in understanding the fact that anthropocentrism—the human-centered or 'anthropocentric' point of view that humans are the only or primary holders of moral standing, could not be accepted as bringing anything good to the society.

My contention is that Bezbaroa's 'eco-critical' outlook often results from his reaction against the changing attitudes of the people, a concern which is also reflected in the 'subtexts' of his writings. However, let me try to delve into the discourse of reading Bezbaroa eco-critically on the basis of two specific examples taken directly from his own writings.

First, I would like to refer to his autobiography "Mor Jivan Sowaran" ("Reminiscences of My Life") published serially in the Assamese literary journal 'Banhi'. In the 8th chapter of the 1st part of his autobiography, he is found going heavily on his gentleman friend who wanted the replacement of the plants of 'roses' with that of 'chillis' in the tubs placed in his courtyard. My own translation from Assamese to English of an extract from that chapter relating to his experience would roughly read like the following:

If humans had the sun and the moon at hand, they would have reduced them to nothing in no time. Those industrious among us would surely have set up workshops on their surface, turning them into the surface of blackish unwashed 'soru' (an utensil used in cooking) with filthy smoke emerging from their chimneys of their furnaces. Whatever it may be, having resolved within such apocalyptic thoughts, I started nourishing the worn-out rosebushes, watering them and taking care with the sole hope that they will bloom. One day, a friend of mine, who was a gentleman cum businessman, came to meet me. He cast a look with a mocking smile at the roses in the tub, being so keenly taken care of, and said, 'Well, how much do these flowers give you? If you had planted a few plants of chilli instead, it would have given you chillis to take rice with. Such a revelation finds in me an intuitive and embittered response. What an un-poetic comment. Days after, despite all my endeavours, the roses turned yellow and breathed their last, probably, being unable to digest such an unkind, the unflinching comment of the merchant friend. (Bezbaroa, 88)

In this example, what is so apparent is the writer's love for the flower, which according to him, can arouse his poetic feelings and then inspire the poet within him. However, the beauty of the flower makes no difference to the friend and his attitudes. Bezbaroa, who knew what was going wrong in his society, found it very difficult to accept what his friend had said. However, what caused the death of the rose is ironically remarked by Bezbaroa as symbolic of human being's disregard for nature that might have caused its death.

The other example, I would like to site is that of the story "Kanya" (the Kanya river of Orissa) which was written by Bezbaroa during his stay in Sambalpur in Western Orissa as a timber merchant. Although based on the lives of the Chaotal tribe in Orissa, a unique representation of the objectification and commodification of nature for fulfilling human greed is perhaps best reflected in this story too. Although this story actually narrates the mysterious and unfulfilled love of a couple who are ultimately united through death by drowning in the river Kanya, I find in this story a 'subtext' which addresses the objectification and commodification of nature I am concerned with. Here again, the narrator of the story has a poetic sensibility and he is trying to influence his friend towards appreciating the beauty of the river, the trees on its banks and the over-all impact the hushing sound of the river is having on its onlookers. However, the narrator is seen not to have liked the attitude of his friend who does not have the capacity to enjoy the entertainment provided by the calm and serene atmosphere of the banks of the river Kanya. Following is my own translation of the narrator's denunciation of the attitude of the friend will read like the following:

If someone seeks to sensitise him to the beauty of a particular tree, he would respond with a calculation of the length and breadth of the tree, of the number of logs and wooden boards that the trunks will finally give you and thus produce an assessment of the poetic beauty. If attempts are made to draw his attention to the beauty of the black pebble, he resolves the aesthetic issue with an assessment of how much amount of metal results when the stone is melted. One day, I showed him a glittering black pebble and asked, 'Do you know how they look beautiful with their shiny black?' He retorted, 'Don't you see these dark complexioned people, when they die, their bones and flesh scatter and turn to black pebbles.' I keep looking for these pebbles and so does he, but as he says, his intention is different, because he is not looking for the pebbles really, but for a piece of diamond or any piece of precious stone. (Gogoi, 133-134).

Thus, it is significant to assume that Bezbaroa had possessed an extraordinary ability to explore human nature at a historically significant

time of Assamese modernity. Consequently, there can also be found in him an apparent glorification of men's attachment with nature followed by a critique of the kind of 'anthropocentrism' which projected the forms of natural lives as resources to be consumed by human beings. His biographer Hem Baruah had stated that although traditional in outlook, Bezbaroa's stories are the first serious attempts at depicting life naturally with its ethos and clan, joys and despair, and that what perplexed him was the sense of folly exhibited by the so-called new class that basked under alien sunshine and considered it real. His sense of patriotism was also affected by these blind social drifts, which he lampooned with deftness akin to Jonathan Swift (Baruah, 53). For example, a critique of the snobbery of the newly English-educated people is clearly visible in stories like "Malak Guin Guin" and "Vokendra Barua" compiled in his collection of short stories "Jonbiri". Bhaben Barua writes, "Besides these writings of the nineteenth century Bengali writers of the comic tradition, Bezbaroa seems to have received some general inspiration from three writers of English literature-Shakespeare, Addison and Dickens" (Neog, 159). Such influences are best reflected in Bezbaroa's thematic renderings as well as character portrayal. However, it is Bezbaroa's views on Nature and natural objects in which to be found the 'Eco-critical' Bezbaroa. Based on the observations made above, Bezbaroa may be considered an Eco-critic because in his satirical representation of the anthropocentric, technocratic world around him is contrasted against his very deep love for Mother Nature.

7. Conclusion:

By now, it is understood that Lakshminath Bezbaora had succeeded in drawing the picture of two different worlds, and this has been done in a language that is graphic, vivid and pictorial. The two worlds include-the Assamese cultural world and the world of changing social fabric under British rule. Thus, there developed a hybrid mental complex amongst his fellow people, which became the subject matter of most of his fictional writings. Moreover, based on what I have discussed, it is possible to

state that Lakshminath Bezbaroa had also acquired unique status as an 'eco-critic' or 'eco-writer' much before these terms gained critical significance. Considered from the point of view of Assamese cultural regeneration, Bezbaroa's multifarious experiences as a writer, as a traveler and as a timber-businessman perhaps helped him realise the point that the modernist sense of reason and progress, would not always help in explaining the logic behind the modification or violation of nature. What Bezbaroa presents with such examples is a critique of the mercenary attitudes found amongst a class of people who used to think everything in terms of profitability and utility. However, what is so interesting about Bezbaroa is the way he sought to criticise his own changing attitudes towards nature. His autobiography, "Mor Jivan Sowaran" also includes references to those incidents where Bezbaroa felt like laughing at himself for what he was thinking and doing as a timber merchant. When England was undergoing heavy industrial changeover, (which became the underlying concern for the great romantics poets of England) the habitats and natural resources in Assam and its neighbouring places were also undergoing drastic changes to meet with the newly emergent demands of raw materials under colonial greed. Bezbaroa's acute understanding of the ills of his society and his use of satire as a representational mode calls for further critical investigations of his oeuvre-one of which can be carried out with the help of Eco-criticism.

•••

8. References:

- Barua, Bhaben. (1972). Lakshminath Bezbaroa's Major Achievement: Short Stories. In Neog, Maheswar, (Ed.). *Lakshminath Bezbaroa, The Sahityarathi of Assam*. (1st ed., pp. 154-165). Gauhati University.
- Baruah, Hem. (1967). *Lakshminath Bezbaroa*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. (1998). *Mor Jivan Sowaran*. Dibrugarh: Banalata.
- Buell, Lawrence. (1995). *The Environmental Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Buell, Lawrence. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Carson, Rachel. (1962). *Silent Spring*.
- Gogoi, Hridayananda. (2001). *Lakshminath Bezbaroar Galpa Samagra*. Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan.
- Suniti Kumar Chatterji. (1972). The Nineteenth Century Renaissance in India and Lakshminath Bezbaruwa of Assam (1864-1938). In Neog, Maheswar. (Ed.) *Lakshminath Bezbaroa, The Sahityarathi of Assam*. (1st ed., pp. 1-14). Gauhati University.
- Waugh, Patricia. (2006). *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: OUP.

•••