

# TRIBE, CULTURE, ART

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF  
PROFESSOR SUJATA MIRI

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VANLALNGHAK  
SIBY K. GEORGE

The volume is a collection of articles in honour of Professor Sujata Miri who retired from the Department of Philosophy, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2004 after 29 years of service there. The pieces reflect her diverse interests like the nature of the philosophical quest, tribal culture, religion, art etc. There are also discussions on themes relating to contemporary debates like globalization, religious pluralism, multiculturalism and human rights. Majority of the papers is centres on issues concerning tribal societies of North East India, an area of Prof. Miri's abiding interest. Her research on the philosophical underpinnings of tribal cultures—primarily of the Northeast—has a very special place in the contemporary debate. She has encouraged, with wonderful results, many tribal students to take up in their Ph.D work, themes relating to the understanding of their own cultures. At least three papers of the volume deal with art criticism and with philosophical questions relating to aesthetics, for Prof. Miri took to painting, at a somewhat late stage of her career, as something like an extension of her philosophical work. The book will be of much use to students and scholars of philosophy in general and those interested in the conceptual study of cultures. The collection, with adequately reflecting the many-sidedness of Professor Miri's creative personality, has touched upon some of the most relevant and interesting issues relating to tribe, culture, religion, art and contemporary social concerns.

**Rs. 595/-**

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*Essays in Honour of Professor Sujata Miri*

*Edited by*

Vanlalnghak  
Siby K. George



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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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*Siby K. George*

Professor Sujata Miri retired from the service of North Eastern Hill University on 30 June of this year. She joined the faculty of the University in 1975 and has served it since with great distinction. This small volume is meant as a tribute to her as a philosopher, as a much admired and loved teacher, as someone with marvellously varied intellectual and artistic interests and, above all, as a person of rare human qualities.

Professor Miri's abiding interest through all these years has been in the philosophical understanding of tribal cultures particularly of North East India. She began her research rather tentatively, but very soon realised that this was the kind of work which her inclination, professional responsibility and particular location combined to turn into a serious life-long commitment. She has thus pursued it with great zeal and rare versatility for nearly three decades. Today, the value of what was begun tentatively has an assured stability. "But origin always meets us from the future" – these words of Heidegger towards the end of his philosophical career seem to ring true in the case of Professor Miri as well.<sup>1</sup> On looking back, one is struck by the sheer enormity of the work done. Professor Miri is still not tired of speaking and writing about the tribal cultures of the North East. She considers her exploration a beginning that, hopefully, will be passed on to

a vibrant new generation of tribal scholars. In this introduction, I shall try to give a brief account of her thought. Hopefully, this will provide the background for reading some of the papers in this volume which are direct commentaries on her work.

But, while understanding tribal cultures has certainly been her central interest, one cannot possibly leave out, in any account of her work, her two published novels and her enormous corpus of paintings. I shall have something to say about both these towards the end.

'Culture' is a nebulous word. While it is in fact as concrete as the ground under our feet, when we come to speak of it, it seems to become both nothing and everything, elusive and difficult to capture under a definition. Come the time it is lost or in a process of fading out, we groan and moan over what might have been; there is almost an incessant stepping out into the never-to-be-retrieved past, just for nostalgia's sake. Alas! Until things of value are lost, we do not seem to realize their worth; until the precious disappears, we tend not to realize how precious it was. In most of the tribal societies of North-East India, there is this palpable feeling of the gradual disappearance of what they as compact societies valued in the past, about the evaporation of what they can loosely call their own cultural heritage. This feeling was expressed by an elder of Arunachal Pradesh to a journalist: "Our traditions are being destroyed. Soon, we will be the nowhere people, without a past or a future... ."2

Professor Miri was keenly aware of this predicament right from the early days of her association with the North East and she believed that this cultural alienation was at the root of many of the region's problems. Every human being wants to feel a sense of belonging to a place, a community, a society, a family and without this feeling of 'rootedness' he/she can hardly feel secure. When this feeling is not satisfied, there is a feeling of being displaced, uprooted and 'not being at home', and this is a dangerous feeling. Now, a tribal, by definition, is a man/woman who lives closer to the land and

kinsfolk, with an almost 'complete' feeling of security and contentment to the extent of feeling it 'unnecessary and superficial' to think of a wider contact with the outside world. When Professor Miri speaks about what has happened to the tribal societies of North East India today, what she means is the loss of this feeling of security and contentment, and the consequent feeling of alienation and estrangement. If one is taught to believe that whatever institutions, customs, practices, beliefs and the sum total of what we call 'culture' that kept together his/her community as a cohesive unit without the need for an imposition of something from the outside is suddenly absurd and irrelevant, then one feels alienated and estranged; one feels as though the ground under his/her feet is wobbling and one is losing 'his/her place' and 'self', because a person is not just an individual, rather, a person is the microcosm of the community, a person's 'meaning' is not just an entity by itself, it rather is a system and a network connected to his/her community. This is one of Professor Miri's chief contentions.

But there are also certain fundamental issues to be settled. These issues may be largely clubbed together as philosophical and conceptual, and they have to be settled side by side with the rational discourse on culture vis-à-vis modernization. This fundamental questioning is different from the anthropological, historical and sociological study of cultures. This fundamental probing in the philosophy of tribal culture is what Professor Miri did in the Department of Philosophy of North-Eastern Hill University since the late 1970s. She did it laboriously with passion and commitment. She neither doubted the value of what she set herself to do even for a moment nor gave into cynical counter arguments.

According to Professor Miri, a cohesive cultural group like a tribe shares both a conceptual system and a worldview. Every culture has a complex conceptual system specific to it and it embraces the various concepts in that culture, usually embodied in the language of that particular culture, since 'language is the home of concepts.' Within a culture, within its conceptual system, there is also an awareness of a

'particular world'. The particular view that emanates within a culture from this awareness of a particular world is called a worldview. Professor Miri writes:

A world view, as I use the term, is that part of a conceptual system, which is crucial in the articulation of a culture's view of man's place and role in the world, his relationship to things other than himself (including other men) and also his relationship to himself. Concepts which are crucial in the constitution of a world view would be such as the following: man and his specific capacities, man's destiny and his pursuit of it and man-woman, man-child, man-animal, man-nature, man-alien, man-god relationships and so on.<sup>3</sup>

This worldview is the foundation for the behaviour and ethics of humans within a community. If this worldview is shattered unrecognizably, there is the problem of alienation. Human beings are not as quick learners as they are imagined to be in this aspect because while trying to get rooted in another worldview and culture they question themselves and their identity. This is the whole argument of Professor Miri: that our identity is not something that we make by ourselves as floating individuals<sup>4</sup>; it rather is a 'construction', a formulation of a culture, a worldview, a community and the particularities of the individual get neatly merged into the social being, rather than both staying irreconcilably separate.

With the above conviction, Professor Miri discusses various concepts of the different tribal cultures. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya and the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh come into her discussions more often than the other tribes. In these discussions about tribal cultures and worldviews, she talks extensively about (i) tribal religions, (ii) the environmental ethics of the tribes and (iii) about their oral traditions.

Professor Miri believes that religion is an important aspect of a people's culture and worldview. When she came to the North East, she was shocked by the fact that the religions of the tribes were almost dying and together with this their cultures because many of the traditional practices and ways were intimately tied to their religion. She writes:

There is a more serious problem connected with the so-called tribal's past, more specially his religion. For years it has been branded by Hindus, Muslims and Western intellectuals alike as primitive, barbarian and immoral, falling under the disparaging umbrella of animism. Hence for a large section of the population of the north-east, who either themselves or because of their parents have adopted other cultures it has become taboo to revert to the ancient tribal ways.<sup>5</sup>

Disagreeing with the modern notion of secularism that has created a chasm between culture and religion, Professor Miri places great emphasis on the relation between culture and religion. According to the secularist assumption practice of religion is a private and personal affair relevant only to the individual's subjective taste –something like collecting antiques– and it has no intrinsic connection to the practice of a culture. Hence the argument that the tribes of the North East may give up their indigenous religions and may still adhere to their own cultures. Professor Miri is deeply suspicious of this argument. For her, it is religion that gives meaning to many aspects of culture and bereft of religion, these practices become blind and empty. Furthermore, varying religious practices within a cohesive cultural community like a tribe is a divisive force that shatters its cohesion. The realistic force of this argument cannot be denied by an onlooker in today's Christianized tribal groups of the region, where the biggest divisive force is inter-denominational conflicts. It is like following various rules within a group or what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' While the practitioners of one religion follow one set of rules and assumptions, those of another follows another set of rules and assumptions, causing tension within the group itself and shaking the foundations of 'basic agreements' that ruled the community thus far. By practising these different religions they lose cohesion and become fragments. Professor Miri says: "... every time a basic disagreement appears, we can multiply societies."<sup>6</sup>

For someone who looks at tribal religions without an insider's vision unlike Professor Miri, their religions are disparagingly 'animistic' as they attribute a soul to natural

phenomena. However, Professor Miri has given a significant impetus to the carving out of a beautiful philosophy of the environment from the philosophy of tribal religions. For her, what is called 'tribal animism' is a 'truly religious vision of the tribal cultures.'

According to this vision man, God and nature are necessarily bound together with each other. Man and Nature share a common life, which incidentally includes a common moral framework... To those brought up in the traditions of the sacred/secular dichotomy..., this recognition... is proof of the primitiveness of the tribes of the region.<sup>7</sup>

She feels that the secularist propaganda of limiting religion to what they understand as sacred has had disastrous consequences on the region. By calling the 'religious ecology' of the tribes as barbarian, the secularists have destabilized the edifice of the tribal culture itself. This has led the tribals themselves now to make economic exploitation of nature, a practice that was taboo to them. According Professor Miri the new-found aggressive claims of identity among the tribes here is a reaction against this deep-seated fear about the loss of identity and alienation. Hence, conversion is a cause of fragmentation of the tribal society.

The most vital insight that Professor Miri has highlighted in her studies of tribal cultures of North East India is a viable environmental ethics that can be developed from it. For one, she has a deep love for nature despite her sophisticated urban upbringing. Her paintings are a witness to this love for nature. Unlike the instrumentalists, who believe that the environment has only an instrumental value for the sake of humans, Professor Miri believes that nature has an intrinsic value, which is independent of humans, and that all value is not what we as humans give to something/someone. That is, she honours a shift from 'anthropocentric' to 'biocentric' ethics, which dismantles the wall that separates the human subject from the natural world, the object. In order to achieve this 'shift' in the concrete, her exemplar is the tribesman and woman. In a recent book, *Ethics and Environment*, she poses 'the tribesman as the interlocutor' in

this shift. There is a profound difference between the new environment philosophy and the traditional views of the tribals. The new philosophy of the environment was to a certain extent forced by a group of phenomena like environmental degradation, global warming and the fear that the Planet Earth would soon become inhospitable to life. Of course, a nice intellectual framework was given, albeit, to a utilitarian philosophy of the environment as time passed. But for the tribals of the North East, it was a sense of humility and awe that ruled their attitude towards nature. "Their argument was simple. If all creatures including man are animated by a common indwelling spirit, then no one species could conceivably assume that the whole existed for its benefits alone."<sup>8</sup> For the tribals, nature was inspirited and they did not see it as radically separate from the human community. In fact, environmentalists in the region believe that traditional practices and systems of the tribes had a natural way of taking care of the environment including the forest. Serious ecologists of our time want people to overcome the modern nature-man divide by a wide identification of life in all its forms. Professor Miri has found in her investigations that this is exactly what the tribals of the North East lived by for centuries. "It is the same 'I' that reverberates in me, as in my family, clan, village, mountain, river, mother earth and so on. This makes possible communication and love with the other without necessarily undermining the reality of the other. The connexion with nature is not fancied but real."<sup>9</sup> However, Professor Miri has a deep suspicion about the Christianized tribal's ability to retrieve this ecological past, as the Judeo-Christian tradition believes in a philosophy of human subduing of the environment and having dominion over all creatures (Gen 1:28).

Of course, I have not here said anything on the work Professor Sujata had done actually in the field of a conceptual study of tribal cultures by examining the various concepts of that culture. The limitations of my attempt here do not allow such an extensive treatment. For instance, she has studied the concept of U Blei (God) and Ka Meiramew (Mother Earth)

etc., in the Khasi tradition; she has studied the Donyi-Polo religious tradition of the Adis; the manners, morals and the concept of good life in many tribes.<sup>10</sup> Now, this was a difficult task since the tribes did not have a literate tradition on which the researcher could back her pursuit. However, Professor Miri places great faith in the rich repository of non-literate oral tradition prevalent among the tribal communities. Hence, she began the laborious process of collecting, translating and interpreting the myths, legends and stories of the tribes which were handed down orally from generation to generation since time immemorial. For her each of these stories and folk songs tell us about a civilization's ideas about life, love, good, bad, truth, falsity, morality, religion, values, systems of governance etc. Professor Miri uses the words 'myths' and 'legends' with a lot of respect. For her, the myths and legends of the tribes have the same stature as the epics of the more theoretical civilizations like the Indian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations. For instance, speaking of the legends of the Khasis, she says:

The rich depository of Khasi legends contains their emphasis on what is considered as right and moral by them. The legends serve as the carriers of the traditional values and present heroes for the new generations to emulate. They embody answers to the Khasi's vision of the good, the ought and the beautiful life. Of course any particular legend unfolds a whole world of things where man, nature, animal, all occupy their own little niche but underlying the entire narration is a particular ideal of life which is to be upheld in a situation involving the emergence of a moral conflict and its solution. Tradition never allows loose ends, philosophy may do so. It gives definite answers to 'what is right' and 'what is wrong' which are expected to serve as guidelines.<sup>11</sup>

I will end this brief and inadequate comment on Professor Sujata's passionate study of the tribal cultures by making my last comment on what she considered as the most valuable aspect of the tribal cultures. Another way of saying the same thing is to try answering the question 'what can one (especially, someone who is not a tribal like Professor Miri

herself or myself) can learn from the tribal cultures?' There are several such lessons, like tribal egalitarianism, their democratic institutions, their self-governance and self-reliance, their honesty and simplicity, their respect for the spoken word and the sacredness it carries, all the virtues of a heroic society like that of the tribals, where the virtue of courage/valour and that of friendship and fidelity played the most important role and so on, the list is endless. However, Professor Miri's philosophical mind has caught the bedrock of tribal morality, that is, their love for balance, their equitable consideration of the natural and the moral/spiritual. She saw that tribal societies abhorred the one-sided approach to life but lived out a holistic life, one with nature, one with the community, not frowning upon life's natural enjoyments nor turning defiant of the supernatural. In their morality, there is no preoccupation with the concept of sin. Anyone who breaks the taboos goes against the laws of nature rather than personally breaking a divine law. Breaking of a taboo brings disharmony in the universe, in the community and in the individual. What Professor Miri speaks of the Khasis is more-or-less true of most other tribes of the region too:

The perfect man, as advised, is one who possesses a balance of head and heart, mind and emotions, intelligence and instinct. Anything out of harmony or maladjusted, either physically or mentally in the individual, the society or the world in general is regarded as a failure in the pursuit of the Niam Khasi. This applies not only to human beings but to all life including Nature in the maintenance of its health and well-being.<sup>12</sup>

Professor Miri is deeply disturbed by the fast disappearance of this significant trait in the tribal communities brought about by modern education and Christianization. Together with Nehru and Elwin, she fears that the proverbial joy and playful spirit of the tribal life is disappearing with the advent of modernity. This fear echoes in the very last paragraph of her revealing reflections on *Ethics and Environment*:

It is an irony of fate that while ecologists of all types... are calling for a spiritual transformation that will give rise to an ecological sensibility which will make possible joyful relationships among people and with non-human beings, civilizations that shared this joyful relationship are being destroyed deliberately and consciously. The time is not far when, may be, they too would have no alternative other than dreaming of the emergence, once again of non-authoritarian, non-oppressive, non-hierarchical societies in which free, playful heterogeneous people live in small, bioregionally oriented, democratic, ecologically sound communities."

The creative tribal force can be retrieved only by getting back to this tribal past. The possibility of this retrieval, I think, Professor Miri has doubts about. To the question, 'from here, whither tribal culture?', I guess her answer won't be too positive. Not someone who will wallow in unsullied optimism, Professor Miri's picture of the tribal scenario of North East India seems to me to be bleak, unless of course the tribals can return to their religio-cultural past, when the religious life was considered the moral life, the public life, the total life – life as seen to be lived out.

An account of Professor Miri's work will be woefully incomplete without some mention of the following: (1) the work she has done with her students in the Department of Philosophy as well as in the Department of Anthropology, (2) her two novels and (3) her paintings. The research she has helped her students do includes the invaluable collection of stories and legends of the Liangmei Nagas, published some years ago, and more than twenty M.Phil and Ph.D dissertations completed under her supervision. Most of the dissertations are philosophical explorations of central concepts within tribal cultures, e.g., the idea of a happy (good) life, virtues - and interrelationships between them - specific to a particular tribal culture; the idea of "revival", the moral, the immoral, the pure and the sinful within the domain of a particular culture and so on. Some of these dissertations have been published and some others are being prepared for publication. These dissertations constitute a body of work that has the potential to become the core of future research in a hitherto neglected, but extremely exciting area.

Professor Miri's two published novels, *Days and Nights* and *The Broken Circle* give us glimpses of another fascinating aspect of her great creative energy. *Days and Nights* takes us far away from the world of the tribes of North East to what is now Pakistan and to Delhi and to Calcutta. It is the story of a woman of razor sharp intelligence who lives through the terrible partition killings, takes active part in the excitement of the post-independence years raises a family of five children, but seeks love where it isn't there and dies unfulfilled but happy in a final moment of self-realization. The novel has received considerable critical acclaim. *The Broken Circle* brings us back to Shillong; it is set against the deep communal divides of the city – the story of a beautiful, young excitement-seeking Nepali girl whose husband is mysteriously murdered. Although her sense of the moral and the immoral is always somewhat blurred, she has an innate and powerful, although inarticulate, grasp of her own self and its ultimate inviolability. This is what finally enables her break out of the cycle of suffering, broken relationships and deceptions and face the world with something like the knowledge of the truth. I have no doubt that Professor Miri's two novels will give her an assured place in the world of literature.

Professor Miri took to painting seriously sometime in the early nineties. The paintings take us back once again to her world of the tribes. The main reason why she chose painting as a medium of reflection was her dissatisfaction with the resources within academic philosophy to deal with the problems of understanding tribal cultures. Her paintings are thus an extension of her philosophical work. Her book of *Paintings on Themes from the North-East* (to be published shortly) will undoubtedly prove to be a unique contribution to the world of art as well as to the world of philosophy. But her paintings are not confined to tribal themes alone. Her subjects range from the thematic to the representative to the purely decorative and abstract. There is thus a playfulness about her paintings which perhaps is not there in her written works. Interestingly this playfulness is also an integral part of her personality. Her paintings have been exhibited in some

of the major cities of the country and have drawn critical acclaim for the spontaneity, energy and freshness and surprise that invariably enliven them.

I hope I have been able to give some idea of the many-sidedness of Professor Miri's creative personality in this somewhat desultory introduction. But the papers collected in this volume will do much greater justice to it.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Martin Heidegger, "The Thinker as a Poet," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) p.10. In the beginning of her philosophical career, Professor Sujata Miri was interested in existentialism and Indian Philosophy. Her doctoral dissertation was a study on the concept of suffering (which was published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in 1976), especially in the writings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and in Indian Philosophy. Her interest in a conceptual exploration of the tribal cultures of North East India was purely a response to a new situation in her life – that of coming to this region and living amongst the tribal people themselves. She manifested openness, respect, patience and insight in understanding about these cultures and with commitment put at the disposal of this understanding her versatile talents, inspiring generations of students to take a deep philosophical interest in their own cultures. In this, Professor Miri has set a fine example for young teachers and researchers.
2. Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist : Tales of War and Peace from India's North East* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995) p. 133
3. Sujata Miri, *Khasi World View : A Conceptual Exploration* (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1988) p. 2
4. Professor Miri was deeply disturbed by the existentialist notion of naked individuality. She writes: "But in its attempt to ascribe unique dignity to human personality, existentialism very often deprives it of its true essence and value. It does not want to conceive the individual as a self-conscious creature and integral part of the universe, as sharing its essence in the universal consciousness or as an appearance of the Absolute." (*Suffering* [Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1976] pp.41-42.
5. Sujata Miri, "Whither Tribal Culture," *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, ed., Mrinal Miri (Shimla: IAS, 1993) pp. 33-34

6. Sujata Miri, *Communalism in Assam : A Civilizational Approach* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1993) p. 123
7. *Ibid.*
8. Sujata Miri, *Ethics and Environment : Theory and the Adi and Khasi Practice* (New Delhi: Spectrum Publications, 2001) p. 55.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Professor Miri has worked with many tribal research scholars in the Department of Philosophy, NEHU, guiding them to study the various facets of their culture from a conceptual perspective. Several Ph.D., and M.Phil., dissertations were produced in this field under her supervision. Coming to the North Region as a teacher of Philosophy, she understood her mission as helping the students of the region, majority of whom belonged to tribal communities, "to achieve an authentic awareness of their own cultures and traditions." (Sujata Miri, "Introduction," *Rationality and Tribal Thought* [New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2004] p.1)
11. Sujata Miri, *Khasi World View* p. 14
12. *Ibid.*