

Ethics and environment

THEORY AND THE ADI AND KHASI PRACTICE



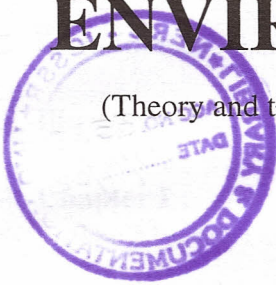
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Sujata Miri

ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENT

(Theory and the Adi and Khasi practice)



SUJATA MIRI

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PREFACE

In the normal scheme of ethical evaluation, nature does not come into the picture at all, and if it does, it does only in its capacity to be instrumental in preserving and furthering the cause of man as a creature of value. Nature, in other words, is seen as having no intrinsic value of its own. Its value, when it is there, is only instrumental and, therefore, contingent.

Philosophy, or ethics, or aesthetics as conventionally construed in the west cannot adequately deal with the environmental crisis. Rather all these are part of the crisis itself, and therefore, cannot be used as a way of dealing with them. Hence in my work I have explored a variety of pre-modern ways, namely the Adi and the Khasi (of North East India), of looking at nature in which it may be possible to find a place for a central evaluative concern for nature and environment. I would have liked to have been able to do a much more detailed work on the living thought and practices of the tribes of North-East India. But as the secondary material is both scanty, terribly territory-stereotyped, this would have involved my travelling extensively in the area to talk to the people, partake of their life and learn. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, this could not be arranged. Perhaps this will be my next project.

This work has been completed with the assistance of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research who very generously awarded me a fellowship for a project on 'Ethics and Environment'. To the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla I owe special thanks for offering me affiliation and study and library facilities.

Above all I am most grateful to Mr. L.K. Das for his help in preparing the manuscript.

Sujata Miri

INTRODUCTION

My main concern in this work has been to try and answer the question, "How is environmental ethics possible?" The original intention — if that is the right word - was to write an essay recognizably within the domain of a conventional philosophical work complete with analysis, argumentation and conclusions. But what I have actually produced is nothing of the kind. While my basic concern does remain philosophical, the work is not a sustained analytic argument or series of arguments for a particular thesis; nor does it consist in the detailed working out of a position from a critique of a variety of philosophical theses and arguments. Analysis, argumentation and critical evaluation of philosophical positions are certainly there; but they serve a secondary rather than a primary purpose. My justification for this is that so-called "rigorous" philosophising is frequently a trap which shuts out all true illumination and creates only an illusion of light. What I have done here is to put together a series of *thoughts* related to each other in many different ways - but all of them woven around the theme of the possibility of a genuinely *evaluative concern* for nature.

Part I of the work deals with what I call the *modern divide* : this is the divide between mind and matter, man and nature, fact and value, science and faith and so on. Of course, there are intimations of such a divide in pre-modern times as well; but in modernity this divide takes on a character of ultimacy which affects all our ways of organizing our experiences of ourselves and of the world and of understanding our predicament. Given this divide, ethics or morals can only be understood as belonging firmly to the domain of man. Ethics regulates man's relationship with *others of his own species*. This must be so - so it would appear — irrespective of whether one believes that the nature of ethical obligation is grounded in our subjectivity, or that it is grounded in the objectivity of values or in our rational nature or what have you. If morals have thus only to do with my relationship with other human beings, what kind of evaluative

concern could, then, there be for nature or for the non-human world within the modern divide? Well, utilitarianism or consequentialism in respect of the non-human world, is a natural response : we must respect or value nature because that is the only way to ensure our own well-being *and* survival. And, this response is available to people irrespective of whether they are subjectivists in their ethics, or objectivists, or deontologists or virtue-ethicist or feminists. The difficulty with this approach - as with modernity as such — is, of course, that it is too human-centred for it to be able to give an adequate meaning to the concept of respect as applied to non-humans. It can be argued — I think with justification, that utilitarian or consequentialist "respect" cannot really count as respect. Respect is, after all, a kind of *knowledge* - knowledge that the object of respect is valuable independently of its use for the respecer.

Another response might be that of the aesthician of nature. This is largely my concern in Part II of the work. Nature can be the object of aesthetic experience of more or less intense kinds; and any object of aesthetic experience must have qualities which are valuable — which constitute its *beauty*. But the aesthetic response is just as difficult to articulate within the modern divide as the utilitarian response. It may turn out to be just as equally man-centred - as, for instance in Kant - as the utilitarian response. Or, it may collapse into a self-cloying romanticism of an abstract kind. In any case, this response will have to come to terms with such assumptions of modern aesthetics as that there is a categorial difference between the artifactual and the natural - whether organic or inorganic - that art has to do with human creativity and, therefore, with the artifactual.

The response of the ecologist, (which is my concern in Part III) the deep ecologist and the ecofeminist is bold and desperate. It is bold because it dares to take on the great hegemonic authority of the modern divide; and it is desperate because it appears to itself as entangled in a fight to the finish - a fight in which it is, in every way, an unequal combatant. Frequently, this leads to a flight - and the flight is into the domain of post-modernism. But post-modernity is

only a development out of modernity - and the modern divide is just as much a creed of post-modernity as it is of modernity. Post-modernity merely questions the autonomy of the idea of objectivity - "objectivity" for it, is a creature of subjectivity or relativity - paradoxical as it may sound; but man and nature remain as distant in post-modernity as in modernity.*

In Part IV of the work, I turn away, therefore, from the entire western debate and see, if there is a way out in non-western, pre-modern thought and practice. I offer here thoughts on tribal world-views. The important thing to realise about tribal thought is that it is seamless — free from divides of the kind that modern thought is driven by. Man, animal, nature, the earth, the sun and the moon belong to a continuum and form a natural - if cosmic — moral community which they must all sustain. Moral obligation springs neither from subjective compulsions, nor from the autonomy of the rational will; nor from utility to man's life and his well-being; nor indeed from any deontological status of the moral rights. It springs rather from the *sacredness* of the entire natural order. Man, animal, trees, mountains, forests, rivers are equal members of a community with inalienable - because sacred - obligations, duties, to one another. Here responsibility is not a function narrowly of human freedom. It is something that emanates from the order of nature itself. Any violation of the order whether by humans or non-humans is a failure of responsibility, and receives punishment in one way or another. Tribal thought is strictly non-hierarchical. No species exists for the sake of another — rather all exist for the sake of all — for the sake of the entire community of species which is sacredly grounded. No member of this community has a place lower in moral status and responsibility than another - rather the place of each confers a responsibility and status to it uniquely its own. Humans - because of their egoism and vanity - are ever inclined to violate the natural moral order. This is why moral education is crucial for humans - and tradition is the great educator. Tradition does it — not through abstract, analytic, ratiocinative argumentation - because such procedure cannot possibly take account of the great delicacy and complexity of relationships between different

members of the cosmic moral community. Tradition does it through poems and songs and stories - sung and told in appropriate contexts and appropriate times and by the appropriate people.

All this, of course, is anathema to the modern mind, because modernity, for it, consists precisely in the "liberation" of the modern mind from "traps" such as the tribal way of thought and life represents. This "liberation" consists in the affirmation of the uniqueness of human freedom and of the superiority and autonomy of human rationality. Unfortunately, however, *this* idea of human freedom might well be entirely illusory and human rationality might well prove to be a conglomerate of self-enclosed systems which have little or nothing to do with the idea of truth as an independent entity. The natural consequence of such developments is complete "materialization" of man, on the one hand, and an all pervasive relativism, on the other - relativism between different systems of thought and knowledge, between different cultures and moralities. In such an eventuality moral obligation, as an over-riding principle of action will have no meaning; and respect for nature may merely be just a culture-specific eccentricity. Tribal thought and practice are founded on the *sacred* grounding of all creatures - human and non-human; and, while all tribal thought and practice is localized - bound to the land, as it were - the basis of this localised efflorescence is what might be called a mundane - entirely non-esoteric spirituality which is common to all tribal cultures. It is, therefore, to the great advantage of tribal thought, that it is not beset by problems of relativity. To modernity it can say with perfect legitimacy: "you have gone terribly astray; if you could only return to your roots, you would find a way to be at peace with yourself and with all around you. There will be pluralism there, but not relativism. The other, including the tribal other, is an equal member of the great "community of beings." Unfortunately, this "return" - by sheer compulsion of forces that modernity has unleashed - can only be a dream and for most of those who think they have achieved it - as e.g. in the so-called "hippy" movement - it is only, as in Freudian psychology, a "dream" achievement - not a real one.

One possibility I have not considered in the main body of the work is a reconciliation - from the modern divide, that is - that can be sought in religion.** Some religions have, of course, played the role of modernity's partner - partner in the great drama of our times to the extent that they see things the way that modernity dictates. But there may still be others which may provide the basis for a non-devisive vision. I am tempted to suggest that there are also religions where the tribal vision of the sacredly grounded community of beings might still be alive. One may think here of some strands of Hinduism, of Jainism and certainly much of Buddhism. Take the no-self doctrine of Buddhism. [This might have correspondences with the all-self doctrine of *advaita*, but that is another story.] This may be treated as a mere dogma of Buddhism - whose truth is *fixed*, as it were, by fiat. But the no-self view - which has resounding echoes in Wittgenstein - can quite conceivably *translate* into practice; and, thus translated, can strike at the very heart of the modern divide between the self and the other and be the beginning of a moral transformation where egolessness and compassion *for all beings* are the true springs of all action. Such a transformation may, of course, also be coincident with a spiritual experience of "nothingness" or of the world as a "limited whole" (Wittgenstein) or to a blazing vision such as the following :

"Far away in the heavenly abode of the great God Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant taste of deities the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hung the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring."

This powerful image is, among other things, a symbol of the cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among the members of the cosmos - a more than adequate basis for a serious ethics of environment.

* Masters of post-modernity such as Foucault, Derrida, Boudrillard can all be understood to have argued from a position like this.

** This is explored fairly extensively in my already published works on tribal religions.



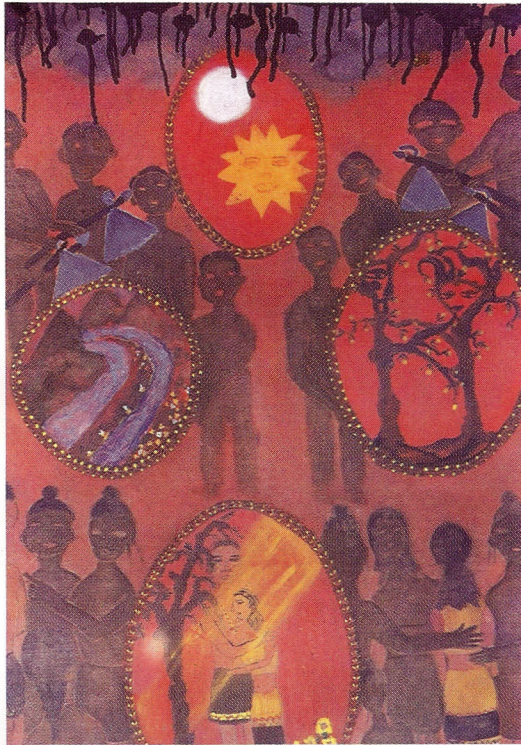
1. Man made himself centre of the universe.



2. Man, self-satisfied sits on the ruins of nature



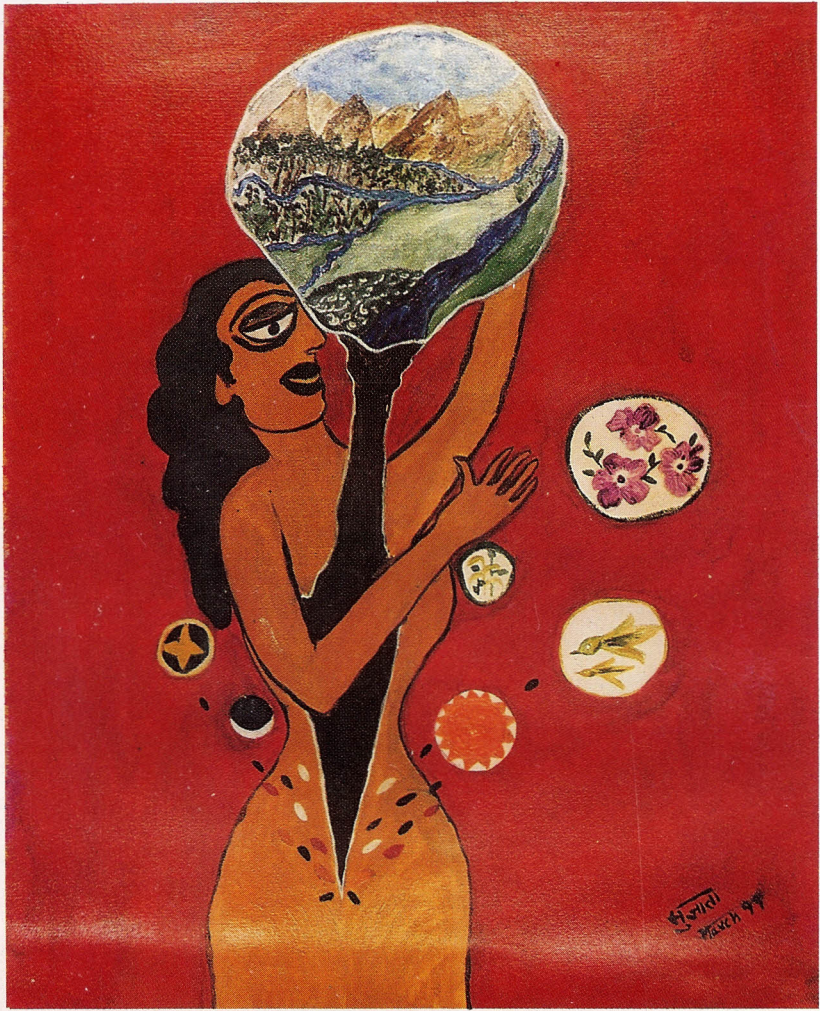
3. Development threatens Mother-earth and Sun-goddess.



4. The original glory of the Sun and the Moon, the sacred rivers, sacred forests, and above all, love threatened....



5. Mother-earth the most revered deity.



6. The womb of Pedong Nane.

Ethics and Environment takes a critical look at the growing literature on the possibility of a moral discourse of which the human reality is not the exclusive domain. The "modern" man's ethical concern with the environment in its diverse form remains, according to the author, inadequate because of its inability to transcend some of the conventionally rigid boundaries of "rational" argumentation. By contrast she argues that the non-anthropocentric concern and modes of articulation of tribal cultures provide a much sounder basis for an environmental mortality.

The book will be useful both to students at various undergraduate and post-graduate levels as well as to researchers.

The front cover depicts in the top panel The Sky God and his wife-Lightning and the bottom panel shows The circles of creation. All illustrations are by the author.

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Sujata Miri is a Professor of Philosophy in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. At present she is also the Head of its Department of Philosophy. She has done extensive research into the philosophies of tribal peoples- particularly of the North-east. During her long career as a teacher and supervisor of research she has inspired generations of students to take deep philosophical interest in their own cultures. Her published works in book form include: *Suffering, Religion and Society: North-East India* (Ed), *The Khasi World View: A Conceptual Exploration*, *Liangmai Nagas: Legends and Stories*, *Communalism in Assam: A Civilizational Approach*.

Sujata Miri has also published a novel entitled, *Days and Nights*, which has received wide acclaim. Another novel is complete and will be published in the near future. Another interesting accomplishment is in the area of painting. Her paintings- most of them thematically unusual and surprising- have been exhibited in some of the larger cities and have earned much praise from critics.

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