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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The Indian Lineage of Ecological Concerns with Special Reference to Bishnoi Community

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism which as a theory started somewhere in 1990s, postulates that literary discourses are analyzed from the point of view of nature in order to sensitize people towards threats to environment and ecology. But going further down in history we find that it has its roots in distant past. If we consider Bishnoi culture of Indian soil it is a community which fights against killing animals and cutting of trees, a fight aggressively initiated by as asserted by Edward Abbey, a devotee of deep ecology, in favor of Utah Desert on the American soil. Their ways may be different but the intent is same that is- protection of nature and Mother Earth. Considerable efforts made by Bishnois in Rajasthan are in no way lesser than the efforts of Abbey to protect his beloved desert. The Bishnois sacrifice their life to save trees and wild life of the area for which Abbey also tried hard through his proactive narratives. This paper is not to adjudicate their endeavors but a conventional approbation for what they do to shield our Mother Earth.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature Writings, Environmentalism, Bishnoi culture. Edward Abbey

Ecocriticism ensures conformity between man and nature. History is filled with an array of writings dealing with nature and its protection. The horizon of ecocriticism is extended day by day and has reached to a level where it is accepted as a literary theory. In the glorified history of Indian Literature the contribution of distinct environmentalists like Medha Pateker, Sunder Lal Bahuguna, Arundhati Roy, Ruskin Bond and Amitav Ghosh can't be ignored. Narmada Bachao Andolan received tremendous support from such active environmentalists. In the backdrop of Indian Literature one of the undercurrent themes is 'nature and its protection'. India has treasure of natural beauty and wildlife like Himalayas, southern plateaus and the world famous Thar Desert. With the passage of time these natural treasures helping the ecological balance have been threatened by man's cupidity. This acute depletion of nature has aroused concerns of many environmental organizations. 'Earth First!', a radical group of environmental advocacy formed by David Foreman in the United States is one of such organizations. In India such an organization can be compared with Bishnoi Community and Gujjar's association. Bishnoi Samaj is a loosely connected social group like that & 'Earth First!' and it started from Khejarli village of Bikaner Rajesthan in order to protect the clipping of trees. Somewhere in 1730 Amrita Devi

along with several other women and children protested and even died while safeguarding trees. Many Bishnois lost their lives for the noble cause of protection of nature and wildlife by others. Subsequently their methods of protest were followed.

In memory of the 363 Bishnois, who died protecting their dear trees, a number of khejri trees are planted around the area, which is still notably lush and rich with animal life. The Bishnoi sacrifices became the inspiration for a much larger Chipko movement that is still growing today, in which villagers physically embrace trees to save them from logging. (Blaine 3)

Bishnoi religion strongly stands for preservation of natural biodiversity of Thar as Edward Abbey does vigorously to protect natural wilderness of Utah Desert. In this context Dr. Sumathy's opinion is worth mentioning when he says: "He [Abbey] wishes to possess the desert, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply and totally." (26) As Abbey developed a great rapport with desert and its wildlife, Bishnois also have a strong sense of affiliation with it. Like Abbey, Bishnoi Samaj has drawn not only the attention of the world to Desert's problems but inspired people for some actions in order to resolve these ecological issues. By writing aggressive discourses for protection of ecology and nature. Abbey provoked his readers to take recourse to some sort of stand in order to translate their concerns for protection of nature into action. His works like *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, *Hayduke Lives!*, *Desert Solitare* etc bear testimony to the fact. Susan M. Lucas in her "Counter Frictions: Writings and Activism in the Work of Abbey and Thoreau" defines him as:

In American nature writing, two of the most vehement, influential voices to inspire environmental activism belong to Henry David Thoreau and Edward Abbey. Though writing a century apart and about different regions, Abbey and Thoreau openly advocate individual resistance to institutional oppression through jeremiadic rhetoric and acts of civil disobedience. (Lucas 2)

In India the Bishnois fight for their desert and its biodiversity at the cost of their lives. This hardcore community works on twenty nine principles suggested by their Guru Jambheshwar, as Abbey followed the principle of deep ecology suggested by Arne Naess. They prophesy that 'harm to nature means harm to self'. The same bishnoi samaj had raised a legal fight against bollywood actor Salman Khan for killing of chinkara for fun in 1998 during the shooting of one of his films. Though the actor was acquitted by the Hon'ble High Court but this fight served as deterrence for poachers. The vital point is that for wildlife conservation this samaj is considered aggressive but not violent. In 1996, Nihal Chand, and many more devoted Bishnois sacrificed their lives for the sake of wildlife protection and a documentary entitled 'Willing to sacrifice' was filmed which received the award for the Best Environmental Film in The Fifth International Film Festival.

The Bishnois never harm their vegetation and wildlife even for their fuel; they collect the dry wood and cow dung. They generally protest every kind of illegal hunting and mining in the desert. They are very particular for flora and fauna of the region and protest against any sort of illegal construction. They also pressurize state government to maintain wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. The same sort of enthusiasm can be noticed in the fiction of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. A group of four outsiders roam the American Southwest sabotaging bulldozers and burning billboards, all in an attempt to halt the despoilment of pristine wilderness. In the novel's climax, the gang plots the destruction of the Glen Canyon Dam on Colorado River in Arizona. So great is the influence of the novel that the term 'monkey wrenching' has been adopted by many environmentalists. The Bishnoi Samaj also paved way for Chipko Movement and many more such environment related agitations. They also take refuge to monkey wrenching to an extent, as a last resort, to give voice to their protest.

Abbey was fond of wild junipers of the desert as Bishnois revere 'Khejre' tree. He took it as a symbol of freedom and individualism sought away from the evil influences of urbanization. Bishnois sympathize with desecrated Khejre in the same manner as Abbey does for wild junipers and severely oppose its cutting and logging. Both personify their venerable trees as god and are ready to sacrifice their lives for it. Abbey's writings are seen as the anti capitalist, apocalyptic, anarchistic, and millenarian doctrines that characterize the contemporary radical environmentalism. Completely in contrast with that Bishnois are staunch believers of reincarnation of the human body. They take wild antelope as their ancestors and always pay it great veneration.

Most Bishnoi people, converted Hindus, still believe in reincarnation and their main objects of veneration are the gentle antelope, revered as returned dead ancestors. Antelope are frequently seen in large numbers near Bishnoi millet plantations and irrigated land—a scenario that has become the crux of an oddly symbiotic and contentious relationship with their neighboring ethnic group, the Bhil. (Soule)

Bhil people are very famous aborigines of Thar Desert as they are known for their hunting activities and serves as foil to Bishnois of Rajasthan. The Bishnoi community take their hunting expeditions harmful towards the ecology of the desert and show their vehement resilience which Abbey also did through his provocative fiction. "The Bhil flaunt Bishnoi taboos by cutting trees to fuel their fires, build their houses and most importantly to provide materials for basket making, especially the green wood of the precious *arana* tree." (Soule) During the years of draught their clashes increase many times but bishnois continue saving vast biodiversity of the region. They seriously don't favor violence to protect nature but don't hesitate to protect the 'self' as they take nature as an extension of the self and any harm to the self is considered as inciting offensive action and proper retaliation. Abbey also locked horns with state government for its developmental programmes as they caused harm to the natural beauty and biodiversity of the region. He was in favor of eco-sabotage. Ecosabotage is a tactic adopted by radical contemporary environmentalists who believe that the approach of mainstream environmentalism

is ineffective. They argue that Earth's destruction is brought about by industry; it is a violent infringement upon a natural state of affairs and as such development calls for violent retaliation. Edward Abbey gives a theoretical basis for eco-sabotage. He took his act of ecosabotage beyond the feigns of civil disobedience to direct actions and was supported by staunch nature lovers. The same sort of deep ecological concerns can be noticed in Bishnoi Samaj as they do not hesitate in becoming violent for protecting nature and Mother Earth. Their protest can be supported by hard core conservationists. They know how to bring new polices for environmental conservation and how much support is needed from environmental organization like & formed by other communities like the Gujjars. Amrita Devi was offered a deal that if she wanted to save trees she had to give a bribe to the government officials but she refused it and offered her head instead of money. "Sar santey rookh rahe to bhi sasto jaan" (Ramawat 376) means while saving a tree if one has to sacrifice his or her head then they should never hesitate.

By the end of the massacre, 363 Bishnois had given their lives in sacrifice to save green trees. Appalled at the situation and overwhelmed by the dedication of the villagers, the Maharaja passed a decree legally protecting green trees, which stands to this day. Furthermore, it is highly likely that the term 'tree hugger' originated 280 years ago when Amrita Devi demonstrated a mother's love for our hero, the Khejri tree. (O' Nell 4)

Such ecological agitations and movements are not the things of the past but have relevance in the present day world. In march 2016 the spiritual leader of India Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was charged a fine of five crore for spoiling the aquatic life of river Yamuna and for irreparable damage caused on the river bed by the construction activities of World Cultural Festival. The National green Tribunal took a serious note of that damage of ecology of the river bed of Yamuna and slapped such a great amount as fine on 'The Art of Living' group which was not permitted for leaving the enzyme in the river water which he claimed would purify its water. Delhi Pollution Control Board was also asked to pay a fine of one lakh rupees for failing to discharge their duties. This sensitization has become possible only through the efforts of people who sacrificed their lives for saving ecology. Their efforts should not be allowed to go waste and that would happen only when we realize that there is a spirit behind the trees like Wordsworth and "Find tongues in trees, tools in the running brooks/ sermons in stones" Just like Williams Shakespeare.

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