



## Eco-centric Myths and Deep Ecology in Sangay Wangchuk's *Seeing with the Third Eye*

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### ABSTRACT

The word myth comes from the ancient Greek word *mythos* and it refers to a form of speech or narration. Bhutan's unique eco-centric myths and senses of deep ecology serve as main factors in preserving the natural environment and as a result, two-thirds of the country is under forest cover. Knowledge of deep ecology and animistic beliefs in myths reveal a deeper affinity to understand the natural landscape, reinforce the harmonious human-nonhuman relationship, and treat the natural landscape with deep respect. However, due to the increasing external forces of technology, western perspectives, and globalisation, myths continue to function as old-time stories for societies. Sangay Wangchuk's *Seeing with the Third Eye* interrogates the external forces by upholding Bhutan's eco-centric myths and ethics of deep ecology through the conservation of natural biodiversity. Based on these perspectives, this article explores the intertwining relationship between local eco-centric myths of Bhutan and deep ecology. The article also proposes an integrative approach of eco-centric myths and deep ecology as a model towards human-nature collaborative and co-creative existence. Furthermore, by juxtaposing scientific evidence, the article strives to prove the significant impacts of eco-centric myths and deep ecology in the conservation of the earth's biodiversity.

**Keywords:** myth, animistic beliefs, deep ecology, green capitalism, biodiversity.

## Introduction

One of the purposes of writing this article emerges from the close association of the authors with the natural environment in their respective geographical spaces of Bhutan and India. Both the authors were born and brought up amidst the natural environment and as a result their association with different academic disciplines of science, history, literature and others were widely driven by the eco-centric existential patterns of the natural environment. Eco-centric myths and deep ecology invite the human civilisation across the world to incorporate the functional patterns of the natural environment within the habitual ways of thinking and doing. Myth in the modern world is almost a forgotten past. On most occasions the beliefs in nature's spiritual spirits are ignored by anthropologists. Anthropologists claim myth as a primitive form of idolatry, superstition, and orally transmitted hypothesis that can be freely subjected to distortion and is therefore of no value to the contemporary discourses on sciences and technologies. Despite the existence of such problematic narratives, the article outlines that the importance of environmental myths influences many modern-day scientists, who highly regard the practical contributions of such myths towards environmental conservation. This research article also urges societies, policymakers, and environmentalists across the globe to adopt the integrated approach of eco-centric myths and deep ecology as an environmental ethic to maintain the human-nature relationship, and sustain biodiversity.

The word 'myth' originates from the Greek word *mythos*. *Mythos* refers to a 'tale' or 'true narrative' that is transmitted and rooted in truth. *Mythos* was closely related to the word 'myo' meaning 'to teach' (Dowden 2). Myth usually offers a supernatural explanation for the creation of the world and humanity. It is an anonymous story, originally animistic, told by a particular cultural group to explain a natural or a cosmic phenomenon. However, myth in the modern world has attracted a range of concepts across diverse knowledge disciplines. Claude Levi-Strauss' *The Structural Study of Myth* recognises myth as an inherent language, as a means of communication, and as a manifestation of thought. Levi-Strauss' structuralist approach asserts that people use myth to express their values, to explain the present, past, and the future, which must remain preserved even in the "worst societal transitions" (429). In Bhutan, the mythological narratives of the natural environment have been preserved across generations through oral tales that have been transferred from one generation to another. The narratives have been imbibed from the foremothers and forefathers and govern every aspect of social, political, cultural, and economic life in Bhutan. Since childhood days,

individuals at home and schools are taught how the natural environment should always be treated as an active living being and not as a passive resource of profit and power-making. The school text books on mainstream science, technology, history, literature, and other subject areas are interpreted with respect to the mythological discourses that are socio-historically connected to the natural environment. The optimistic outcome of the eco-centric mythological practices in Bhutan can be realised through the efficient ways in which the communities tackled what Levi-Strauss identifies as the “worst societal transitions,” during Covid-19 (19). On a similar note, Roland Barthes defined myth as a speech and as a system of communication that explains the forms of human behaviour with its origins (9). The eco-centric mythological beliefs and practices in Bhutan are ingrained within individuals since their birth. The homes, neighbourhood and the schools make sure that every individual’s thinking, functional and behavioural patterns evolve in tandem with the eco-centric myths of Bhutan.

Likewise, Tshering Cigay Dorji claims myth as a form of an oral tradition that shows insight into local histories, beliefs, and relationships between humans and the natural environment. He further argues that the traditional customs, beliefs, and cultural affinities to nature are inherited through the narratives of eco-centric myths. Myth comprises different animistic beliefs that help humans maintain a sense of respect for the natural environment, and restrain from destroying nature (26). This is why, according to the National Forest Policy, at least 60 percent of Bhutan should be covered with natural forests and today 71 percent of Bhutan is engulfed with forests (Tembon). Every aspect of human existence in Bhutan is driven by respect and reverence towards the natural environment. In most of the houses in Bhutan, the residents keep aside a definite piece of land to grow fruits and vegetables. Such a practice across generations has instilled deep-rooted ecological consciousness and self-sustainability amongst the people in Bhutan.

In Bhutan, myths were derived from Bonism, which is a pre-Buddhist religion practiced in Tibetan philosophy. Before Guru Padmasambhava<sup>1</sup> introduced Buddhism in the 8th Century, Bhutan practiced Bonism. Thus, Bhutan’s traditional beliefs have absorbed the animistic features of Bonism, which holds that every natural object has supernatural souls. Since then, the culture of nature worship, the ritualistic beliefs in local deities, and the practice of invoking and propitiating natural objects prevail in Bhutan (Penjor 27-28).

<sup>1</sup>Guru Padmasambhava is believed to be an Indian Buddhist mystic, who introduced Tantric Buddhism in Tibet and built the first Buddhist monastery there. It is believed that after he introduced Buddhism in Tibet, he flew on a tiger’s back to Bhutan and established Tantric Buddhism in the country. After flying to Bhutan, he resided in a cave, which is known as the Tiger Nest Monastery today.

For every individual in Bhutan, eco-centric myths function as the foundation stone of knowledge production and provide the basis for the study of the relationship between the human civilisation and the natural environment. Myths and animistic beliefs significantly help social sciences, anthropologists, and ecologists in practicing biodiversity management. William Cavanaugh and Brian Cottle state that society is structured to conform to certain social, cultural, political, and geographical myths (178). This understanding of myths gets well reflected in the habitual lifestyles of the people of Bhutan. Different trees, animals and insects are regularly worshipped in Bhutan as a part of their Buddhist ritualistic practices. Such myths and animistic beliefs have not only flourished throughout the history of Bhutan, but have also been an integral part of the mythological practices across the world. For instance, in India many indigenous communities like the *Kols*, the *Bhils* and the *Santhals* do not acknowledge the mainstream religious (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, etc.) mythological ideologies and continue with worshipping natural forces like trees, sky, water, storms, birds, and animals that they have imbibed from their ancestors across generations. Such indigenous eco-centric mythological rituals are performed by these communities who reside in (or near) the forests as well as in the cities. Similar instances of eco-centric mythological practices can be found among the indigenous communities of other South Asian countries as well like the *Kochis*, the *Rabaris* and the *Bakarwals* of Pakistan; the *Chakmas*, the *Marmas* and the *Mandis* of Bangladesh; the *Kachins*, *Karens*, and the *Karennis* of Myanmar; and the *Bharatas* and *Veddhas* of Sri Lanka. In this sense, myths have a strong connection in understanding human relationships to other aspects of the world.

These eco-centric mythological beliefs and practices gain a planetary significance further when human-nature relationships are understood in relation to the phenomenon of deep ecology. According to Bill Devall, the phenomenon of deep ecology was proposed by Arne Naess and it is the study of the relationship between human civilisation and the environment (140). It asks deeper eco-conscious questions about human society and nature beyond earth's wisdom. Naess believes that all life systems from living organisms through ecosystems to human beings are interconnected. The aspect of deep ecology pushes the human civilisation to a global present, which interrogates the "sustainability and the durability of the planet" (Mbembe 5). Deep ecology also provokes the human civilisation to think how the planet can be reassembled and reconstituted "as an integrated system in which humans and non-humans, physical, chemical and biological components, oceans, atmosphere and land-surface are all interlinked

in a grand gesture of mutuality” (5). Some of the perspectives of deep ecology are self-realisation, biocentric views, positive human attitude towards nature, and building balanced environmental ethics towards better biodiversity management (65).

Deep ecology holds eight distinct principles and each promotes a lifestyle that seeks to harmonise with nature. This eightfold platform is a pedagogical tool that can assist people to develop an eco-philosophic statement and helps to bring about a rethinking of societal values (Devall 66). Arne Naess says that “nature belongs to all other species as much as it belongs to humans. Trees, water, animals, plants have equal rights to live in nature as much as humans. The idea develops a new balance and harmonious relationship among individuals, communities, and nature” (98). Likewise, conservation of nature has been an important environmental practice in Bhutan. Bhutanese eco-centric myths and traditional beliefs have successfully preserved its biodiversity for ages. Myths have helped indigenous people to remain connected with the biophysical environment in a spiritual way. According to Elizabeth Allison, widespread beliefs in myths and deities that inhabit the landscape, reveal a deep affinity and support the modernist goals of environmental conservation in Bhutan (198).

This is how myths and deep ecology guide human societies to weave collective eco-centric attitudes, develop a compassionate and healing attitude towards the earth, and forge a sense of self-realisation that every natural object is a living entity. The instinctive values of eco-centric myths and deep ecology propose a radical change in human consciousness, restrain humans from destroying natural resources, and outline a harmonious relationship between society and nature. Sangay Wangchuk’s *Seeing with the Third Eye* unpacks similar arguments about myths and deep ecology in Bhutan. Wangchuk’s *Seeing with the Third Eye*, a novel set in rural Bhutan, shows a strong affiliation between myth and deep ecology. The book unfolds eco-centric myths and animistic beliefs that are being practised in Bhutan for several centuries. Like Naess, Wangchuk too believes in unity and interdependence within every living being. Each soul can either offer help or harm humans. For instance, the Lu-serpent spirit owns rocky terrains; mem-spirits of trees own trees, *Yulla/Tsen*-spirits of lakes, cliffs, and mountains, etc<sup>2</sup>. If these spirits of nature are disturbed, then they would punish humans with storms, floods, earthquakes, and diseases. As such, these spirits must either be worshipped or appeased. These narratives outline that nature in Bhutan is regarded as the eternal mother and it is not wise to abuse her or take

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<sup>2</sup>Lu, Mem and Yulla/Tsen are referred to as natural spirits in Bhutanese myths and folk tales.

her treasures wantonly. For instance, mountain peaks in Bhutan are considered as an abode of the guardian deity called *Yulla/Tsen*; water sources are inhabited by the water spirit called *Chugi Lhamo* (God of water bodies), and rocks are owned by Lu or the serpent deity. These indigenous beliefs and practices helped Bhutan remain 60% covered with unimaginable diversity in nature. Natural spirits and local deities in the surrounding areas are appeased with verses such as: “Welcome to humble offerings, hail to masters and enlightened ones, hail to spirits of mother earth...let none go hungry, angry, greedy. We are temporary sojourners on earth, be pleased with our offerings” (Wangchuk 45). These traditional beliefs help Bhutanese to maintain a positive attitude towards nature. As a result, most of the country’s ecosystems are safeguarded by maintaining 60% of its land covered with natural diversity (45).

Likewise, Naess suggests the need for biocentric equality so that all natural things in the biosphere have equal rights to live. Deep ecology allows humans to see nature through erroneous and dangerous illusions (66). Halide Gamze Yakar observes that in the homocentric era, human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and as a result, the situation is rapidly worsening. The foundation of biocentric and ecology consciousness is significant to sustain both humans and natural diversity (95). On a similar note, Wangchuk in the novel argues that the impact of 21st-century modernity, the influx of western ideas, anthropocentric perspectives, technological expansion, human greed, and desires may overexploit the natural ecosystem. He, therefore, perceives myth as a significant measure to conserve the natural environment at all times (143). With respect to these arguments, this article affirms that integrating eco-centric myths and deep ecology can enhance ecosystem resilience on a long-term basis.

This research has been conducted through the qualitative method to explore experiences, perspectives, and theories, and to support the connection between eco-centric myths and deep ecology with Sangay Wangchuk’s *Seeing with the Third Eye*. The analytical frameworks that have been implemented to achieve the aims and objectives of this research are:

a. Thematic Network Analysis: While reading the primary text and the theoretical texts the authors made a note of all the important sub-themes themes like capitalism, ecology, natural environment, education systems, ecological consciousness and various others that are relevant for this article. The sub-themes were then classified under the two primary themes of this article which are eco-centric myths and deep ecology.

b. Comparative Analysis: Besides the Thematic Network Analysis, the

other analytical framework that has been used to shape this article is comparative analysis, where the authors compared the phenomena of eco-centric myths and deep ecology in Bhutan with other countries in South Asia. The comparison with other countries in the context of Wangchuk's text enabled the authors to understand the concepts of myth and deep ecology in a trans-cultural and trans-geographical manner.

However, the lack of previous research on the primary text, scarcity of written documents on myths, and limited research on Bhutanese literature challenged the authors to explore related ideas in relation to other countries.

### **Myths and Deep Ecology**

This section reflects on some of the important arguments around eco-centric myths and deep ecology. Through the arguments, this section serves as the basis to positionise the theoretical and thematic reflections of the authors about the necessity of deep ecology and eco-centric myths in contemporary Bhutan and other parts of the world in the context of Sangay Wangchuk's novel. The era of the Anthropocene has forced humanity to acquire the capacity to mould nature, making human activity a major driver of global environmental depletion. Environmental depletion impacts millions of people and increases risks on fragile ecosystems globally. The liberal social system embedded within western perspectives regards humans as the most superior entity in the universe. This system believes humans as the centre of the life system and that they have the right to regulate the living and creative value of all other living organisms (Gladwin et al 881- 882).

The World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report* placed human-led environmental degradation as the top long-term risk (McLennan 3). It is a growing concern that if human-centric violent activities on earth continue, then environmental crises will worsen considerably. Addressing global environmental risks demands a mutual understanding of human-nature views and ecological values. Bron Taylor argues that unless human assaults on the environment reduce, the earth will be less habitable for present and future generations. Changing landscapes, climate change, rising sea levels, disruption in the ozone layer, and exposure to hazardous diseases are some of the prominent environmental crises today (190).

Hence, the authors propose an integration of the phenomena of deep ecology and eco-centric myths as possible ways of countering ecological violence and promoting a sustainable environment. The implications of this integrative

process include embracing eco-centric myths and deep ecology and including such knowledges in the school curriculums and pedagogies; adopting the holistic concept of dynamic human-nature interactions in practical life; recognising eco-centric approaches as a usual and normative part of daily existence; and promoting long-term sustainability through respecting ecological diversity like preserving the animal and plant lives around. Given these insights, the concept of environmental ethics is a guiding principle for the stewardship of the ecosystem.

Wangchuk in his novel also asserts that developing human instinct values through myths and traditional beliefs help to mitigate environmental threats (61). In connection with this argument, Daniel Wirth proclaims that indigenous myths and traditional beliefs are an educational tool to inspire and bring changes in human behaviour within the Eurocentric world (8). The myths and traditional beliefs raise individual awareness towards environmental spirituality, build attitudes of care and share towards nature, impose environmental justice, peace, and develop a sustainable society. Natural objects, places, and creatures possess a spiritual essence. Further, indigenous communities across the world have their own set of spiritual ideologies to interact with the natural world (Taylor 176).

Wangchuk in *Seeing with the Third Eye* unfolds how eco-centric myths in Bhutan help in the conservation of natural biodiversity. The unique spiritual ideology that has been passed down across generations regards environmental objects as living mysticisms. Wangchuk observes that places and natural objects are identified as protecting deities, divinities, and supernatural spirits. Wangchuk reveals how myths unfold sacred and reverential human attitudes towards nature. Humans respect and fear nature. "Fear" is especially important in relation to the preservation of nature. It is believed that fear helps humans to protect nature from harm. This belief conveys that humans should avoid encroachment into the territory of wild lives, and display concern for the preservation and protection of animals and plants. Thus, he concludes that myths establish an understanding relationship between humans and nature, and maintain a balance in the human-nature relationship. For instance, *Lu*-the snake serpent is one of the most important ecological elements of nature. *Lu* is believed to be clean, pure, sacred, and is sensitive to pollution. He is the custodian of water bodies, rocks, and land that exerts powerful effects on human activities. The snake serpent is believed to be the holder of treasures and may grant wishes, wealth when it is propitiated with milk (Wangchuk 53).

The novel unpacks the necessity of reviving local eco-centric myths and deep ecology in a crowded, technocratic, and busy world to bring spiritual changes



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in the human attitudes towards the environment. Like eco-centric myths, deep ecology offers spiritual guidance for long-term environmental sustainability. Deep ecology praxis argues that like humans, the rights and responsibilities of all beings require consideration (Wirth 11). Martha Gimenez observes that deep ecology engages with themes such as developing intrinsic value between the human and nonhuman world, maintaining diversity in nature's ecosystem, changing human intervention in natural processes, restoring the balance of nature, and substantially reducing human activities on earth to let diverse biodiversity flourish (295).

Myth and deep ecology persuade individuals and institutions across diverse disciplines to solve contemporary environmental crises. The philosophy of deep ecology and spiritual realm of eco-centric myths addresses environmental issues at spiritual as well as scientific level. Therefore, the relationship between deep ecology and eco-centric myths must be nurtured and practised so that people become more adept at maintaining balanced human-environment relationships. Additionally, both deep ecology and local myths reject the dualistic view of humans and nature as separate entities and the Anthropocentric view of human values as the source of all values. Pepper holds that anthropocentrism manipulates, exploits and destroys nature to satisfy human materialistic desires (20). Contradicting environmentalists' views, anthropologists argue myth to be an inverse of science and a remnant of primitive thought. For instance, the phenomenon of green capitalism believes that nature could be optimised to satisfy human needs. This theory emphasises the need of regulating the natural environment for market operations and regards markets as the most efficient way of allocating scarce resources. The theory also considers pollution, loss of biodiversity, and the unsustainable use of natural resources as a form of 'market failure,' thereby, encouraging market operators to become more efficient, innovative and to make the maximum use of natural resources (69). Such an understanding of the natural environment has also motivated various corporate companies to generate environment conservation initiatives and encourage their workers to play an active part. However, the phenomenon of green capitalism is highly problematic and deceptive in nature because the marketization, exploitation and the demonization of the natural environment do not cease to exist. Besides the self-profiting corporate workspaces, the narratives on human-nature balance is evident in various ecological theories as well.

Richard Mbatu's *Balance of Nature: Ecology's enduring myth* argues that nature exists in a perpetual state of equilibrium that may not be altered by humankind. This theory imagines life in association with supernaturalism. The book argues

that humans cannot claim to be a determining factor in the natural workings of nature. Instead, the book proposes the necessities of practising self-realisation, balancing environmental policies, and adopting biocentric views towards life (94). Similarly, Wangchuk in *Seeing with the Third Eye* believes that there is unity and interdependence in all forms of life on the earth, and that natural things: Animals, plants, rivers, mountains, stars, the moon, and the sun have spirits or souls. Each spirit can either offer help or harm humans (Wangchuk 54). Hence, Wangchuk's environmental ideologies parallel Mbatu's arguments in the *Balance of Nature: Ecology's Enduring Myth*.

Similarly, Edward Wilson's *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* focuses on an innate emotional affiliation between humans and other forms of life. Biophilia is a psychological response of 'natural fear' that is produced through human exposure to natural objects. As a result of fear, humans maintain a close relationship with environmental objects. This hypothesis confirms that the increasing dependency of humans on technology demotivates humans from connecting with nature. And the decline in biophilic behaviours leads to the loss of respect for the natural world, resulting in a decreased appreciation for the diversity of life-forms, consequent to environmental destruction. The emotional reactions influence human thinking about nature and their landscape while inviting humans to look at the environment with care (360). Wangchuk too asserts that myth enhances the sense of fear and realisation amongst communities by discouraging people to cut down trees and cause pollution. Bhutan has legends and myths behind the origin of every place's name. Stories of demons and spirits help people maintain a sense of awe and respect for the natural environment, and restrict them from destroying nature. For instance, water is an indispensable resource for any rural community in Bhutan. All trees that grow around the rivers and streams are believed to be protected by *nepo* (spirit) and are treated with respect. It is believed that if one tree is cut down, sickness or even death would befall humans. All these mythical beliefs have helped Bhutan to protect their natural resources for centuries. Wangchuk believes that disturbing and disrespecting these natural resources would invite disease and death to the local communities in Bhutan. It is a taboo to cut trees from the forests that are considered sacred, as these are considered the domains of local deities. Similarly, big rocks and trees identified by their ancestors are also regarded as local deities and are culturally and spiritually protected (Wangchuk 25).

Furthermore, the thematic blending of local eco-centric myths and deep ecology was also speculated in Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*. This theory proposes

that various parts of the biotic community like individuals, animals, and plants depend upon one another as a system with distinct characteristics of its own like peasant societies, communists, capitalists, and industrial complexes. Leopold's insights into the deeper ecological approach which went unnoticed until the 1970s are now being propagated by the philosophy of deep ecology and myths (Callicott 31). Some of the features of this theory are the shifts in emphasis from particular to whole, from individuals to communities, from human beings to nature, and from anthropocentrism to eco-centrism (23). Likewise, Wangchuk persuades that amnesic beliefs of local myths have a significant role in protecting nature in all its manifestations. The traditional beliefs inculcate a deep respect for the environment and the belief that natural phenomena like mountains, rivers, lakes, rocks, and others are imbued with powerful spirits that can influence the general well being of a village, community or society (43). He further emphasises that myths enhance spiritual changes in human attitudes which in turn affect changes in action. These attitudinal and spiritual changes can have significant physical results and implications for environmental conservation initiatives. The spiritual energies and vibes from local myths strengthen the commitment of the communities in conserving biodiversity (137).

Gene Anderson also believes myth and deep ecology are devices for sanctioning moral codes, carrier waves to invoke emotional power and intellectual authority in the minds of humans. Above all, perspectives of eco-centric myths and deep ecology regarding the human-nature relationship and conservation of biodiversity are on an equal footing. Both myth and deep ecology hold important insights for the development of more sustainable human relations with the non-human world underpinning contemporary ecological crises (54).

### **Importance of Eco-centric Myths and Deep Ecology in Contemporary Bhutan**

In Bhutan, local eco-centric myths are an inspirational source for environmental protection. Wangchuk's *Seeing with the Third Eye* exposes various myths that have significant impacts on the conservation of biodiversity. He believes Bhutan is traditionally and mythically well-accustomed to preserving environmental diversity (53). For instance, the myth of Aum Dorichum, a great lady of stones who is a half-human and a half-snake, was believed to have supplied stones needed for the structural construction of Punakha Dzong<sup>3</sup> in the 17th Century (54). Today, a polished stone near a pond and a mystical tree next to Punakha Dzong

<sup>3</sup> In Bhutan, the term 'Dzong' is used to refer to a Buddhist monastery in Bhutan.

is worshipped as the spirit of Aum Dorichum. To avoid the outbreaks of leprosy, earthquake, hailstorm, and pests, the communities believe that the spiritual soul of 'Aum Dorichum' should be respected, the areas surrounding her pond should be kept clean, and the trees should not be axed (59).

Likewise, the myth of Lama Drukpa Kunley, who is also known as the divine madman, has left widespread religious legacies in Bhutan since the 15th century. This myth reveals that while Drukpa Kunley was meditating in a cave, a group of malicious spirits surrounded him to harm him. However, his supernatural power subdued these assembled spirits and burnt them alive with a bunch of burning oak trees. It is believed that from the ashes of the malicious spirits grew a tree. Since then, oak trees in this area gained spiritual attention. Today, the trees are habitually worshipped and are protected as citadels of spiritual worship (Wangchuk 6).

Phurpa Wangchuk and Yeshe Dorji also narrate accounts of spiritual association between water sources and myths. Ap Khachep, a local male deity, is attributed to Chugbo Tshachus which is a hot spring located in Central Bhutan. The plethora of medicinal flora and multifaceted traditional healing practices of this hot spring dates back to the 7th century. It is believed that this hot spring was prophesied by Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal, who is a female deity to Guru Padmasambhava (80). Today, the hot spring is known for its health benefits and is believed to cure health problems, stomach ailments, tuberculosis, diabetes, muscle sprains, and many more.

However, the people who visit Chugbo Tshachus must conduct a purification ceremony through burning pine leaves, reading verses of the water spirit, sanctifying water from the holy vase, and sprinkling mixed grains over the spring source to make peace with Ap Khachep and have a peaceful hot spring bath. Animistic fear from this myth restrains people from destroying natural objects in the surrounding areas because it is believed that if Ap Khachep gets angry, he might unleash misfortune on earth in the forms of diseases, famines, and earthquakes. Likewise, an eponymous male deity Ap Chhundu in western Bhutan, who is believed to be the god of wealth, prevents people from mining, construction of roads, and deforestation.

Additionally, the lake called Mebar Tsho<sup>†</sup>, which has been named after the spiritual legacy of Terton Pema Lingpa who is the second reincarnation of Lord Buddha, is filled with mythical stories about the role of eco-centric myths in conserving the natural environment. It is believed that Pema Lingpa, after discovering hidden ancient texts and treasures from a lake, came out on the land

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<sup>†</sup> Mebar Tsho means the burning lake.

with a burning butter lamp. Historians claim that the lake is guided by the spirit of Pema Lingpa. This is why the spiritual energy that emerges from this lake makes the place beautiful, spiritual, and ecologically diverse (Wangchuk 33).

In connection to the impact of myth and deep ecology in contemporary Bhutan, Rinzin Rinzin's *Depa Bondeypa's Relatives* narrates the myth of Tsadila Tsho — a mythical lake — and Depas of Nyongdela (a mythical name for the people of Lhuentse)<sup>5</sup> in eastern Bhutan. According to Rinzin, Tshomen, the female deity of Tsadila Tsho, who is believed to be spiritually rich and powerful, guarded and blessed the Depas<sup>6</sup>. At that time, the Depas were the richest community of eastern Bhutan and they served Tsadila Tsho with milk, flowers, fruits, and incense. However, Depas' ignorance, greed, and desires provoked them to kill Tshomen, who came in the form of a mystical bull. As a result, the lake dried up and the people started suffering due to heavy hail storms, pandemics, and crop failures. Gradually, the Depas lost their material wealth and today they are one of the most socio-economically backward communities of Bhutan (Rinzin 34-51).

These roles of myths in biodiversity preservation are not only confined to Bhutan. For instance, Native Mexicans believe in the myth of Vaniko — a deity in Mayan mythology — and her power in destroying crops and forests, and unleashing pandemics. This myth also serves as a significant tool in environmental conservation in Mexico (Levi 609-611). Likewise, the findings of Nurit Bird-David and Danny Naveh about the Nayaka<sup>7</sup> community's belief in the Devaru<sup>8</sup> spirit in Tamil Nadu, unfold a similar narrative of the influence of spiritual myths in regulating the human civilisation (29). The Nayakas believe that natural objects have souls and they protect the natural environment against exploitation. As a result, the indigenous communities in India, Mexico, Bhutan and in other parts of the world believe that harming nature would lead to the degradation and destruction of the human civilization. Such a belief is not only mythically argued, but scientifically proven as well.

The mass extinctions of species, environmental contaminations by industrial wastes, and other mega catastrophes have led to a mounting terror on the planet. For instance, the United States of America uses one billion pounds of toxic pesticides, herbicides, fungicides annually and it contributes to 30% of the earth's depletion (Bradford 44). The gravitational data of the GRACE (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experience) satellite system reveal that out of

<sup>5</sup> A town located in the northeastern part of Bhutan.

<sup>6</sup> The name of an agricultural community in eastern Bhutan.

<sup>7</sup> A culturally and economically flourishing community in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which traces their ancestral origin from the Madurai Nayak dynasty of the 16th century.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Nayaka myths, 'Devaru' is a spirit that protects the forests and strengthens the relationship between the humans and the natural environment.

66% of earth's 37 largest aquifers are already depleted. The report also states that humanity is destroying nature's resources much faster than its rate of replenishment. The catastrophic impact of biodiversity loss is likely to affect the earth for several years to come. Billions of people are likely to be engrossed by acute environmental crises.

Environmentalists argue that over the last thirty years, anthropological ethnographers have conceptualised and experimented with diverse ways to protect the natural environment and restore ecological balance. However, these strategies have been centrally fuelled by consumerist projects of human development that separate humanity from nature, truth, and morality (Kiik 221). Nick Brown also observes that a majority of the environmental conservation efforts are primarily science-driven, objective-based, empirical, and hypothetical forms of favouring technological solutions. The scientific capacity to embrace nature had broken down; science had become dogmatic, and an individual's inner life is threatened by the rise of totalitarian social structures (6). This is why Wangchuk in *Seeing with the Third Eye* argues that the best way of mitigating environmental threats is to develop societal values through myths, animistic beliefs and practices (61). Moreover, myths aim to raise individual awareness about the necessity of building a harmonious relationship between human civilization and the natural environment. Myths and animistic beliefs have been utilised as traditional strategies in conserving the natural environment for generations in Bhutan. Furthermore, he proclaims that traditional myths and animistic beliefs of indigenous people have been shaped to maintain connection with "more than human" (Rubis 817) nature, and are used as an educational tool to inspire, and motivate changes in human behaviour in the Eurocentric world (Wangchuk 76). Repeated failures in environmental management strategies have provoked scientists and anthropologists to build integrative approaches of myth and deep ecology towards environmental conservation and help humans to revisit their actions, reduce overexploitation of natural biodiversity, and conserve natural biodiversity (Anderson 89).

## **Conclusion**

Environmental ethic is a non-hierarchical and pluriversal philosophy focused on harmonising human-nonhuman relationships. Intertwining deep ecology and eco-centric myths is crucial for appreciating the earth's biodiversity and ecosystem. The significance of myth and deep ecology in managing the earth's biodiversity has a long-standing history. Its effectiveness is appreciated today in the contemporary

world. Given these insights, this article has argued on the significance of myth and deep ecology in sustaining earth's biodiversity. The authors' interest in this topic is guided by the violence of the sciences and technologies, changes in human attitudes, overexploitation of natural resources, and curiosity in myth and its relation to nature. In Bhutan, the belief and practice of myths are regarded as a rational phenomenon, which has a significant influence in promoting humans' inclination towards nature. Myths help the communities in Bhutan to remain close to the natural landscapes. However, intrusive forces like industrialisation, technocracy, Eurocentric cultures, and utilitarian attitudes provoke humans to dominate and exploit all the 'other' forms of life. Thus, the objectification of the natural environment in terms of human use is a matter of concern for Bhutan.

The central objective of this article was to examine the relationship between local myths and Naess' concept of deep ecology and to propose the integration of myths and deep ecology towards generating environmental sustainability. This article has examined how myth and deep ecology enhance the harmonious relationship between humans and nonhumans. The mythical beliefs in Bhutan say that all-natural objects have supernatural spirits that can either harm or protect humans. In this sense, myth urges people to treat nature equally to humankind, and sustain earth's biodiversity. Similarly, themes of deep ecology propose to maintain the diversity of nature's ecosystem by developing intrinsic values. It further proposes to reduce human activities that cause earth's depletion and to restore the balance of nature through eco-centric attitudes. Thus, both eco-centric myths and deep ecology hold a biocentric notion that proposes that all things in the biosphere have an equal right, and humans have no right to destroy these lives.

The arguments and analysis in this article show that there lies a significant association between natural objects and the habitual existence of human civilisation. It also invites researchers, academicians, and environment practitioners across the world to generate archives of orally transmitted eco-centric myths of Bhutan and other parts of the world in the forms of audios, videos, and written documents. The archives will enable the different generations of people to understand the values of eco-centric myths and deep ecology on the one side and to apply them in daily life on the other. Such initiatives would also help the governing institutions, educational institutions, and the policymakers to design pragmatic, resilient, transcultural and trans-geographical ecosystemic strategies of environmental conservation across the planet.

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