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Indigeneity, Environmental Commodification, and Decoloniality in *The Race to Save the Amur Falcon*

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Abstract: Through the conservation story, the documentary *The Race to Save the Amur Falcon,* directed by the wildlife filmmaker Shekhar Dattari, unfolds the underlying conflict between the indigenous practices of the Naga community and the widespread harvesting of the migratory Amur Falcon as a result of colonial modernity. Colonial modernity has complicated man's relationship with nature and dissociated the indigenous community from its environment, inducing a ruthless commodification of nature. As a consequence, the indigenous Lhota tribe of the Naga community inhabiting the territories of the Doyang Valley and the Pangti Village, who historically relied on hunting traditions, engaged in large-scale persecution of the Amur falcons in order to earn resources. The indigenous community viewed these migratory birds as *eninum,* which meant 'mysterious creatures', and *osenvoro,* which meant 'foreign bird' in their native tongue and never consumed them as they were considered to be alien to the indigenous environment. But coloniality regimented the mindset of the community and re-ordered the indigenous knowledge system dismantling the ethical relationship between man and nature whereby nature became merely a resource for human utility. The documentary brings to fore the anthropogenic havoc inflicted upon these guileless avians and how, after unveiling such gruesome killings on camera, the government intervenes to restrict such acts by adopting conservation measures, transforming the hunters into conservationists and the hunting grounds into reserve forests. Reckoning with these issues, the paper shall seek to highlight how such conservation measures shall in no way alter the already-transformed utilitarian mindset of the indigenous people, and these green initiatives are nothing but the by-products of the capitalist ideology nurtured during the colonial era.

Keywords: *Lhota Naga, Indigeneity, Environment, Decoloniality, Colonial Modernity*

> "Most of us blindly believe that indigenous communities always harvest their natural resources with restraint and wisdom. But the sad truth is, when commerce and profit entered the picture no one seemed to care about the sustainability."
>
> — *The Race to Save the Amur Falcon*

> "With small grants from a few donors, we launched eco-clubs in several local schools to teach children about nature and conservation. We wanted to get them to think about wildlife in a new way rather than just as food or something to hunt for fun" (ibid).

Directed by the wildlife filmmaker Shekhar Dattari, the documentary *The Race to Save the Amur Falcon* unfolds the horrific tale of avicide as an aftermath of colonial modernity. The territories of Doyang Valley and Pangti Village are inhabited by the indigenous Lhota tribe of the Naga community who historically relied on hunting tradition. Following the ancestral practices of hunting, this tribe employed dogs and spears as weapons and rarely used guns for hunting. J.P. Millis in his book *The Lhota Nagas* provides a vivid description of the customary practices of this indigenous community in the section on "Hunting" where he narrates how the tribesmen hunted Sambhur *(sepu),* serow *(tsiyo)* and barking deer *(sanu)* as these animals were found in abundance in the river valleys and jungles of the territories where the community inhabited, the hunting rituals observed by them and how *Sityingo,* a jungle deity was considered as the owner of all wild animals (63-64). While hunting was a traditional practice among the Lhota Nagas, but the mass hunting and consumption of the Amur Falcon, the migratory bird of prey that visits Nagaland to roost in millions, is not a historical practice of the indigenous community but a 'modern phenomenon'. These migratory birds were viewed by the indigenous community as *eninum,* which meant 'mysterious creatures', and *osenvoro,* which meant 'foreign bird' in their native tongue and were never consumed, as they were considered to be alien to the indigenous environment. But by the end of the millennium, the construction of the Doyang Reservoir in the Wokha district immensely transformed the landscape of Nagaland, both ecologically and socio-economically. Coloniality metamorphosed the landscape and the economic structure of the territory in such a way that the raptor which was previously viewed as alien has now become the target of trade and consumption in the local markets. In other words, coloniality regimented the mindset of the community and re-ordered the indigenous knowledge system dismantling the ethical relationship between man and nature whereby nature became merely a resource for human utility. This crucial aspect has been featured in the documentary as the wildlife conservationist Bano Haralu comments (as quoted) that when commerce and profit enter, the indigenous community no longer harvests their resources with restraint and wisdom. The documentary centers on the anthropogenic cruelty upon the

migratory species and when the camera exposes such brutality, the government intervenes to curtail such brutality practiced by the community thereby adopting new policies to transform the hunters into green guards and the hunting grounds into conservation sites. The concern of this paper shall be a decolonial reading of the documentary illustrating how the capitalist ideology inherited from the colonial era has restructured the knowledge system of the indigenous community. It shall also highlight how colonial modernity/ capitalism has sought to transform both 'species' into 'commodities', and 'indigenous lands' into 'eco-tourist sites' redefining nature through the lens of market-based consumption.

Immigrating from the Chindwin Valley of Burma, the Himalayas and from the plains of Assam, the Lhota Nagas who inhabited in the indigenous lands "in the drainage area of the Middle and Lower Doyang and its tributaries down to the point where it emerged into the plains" (Millis 1) followed the customary laws of the land which determined their distinctiveness from other communities. Millis discusses that these people call themselves *kyon* which signifies 'man', but regarding the nomenclature of the term 'Lhota', he states that he has not been able to ascertain how it has been derived, only that they are found in government records in that manner. These tribal people have been in contact with the Assamese for a long time. Many Lhota villages received land grants from the Ahom kings on a mutual agreement that they would cease headhunting of Assamese people (Millis 1). Though it is difficult to define the term 'indigenous' but considering the eco-cosmological structure of life that shapes the customs, practices and culture of the Lhota Nagas, they are recognized as an indigenous community. In other words, it is their indigeneity, that is, the cultural distinctiveness of these tribal people which makes them indigenous. "The land they dwell on, natural resources, customs, and traditions on which they rely are intricately connected to their identities, cultures, occupations, along with physical and spiritual well-being" (Kikhi, Das and Dutta 14). It is pertinent to mention that the terminologies 'indigenous' and 'tribal' can be used alternately as in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 169, it was recognised that "given the diversity of the peoples it aims at protecting, the Convention uses the inclusive terminology of 'indigenous' and tribal people and ascribes the same set of rights to both groups" (ILO 2). In this context it is worth reinforcing that the term 'indigenous' often refer to tribal groups who live under customary laws and maintain a distinct socio-cultural identity which is different from the dominant society of the nation-state. K. C. Baral in his essay "'We the People': Interrogating Indigeneity, Citizenship and the State—A Northeast Perspective" states that the 'indigenous' is invariably different from those who are non-natives, outsiders to a place, land or those who are late arrivals. From an anthropological stance the 'indigenous' is conceptualized as a pre-industrial entity, characterised by their primordial association and deep-rooted solidarity with nature. Within the modernist framework, the indigenous is positioned as the 'other' or 'primitive' as opposed

to the civilized outsider (Baral 35). A similar standpoint on the Indigenous community was documented in the seminal Martinez-Cobo Report of 1983 on the protection of the rights of the indigenous peoples:

> Indigenous peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems (Martinez-Cobo Report Volume V, Para 379).

Though rooted in an ecological belongingness, colonial modernity dissociated their kinship with nature and relegated the indigenous community as 'non-dominant sectors of society' and in the words of Friedman "is now part of a larger inversion of Western cosmology in which the traditional 'other', a modern category, is no longer the starting point of the long and positive evolution of civilisation, but a voice of 'wisdom', a way of life in tune with nature, a culture in harmony, a *gemeinschaftt* that we have all but lost" (Friedman 402).

The documentary captures the 'lost voice of wisdom' of the indigenous Lhotas and the transition from their harmonious assimilation with the biosphere to their cultural erosion which leads to the slaughter of the Amur Falcons for sustenance and capital. The documentary adopts a reflexive approach where the journalist cum conservationist Bano Haralu appears on-screen and her presence as one of the characters in the film breaks the fourth wall fostering a direct engagement with the spectators as they experience the same journey with the on-screen narrator. Following her brief on-camera introduction, the narrator sets the scene and in a wide angle shot capturing the hilly terrains of Nagaland she acquaints the spectators with her land and the indigenous community she belongs to, both through her distinct voice-over and visual representation. "Voiceover narration may complement the visuals and add to their coherence" (Duval, John A. 30). Through moving images and static photographs using the animated technique of Ken Burns effect, the documentary features the festive spirit of the community, dressed in colourful Naga traditional attire and accompanied by the indigenous music. This hybrid visual style adopted in the documentary by blending moving images with still photographs creates a historical depth to the cinematic narrative. Indigeneity is represented in the documentary through the striking images of tribal men and women clad in traditional clothing. The still image of a tribesman dressed in traditional attire, carrying a hunting rifle followed by the disturbing

image of modern-day men carrying a carcass tied to a pole with wry smiles on their faces highlight the transition— how the cultural practice of hunting for sustenance has been replaced by the commodification of nature for capital benefit. As modernity is associated with the structures of globalization, capitalism, rising individualism, and economic development, it poses a threat to the traditional, nature-based living conditions of the community, rendering indigenous knowledge system marginalized and vulnerable. It must be noted that the concept of national development, a byproduct of the modern nation-state is often antithetical to tribal welfare and creates rupture between the state and the actual interest of the tribal community. "Parenthetically, for example, the proposed dams in Northeast India are in tribal regions where land and other natural assets are retained and managed on the grounds of community-based customary laws" (Baral 19). The rupture between the state and the indigenous communities enlarges when the state disregards the customary laws of the land and intervenes by asserting its neo-liberal development projects in the tribal lands which not only detaches the communities from their environment but also threatens their livelihood. They lose their claims over their environment and resources as "the claims over natural resources always involve issues of power and control of those resources. The hitherto existing laws treat the Common Property Rights (CPR) as the property of the state" (Kipgen 508).

Similar to the Mapithel Dam Project in Manipur, the Doyang hydroelectric project in the Wokha district of Nagaland is one of the neo-liberal development projects of the state that has increased environmental degradation and heightened the tension between the state and the indigenous community, "whereby, the indigenous tribals are expatriated from their traditional habitation and are dispossessed of their livelihoods (Ibid 511). The documentary projects how the building of the Doyang Reservoir has affected the livelihood of the indigenous Lhotas and transformed the fishermen to falcon hunters. Wildlife photographer and conservationist Ramki Sreenivasan is seen to converse with the tribesmen of the Pangti Village and discovers how the falcon hunters were traditionally fishermen of the Doyang River who depended on fishing for livelihood and sustenance. The wide-angle scene captures the Doyang River and the reservoir built upon it followed by an extreme long shot of the aerial spectacle of the galaxy of falcons and the voiceover of Ramki Sreenivasan stating that after the construction of the dam in 2000, there was a great surge in the number of falcons to that spot. To the impoverished fishermen this seemed like a Godsend opportunity to generate extra capital and accordingly they modified their fishing nets to trap the birds: "The reservoir, not only attracted fishermen but, also attracted falcons making this a temporary stop-over home for falcons from October to November" (Aiyadurai & Banerjee 7).

It has been observed that birds of passage require immense energy to take flight ceaselessly for thousands of miles to cross borders. During the process of their long flight, these birds require to restore their energy by stopping over at particular sites. Several factors govern the decision to halt at particular site and the duration of stay, such as, availability of food and favorable environmental conditions, the physiological condition of the migratory species and an inherent genetic program. The stopover locations are very crucial for the birds as they determine the pace of migration, viability and the breeding conditions of the migratory birds (Kaur, Jacob et.al 284).

Through the visual representation of the world map, the voiceover of Bano Haralu comments that flying from their breeding grounds in Northern China and Southern Russia, the Amur falcons travel all the way to South Africa, where they sojourn for a few months before heading back. The director uses graphic animation to provide an engaging visualization of the round trip of over 22,000kms undertaken by the Amur falcons which seems to be the longest known migration of any bird of prey. The Amur Falcon is a transcontinental species that undertakes an uninterrupted journey of nearly 6000 km from Northeast India to Africa—the longest oversea migration by any raptor. The stopover site in Northeast India is crucial as it seeks to replenish the energy reserve of the birds, necessary for their survival (ibid 284). The site has become a 'bottleneck site' for feeding and resting of more than a million falcons (Kasambe 24).

To introduce the setting of the documentary, the film opens with an environmental shot capturing the Amur falcons roosting on towering treetops followed by two wide angle shots of the armada of falcons in flight projected through medium and distant angles. The voiceover of the narrator narrates that these swarm of falcons filling the sky is indeed an incredible sight. She then illustrates the topography of the falcons whose size almost resembles that of the kestrels. Juvenile females have light grey plumage on their backs and streaked under parts. Adult males exhibit a dark grey plumage with rufous-coloured thighs. These little raptors are insectivorous and collectively consume billions of them.

The documentary features three shot sequences to demonstrate how the falcons prey on insects in the mid-air— an eye-level close angle shot of insects flying and scuttling, a macro shot of tiny flying insects like dust particles in the air with a blurry green background, a telephoto shot in slow motion where falcons hawk to snatch insects in the mid-air. Amarjeet Kaur, Alex Jacob and et.al in their essay on "Prey Species in the Diet of the Amur Falcon (Falco amurensis) During Autumn Passage Stopover in Northeast India" states that: "Stopping over at resource-rich sites and those that are predictable in terms of food availability is therefore likely an important strategy adopted by migrating birds".

Further, during their field research in the stopover sites of Nagaland, when they conversed with the natives, they learned that the falcons in the region are called *loi,* signifying 'insect-eaters', as they particularly feed on *alhu* or winged termites. The indigenous community who became falcon hunters as coloniality steeped in found that the falcons' meat lacked fat at the beginning of the stopover season. Consequently, they chose to hunt falcons toward the end of the season, after the birds have accumulated enough fat from an intensive insect-diet (287-288).

The Race to Save the Amur Falcon exposes how the community traps and slaughters these small avian species in thousands for commercial trade in the local markets. The mass slaughter of these birds during their annual migratory stopover is indeed appalling. The extreme close-up shot focusing on the pupil of the captured falcon highlights the vulnerability and terror reflected in the bird's cornea. Against the backdrop of an ominous music, the narrator Bano Haralu appears on camera eyeing through her binocular lenses where there is a cut-in leading to a monochromatic shot showing the community prepping the slaughtered birds for transporting to the local market.

Such commodification of nature is associated with the emergence of urbanization and capitalism in the indigenous territories that could be fully comprehended within the framework of colonialism and coloniality, for "Every individual discourse, or reflection, remits to a structure of intersubjectivity. The former is constituted in and *vis a vis* the latter" (Quijano 27). Environmental commodification indulged by the indigenous community cannot be understood in isolation, but in an intersubjective relation with the discourse of coloniality/ modernity. Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano in his seminal essay "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality argues that though Eurocentered colonialism, as a formal structure of political power seems to be a question of the past, but its progeny, Western imperialism, still dominates the colonies in the form of social classes or ethnies. While political colonialism has ended, but coloniality of power still persists.

Modern institutions continue to operate on Eurocentric constructs, enforcing a hierarchy of knowledge, where non-western indigenous knowledge systems are devalued and subordinated. The Eurocentric constructs governed the modern institutions as European culture was made seductive: it gave access to power (22-23). The European culture set up such a universal model that indigenous cultures were relegated to a peripheral position. Environmental commodification is, in fact, the cause of Europeanisation. The overwhelming geopolitical and technological supremacy of the European power sought to establish a global norm. Though Asian and Middle Eastern cultures survived this onslaught, nevertheless they began to view themselves through the Western eye, internalizing the Western values and adopting Europeanisation as the benchmark for development. Quijano explicitly

states that coloniality, then, is still the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed (24).

Coloniality of power has not only established social hierarchies, it has infiltrated the societal institutions by imposing its capitalist hegemony. Coloniality is the darker side of modernity. Coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality (Mignolo 3). The commodification of nature in the indigenous territories cannot be understood in isolation as it is rooted in the Eurocentric coloniality of power dynamics. Thus, the transformation of the indigenous community from being the custodian of nature to commercial bird hunters is rooted in Eurocentric coloniality that enforces capitalist dominance over societal institutions. Rather than considering the birds as an integral part of the environment, the community has commodified them by assigning commercial values to the species. "It did not seem to have any particular cultural value, other than having a direct practical value in the form of food or being sold in the markets (e.g. falcons). Thus, conservation of these species required massive awareness programmes, to inculcate values about conservation in peoples' imaginations (Aiyadurai and Banerjee 9). With this objective in mind Bano Haralu and her team visit the indigenous territories of Nagaland to launch an investigation.

Narrator Bano Haralu introduces her team of conservationists— Shashank Dalvi, Roko and Ramki Sreenivasan who venture into the heart of the Doyang Reservoir in the Wokha District to unfold the appalling tale of mass slaughter of Amur falcons and the community-led efforts to protect the species. This cinematic strategy allows the spectators to move alongside Haralu and her team working in Doyang Reservoir and experience a connection between them (the spectators) and indigenous community residing in the distant land.

To unfold the tale, the documentary features a dual-narrator approach and switches between the alternate voices of Bano Haralu and Ramki Sreenivasan, both of whom appear on-screen in the film. This cinematic approach is incorporated in the film to examine the massacre from both insider/outsider perspectives. The narrative of Bano Haralu represents the insider's perspective as she belongs to one of the sixteen major tribes of Nagaland while that of Ramki Sreenivasan, an avid birder and photographer represents the outsider's perspective. But these alternate narrative voices are not opposed, rather they complement each other and collaborate to reach into the crux of the matter.

The voiceover of Ramki Sreenivasan narrates how the team witnesses flock of dead birds when they enter the Doyang Reservoir. Using Ken Burns effect the film projects the gruesome sight of the dead birds in three close-up freeze-frames. At lakeside shacks falcons were being plucked and prepared for a barbecue. The film juxtaposes two contrasting scenes of living falcons roosting on treetops with a grim scene of their streaked carcasses. During the peak migratory season on an average 12000 birds

were harvested every day which amounted to 120,000 from merely one stopover site. The tilt up shot of a tribesman carrying hundreds of falcons to a commercial market with the voiceover commenting how commerce and profit overrides sustainability is one of the significant scenes that expose how capitalist modernity commodifies nature. The narrator reveals that though the government issued an order in 2010 to ban falcon hunting but it was not enforced. To enforce the ban on illegal harvesting the team sent photographs of the massacred birds to the district authority which triggered immediate action. Ramki and his team launched a campaign on Conservation India which had a great impact upon the conservation community around the world. Once India signed the Convention on Migratory Species, there was tremendous pressure on the government to manifest its commitment to concrete policies. As a result of intense criticism, the killing stopped ensuring safe passage for the falcons for the rest of the 2012.

Ramki was busy setting a program called "Friends of the Amur Falcon". Under his initiative eco-clubs were set up in several local schools with small grants from a few donors to teach children about nature and conservation. But the greatest breakthrough came about when the local fishermen finally decided to give up hunting falcons. Despite the loss of the extra money they made every winter they collaborated to set up an organization called "The Amur Falcon Roosting Area Union" to protect the birds.

Ambika Aiyadurai and Sayan Banerjee in their study on "Bird conservation from obscurity to popularity: a case study of two bird species from Northeast India" found that the house doors and roadside hoardings in the Pangti Village displayed posters of birds and messages of bird conservation. The conservation campaign launched in the area and the awareness created amongst the indigenous community through the release of the documentary (as it became an audio-visual campaign) have transformed the bird that was once heavily hunted to 'conservation celebrity'. The local people, conservation NGOs and bird researchers took pride and pledged to protect the bird (7). Through the consistent efforts of the NGOs and the support from the indigenous community the Amur falcon was repositioned to the level of a celebrity as it emerged as the mascot and the centre of the conservation project (8).

In this context, the role of the environmental documentary or eco-cinema becomes crucial in raising the awareness amongst the masses, as Paula Willoquet-Maricondi says "Ecocinema has consciousness-raising and activist intentions, as well as responsibility to heighten awareness about contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health. Ecocinema overtly strives to inspire personal and political action on the part of viewers, stimulating our thinking so as to bring about concrete changes in the choices we make, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies,

locally and globally" (Willoquet-Maricondi 45). Following the release of the documentary a widespread impact was created which led to government intervention to prohibit the killing of the migratory species and launch development projects by transforming the hunting grounds to eco-tourist spots.

The repositioning of the bird into a conservation icon and the initiative to transform the hunting grounds to eco-tourist spots serve as alternative mechanisms to commodify nature in the name of development which had its root in cultural europeanisation. The aspirations associated with cultural europeanisation enticed the native community to participate in the grand discourse in order to attain the material benefits and power of the West by commodifying nature through the idea of development. Looking through the decolonial lens it can be perceived that for the indigenous community both the bird and the environment became a source of commercial benefit. Though Haralu, in the documentary states that eco-tourism will provide the local people a powerful incentive to protect the wildlife, but such institution is in itself a part of global capitalism and western modernity. These development projects to protect the environment shall in no way seek to liberate the indigenous community from the mire of coloniality. While ecotourism shall provide the indigenous population sustainability and green livelihood, but a critical examination reveals a darker reality— such development policies alienate the indigenous community from their own environment.

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