

HUMANITY AND NATURE

Traditional, Cultural, &
Alternative Perspectives



In cooperation with



Humanity and Nature ***Traditional, Cultural, & Alternative Perspectives***

by

Focus on the Global South and The Sombath Initiative

4th Floor Wisit Prachuabmoh Bldg.

CUSRI Chulalongkorn University

Phyathai Road, 10330

Bangkok, Thailand

www.focusweb.org

www.sombath.org

In cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

Focus on the Global South (Focus) is a non-governmental organization with offices in Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and India. Focus combines policy research, advocacy, activism and grassroots capacity building in order to generate critical analysis and debates among social movements, civil society organizations, elected officials, government functionaries, and the general public on national and international policies related to corporate-led globalization, neo-liberalism, and militarization.

The Sombath Initiative (SI) was established after the disappearance of Sombath Somphone in Laos in 2012. The SI aims to increase awareness about the human rights and development contexts in Laos, maintain pressure to address these issues, including the case of Sombath's disappearance, and to build networks of solidarity to further this work. The SI is currently a project of Focus, embedded in Focus' Power and Democracy program.

Copyright June 2016, Focus on the Global South and The Sombath Initiative

Editorial Team

Clarissa V. Militante

Niabdulghafar Tohming

Yasmin Ahammad

Design and Layout

Amy Tejada

Ecological Ethos and Indigenous Traditions

By Debal Deb

Based on past experiences of resource crunch, all traditional indigenous hunter-gatherer-cultivator societies learned to erect cultural institutions to protect their resource base and ensure long-term sustenance of the prey base. Thus, most of hunter-gatherer societies observed tacit rules of restraint so as to not

over-harvest resources. Traditional hunters and artisanal fishers observed closed seasons, which coincided with the breeding periods of the prey animals. Women in indigenous societies were also aware of similar restraints while harvesting wild mushrooms and tubers in the forest.



Inchoate understanding of the value of biodiversity and the need to protect the resource base for posterity is reflected in various forms of cultural and social behavior. In most indigenous cultures, norms against callous or cruel conduct toward animals and excessive and gratuitous exploitation of plant resources are often motivated by “sentiments of affinity,” and are often “unrelated to a calculated empiricism” (Kellert 1996, p. 151).

Sacred Species and Habitats

All hunter-gatherer-shifting cultivator societies have mythologies and folklore that recognize several species as “sacred.” These sacred species may be totems (linked to myths of origin of respective clans of a tribe), or sanctified, with reference to certain deities. Many such sacred species (e.g. *Cocos nucifera*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Ocimum sanctum*) have important uses as food or medicine, and their “sacred” status serves to protect the resource base from gratuitous destruction. However, there are some keystone species with no direct economic use value (such as *Adina cordifolia*, *Ficus benghalensis*), and yet are considered “sacred” in indigenous traditions.

Not only species but also habitats are considered sacred in settled indigenous societies in all the continents. In South Asia, thousands of forest patches, ponds, and lakes are still held sacred. Sacred groves (SGs) are distinct patches of vegetation (ranging in size from a small cluster of a few trees to a large forest stand spanning several hundred acres), which are consecrated to local deities or ancestral spirits. Removal of any living things from the SG is a taboo, although dead logs and leaves are sometimes

removed from some SGs. As a consequence of prolonged social protection, remnants of SGs are today the last bastions of several rare and endemic flora and fauna (Spadoni and Deb 2005; Deb 2007). The institution of sacred groves and ponds is perhaps the best example of indigenous traditional resource use practices promoting conservation of biodiversity.

The assignment of religious value to a species or an ecosystem, regardless of its consumptive end-uses, seems to be a symbolic recognition by local cultures of its “existence value”, and a moral attitude towards nature in general (Deb 2014). This attitude is what Fromm (1973) calls *biophilia*—an innate love and respect for life and creatures.

Existence Value and Ritual Use Value

The existence value of an element of biodiversity, which otherwise does not have any consumptive use value, may get translated into a ritual use value. Different species are considered essential in performing certain religious rites. Thus, Santal, Munda, Bhumij, and Kora people must eat pieces of the tuber *Dioscoria pentaphylla* on the *Dak Sankranti* (the last day of Ashadha month of Indian calendar) as a ritual necessity. Flowers and leaves of different plants that have no consumptive uses are often associated with different rites of passage in tribal and Hindu cultures. *Saraca indica* twigs are a necessary item in Kora obituary rituals, and *Jatropha gossypifolia* flowers are essential in Bhumij wedding ceremony (Deb and Malhotra 1997), although these species are neither considered sacred nor used for any other purposes in these cultures.

Domestication and Amplification of Genetic Diversity

Indigenous people identified ancestral species of animals and plants, from which they derived all the domesticated animals and crop plants that we know today.

Beginning with the dog (*Canis familiaris*), created in the process of domestication of the Eurasian wolf some 17000 years ago, early humans had domesticated over 40 vertebrates and about 300 crop plants (Caras 1996; Diamond 2002). Moreover, indigenous societies fabulously amplified the genetic diversity of these domesticated species through selection, to suit their specific needs (Shi and Lai 2015). Thus, hundreds of dog breeds were created to assist shepherds, hunters, and farmers; thousands of ricelands were created to grow in diverse local edapho-climatic conditions, as well as gustatory preferences (Deb 2005; Huang et al. 2012).

The novel crop varieties and breeds of domesticated animals spread across continents by an expanding network of exchange among ancient indigenous societies. In this exchange network of what Eisenstein (2011) calls sacred economics, seeds are considered to be a common pool resource and a gift item, open to all members of the community. Community seed banks are an example of the communitarian heritage of the institution of continual use and maintenance of crop genetic diversity.

Conservation Ethos in Contemporary Indigenous Societies

Three salient patterns of the cultural practices relating to nature emerge from our study of

traditional indigenous mode of resource use. First, the cultures of primitive technology that were empirically predicated experiences of resource crunch are likely to forbid the resource use modes that are known to have had adverse consequences in the past. Profligate use of other resources, especially the ones that had not affected resource availability in the past, would tend to remain unrectified. The “neutral” practices with no conservation consequences may appear under changed circumstances to be profligate, and vice versa.

Second, some of the current practices that signify “profligate” use of resources may have evolved in response to certain external influences on the local culture and economy. The erosion of traditional social organization, loss of community control over natural resources, and inclusion of the resource items into market economy inevitably disrupted the cultural restraints on overexploitation of resources (Oström 2009; Deb 2009).

Third, all the cultural practices with any conservation implications, incidental or otherwise, seem to depict a reverential attitude toward nature, an attitude that is likely to prevent exhaustive extraction and use of vital resources. Thus, the assigning of “sacred” status to a multitude of plants and animals, and the design of the Lodha and Munda bird traps to prevent injury to the captured animal seem to reveal the respect for nature inherent in these cultures.

Obviously, certain practices regarding natural objects may not have any conservation consequences, yet may serve to reveal the *Weltanschauung* of the culture. Indigenous cultural tradition provides the semiotic plane on which the basic reverential attitude toward nature are reflected, and reinforced, by various cultural institutions and belief systems.

Some of these practices may have conservation consequences to varying extents, while others may have no significant impact on the resource base. Sacred groves and seasonal restrictions of harvest are examples of the former; the omens depicted above, and the myths and beliefs about various plants and animals (Shepard 1993; Nelson 1993) are examples of the latter, which express the biophilia of the society along the metaphorical corridor. Omens, auguries, and related myths may thus be described as a “syntactical” extension of the biophilous “semantic” structure, and serve to endorse biophilia in traditional cultural mores (Deb and Malhotra 2001; Deb 2009).

Continuing traditional norms of resource use indicate that indigenous societies retain an inchoate perception of the value of biodiversity—a value that transcends the instrumental value of natural resources (Deb 2014). Instances of restraints on profligate resource use, and the sanctification of selected components of the living world reflect the indigenous pre-industrial *Weltanschauung* which is facing the threat of disappearance with the advent of capitalization and commodification of nature. It is not too late to reorient national land use policies and state management systems to ensure security to all co-passengers of Spaceship Earth.

References

- Caras, R A 1996. *A Perfect Harmony*. Simon & Schuster: New York.
- Diamond J 2002. Evolution, consequences and future of plant and animal domestication. *Nature* 418: 700–707.
- Deb, D 2005. *Seeds of Tradition, Seeds of Future*. Research Foundation for Science Technology & Ecology: New Delhi.
- Deb, D 2007. *Sacred Groves of West Bengal: A Model of Community Forest Management*. University of East Anglia: Norwich.
- Deb, D 2009. *Beyond Developmentality: Constructing Inclusive Freedom and Sustainability*. Earthscan: London.
- Deb, D 2014. Folk rice varieties, traditional agricultural knowledge and food security, pp. 45-57. In: Claude Alvarez (ed.), *Multicultural Knowledge and the University*. Multiversity/ Citizens International: Penang, Malaysia.
- Deb, D and K C Malhotra 1997. Interface between biodiversity and tribal cultural heritage: a preliminary study. *Journal of Human Ecology* 8: 157-163.
- Deb, D and K C Malhotra 2001. Conservation ethos in local traditions: the West Bengal heritage. *Society and Natural Resources* 14: 711-724.
- Eisenstein, C 2011. *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift and Society in the Age of Transition*. Banyan Tree: Indore.
- Fromm, E 1973. *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston: New York.
- Huang, X, N Kurata, X Wei, Z Wang, A Wang, et al. 2012. A map of rice genome variation reveals the origin of cultivated rice. *Nature* 490: 497-501.
- Kellert, S R 1996. *The value of life*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Nelson, R 1993. Searching for the lost arrow: Physical and spiritual ecology in the hunter’s world, pp. 201-228. In: S. R. Kellert and E. O. Wilson (eds), *The biophilia hypothesis*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Oström, E 1990. *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shepard, P 1993. On animal friends, , 275–300. In: S .R. Kellert and E. O. Wilson (eds), *The biophilia hypothesis*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Shi, J and J Lai 2015. Patterns of genomic changes with crop domestication and breeding. *Curr. Opinion in Plant Biol.* 24:47–53.
- Spadoni, M and D Deb 2005. Ethnoecology of sacred groves in West Bengal, India, pp. 143-160, In: *Himalaya: Environment, Culture and Sustainable Development*. Proceedings of Seminar. Cooperazione Italiana/Zoological Museum: Rome