

'Human lives amidst nature: socio-cultural, historical and traditional systems of environmental conservation in India'

Introduction

Living in harmony with Nature has been an integral part of Indian culture. This has been abundantly reflected in a variety of traditional customs, religious beliefs, folklore, rituals, arts and crafts, and in the daily routines of the Indian people from time immemorial. India has been known for its rich tradition and environment is a crucial part of it and so our tradition has many environmental conservation systems.

In comparison to India's long tradition and cultural ethos of nature conservation, the current global concerns for sustainable development and conservation of natural resources span the two decades between the Stockholm Conference on Environment in 1992 and the United Nations Conference on Human Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

In India, most of the tribal communities are nature worshippers. Forest, rock, river, mountains are sacred to them. They believe in spirits that live in nature and natural surroundings and may be benevolent or malevolent for their life and livelihood. The quantum of importance given to the environment is not limited; they have given the environment as to the status of god as they worship the natural objects. They even protect the environment considering it as their responsibility towards their ancestors because they believe that their ancestors live in nature and reside in natural objects

Review of Literature

For the people of India, environmental conservation is not a new concept. Our ancient Vedic literature and Upanishads describe ecological and environmental values. The Atharva Veda solemnly recognizes and enduring allegiance of humankind to mother Earth.

Some of the fundamental principles of ecology-the interrelationship and interdependence of all life-were conceptualized in the Indian ethos and reflected in the ancient scriptural text, the Isopanisad, over 2000 years ago. It says,

“The whole universe together with its creatures belong to the Lord (Nature).....Let no one species encroach over the rights and privileges of other species. One can enjoy nature by giving up greed”.

In our ancient literature Khsiti (Soil), Jal (Water), Pawan (Energy), Gagan (Space) and Samira (air) are recognized as the basic resources of the earth. Our classical literature emphasized the message that resources should not be used wastefully but should be conserved. Kautilya in his famous treatise Arthashastra describes the world's first forest conservation and wildlife management programme.

Literature about the environment takes many forms, from fiction to non-fiction to poetry, pulling you to a specific place, reinforcing the interconnectedness between living beings and their environment. It can present scientific research as prose that lies at the intersection of science and the human experience within natural surroundings. Sometimes, it may just be an intimate ode to nature, such as a particularly tender poem by Rabindranath Tagore:

**“On the day when the lotus bloomed, alas, my mind was straying, and I knew it not/
My basket was empty and the flower remained unheeded.”**

However, despite the strong presence of nature in Indian literature, the influence of literature on environmental consciousness in India remains largely unexplored. Murali Sivaramakrishnan founded the India chapter of the global Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992, in order to meet a growing demand for exploring the role of literature in environmentalism. He points out that contemporary Indian literature concerning the natural environment has generally not provoked a reaction from the public, unlike in the West.

“Religious intolerance, political power-structures and their impact on imagination consume much of the public's attention. On the other hand, environmental writing has evolved only fairly recently so it could take some time to reach the forefront,” he says.

India has a rich body of regional literature on the environment, such as the work of Sambalpuri poet and writer Haldhar Nag, the Kannada poet Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre or the Malayali poet and activist Sugathakumari. Many of these works are an outcome of environmental movements of the '70s and '80s like the Chipko Movement, Silent Valley Protests and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, that struck the collective imagination of common people, especially those living in the heart of such strife. Unfortunately, a lot of such literature has remained restricted to local geographies. Sivaramakrishnan says,

“Much before Rachel Carson wrote Silent Spring , obscure writers in India had already been writing on environmental struggles in their native languages. Unfortunately, their writing was not in English and, hence, it was not widely available or discussed.”

Historical Systems of Environmental conservation in India:

Twenty-two centuries ago Emperor Ashoka decreed that it was a king's duty to protect wildlife and the trees of the forests. He got edicts inscribed on rocks and iron pillars throughout his kingdom, prohibiting the destruction of forests and the killing of various species of animals. This historical evidence, surviving to this day, is the first recorded measure on conservation anywhere in the world. In more recent historical times, Mughal Emperor Babur's memoirs (*Baburnama*), Guru Nanak's hymns on '*Baramasa*' (the seasons) depicting each month with a dominant bird image, and Emperor Jehangir's memoirs showing his keen interest in and study of wildlife provide fine illustrations of this Indian tradition.

The love for nature has been handed down the ages, becoming an integral part of the Indian psyche. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the martyrdom of the Bishnois in Khejarli village in Rajasthan. In 1730 AD the then ruler of a native state had ordered the khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) trees to be cut in order to bake lime for the construction of a fort. This sparked off a strong collective protest from the local Bishnoi community. 363 men and women, young and old, one after the other, placed their heads against the trees to prevent them being cut and were axed along with the trees. The ruler of the state was so moved by this sacrifice that he sought pardon from the people and issued an order that no green trees should in future be cut in the Bishnoi village. This happened over two centuries ago when the world had scarcely become conscious of ecological consequences of the reckless felling of trees. This legend is now celebrated by singers on stage and in the streets during the Tree Festival. (Man Mohan Singh,1990).

Case Studies

Mangalajodi - A village of Incredible transformation

Mangalajodi village is situated on the banks of Chilika lake in Odisha. Chilika lake is the largest brackish water lake in Asia. The lake is a rich ecosystem with large fishery resources. More than 1.5 lakh people living in 132 villages near the lake depend on it for livelihood. Chilika lake is the largest ground for migratory birds in India. Nearly 160 species of birds come here in the migratory season. These birds are from very far areas like Aral Sea, Mongolia, Caspian Sea, Himalayas etc.

In every winter thousands of birds come to Mangalajodi. The villagers felt this as a disturbance as the noisy birds interrupted their sleep and spoiled their place with shit. Because of this villagers started killing these birds by feeding them with small fish and water lily pods filled with deadly poison. Many birds were dead this way and were ready for meat markets. Gradually nets, traps and guns were also used. Bird meat was famous and was regularly sold. Many poachers earned a good amount of money. Local habits and political involvement caused the wildlife officials not to intervene. Later a poison called Furatin became a famous weapon and birds were killed in monstrous

numbers. This all happened up until the mid-90s. In 1997, an NGO called Wild Orissa noticed the decline and began a mission in the village.



Wild Orissa's Nandakishore Bhujabal led the initiative and began listening to the villagers, discussing their sorrows and joys, forging friendships, and, in time, he was being trusted and respected as a benevolent patriarch by the hardened poachers. He gradually explained to the villagers the effects of their actions on the ecosystem.

Collectively going to a temple and pledging in front of the god before starting something in the village has been a tradition in the village. Bhujbal's persistence gradually won over the rest of the poachers, and in a local temple, they pledged against killing their winged guests. He told the villagers that they can get good livelihood with eco-tourism and this respectable lifestyle, where they weren't treated like thieves and earned a legitimate income from ecotourism appealed to them. Soon the villagers stopped hunting and killing the birds and the village became a tourist spot. The birds have noticed the transformation in Mangalajodi too: over the years, the migratory bird population has grown from 5,000 to 3,00,000 per year.

Yanadi-An Inspiration on Preserving Indegineous Cultures

The Yanadis live physically, socially, and metaphorically on the fringes, creating their lifeworld through practices that involve gathering forest products such as honey, tubers, medicinal herbs, and plant parts. They are socially marginalized and are discriminated against based on the class and caste hierarchies embedded in the structural and social norms adopted by a significant proportion of the population in India.

We used annual reports published by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department (2013, 2014) to understand the state's representations and management of Reserve Forests in the study area. These reports are for Andhra Pradesh state prior to its bifurcation, and the data used here remain unaffected. Informal discussions with rural communities and several Forest Department staff in 2014 and 2015 helped contextualize the official narrative. (Refer to Point 8 in the Links to Conceptual Themes for Further Reference.)

Yanadi identity clearly revolves around the forests and, in turn, is shaped by them. The Yanadis' relationship with forests goes beyond extracting resources to survive. Rather, it is tangled with memory, customary practices, and an intimacy that they explain through terms such as the forest is "a mother", "the womb", or "home". Traditionally, they worship deities who are believed to be forest protectors. Every family is associated with a specific gothram of a plant or animal they should never use, which works toward regulating consumption and over-extraction of a species.

The Yanadis have many beliefs and festivals connected to the forest; they worship some plants considered sacred (e.g., *Shorea roxburghii*, *Cassia auriculata*, *Ocimum sanctum*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Chomelia asiatica*, and *Boswelvia serrata*) and make ceremonial visits to shrines and sacred spots to show respect to nature and their deceased ancestors. An annual festival is organized to worship their god Katavarajulu, the forest protector. Every community worships and undertakes prayers to seek blessings for the forests, rather than for themselves. According to the community, "If the forests are blessed, the community will be blessed." Family names are associated with different landscapes or forests, connecting the people with their place of origin. The community believes that they belong to the area where their ancestors are buried, which is usually in and around the Reserve Forests.

Links to Conceptual Themes

1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334548611_History_of_Environmental_Conservation_Ancient_and_Medieval_Periods
2. <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing>
3. <http://ccrtindia.gov.in/readingroom/nscd/ch/ch11.php#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20fines%20examples,God%2C%20protected%2C%20and%20worshipped>
4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340426988_Conservation_of_Environment_through_Traditional_Knowledge_and_Wisdom_with_Special_Reference_to_Beliefs_and_Practices_in_Tribal_India_An_Overview
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservation_in_India
6. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nindia.2021.40>
7. <https://legaldesire.com/evolution-of-environmental-law-and-policies-in-india/>
8. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nQiQda7uHNrmxGybOHm0dfB39s4hzEh-/view?usp=sharing>
9. [Mangalajodi — A Village Of Bird Protectors In Orissa | Conservation India](#)
10. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/cover/taking-nature-out-of-literary-margins/article24054650.ece>
11. <https://sgtuniversity.ac.in/blogs/the-environment-in-ancient-literature/>