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Caring for Mother Earth:

Ecology and Folk Religions of India

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Abstract: In this age of post-modernity and post-development, humans have finally come to realize that the future of humanity and the future of the environment are intrinsically, inseparably and indefinitely related to each other. But the folk and indigenous cultures have always believed in this inalienable relationship and manifested it through their religious and symbolic schemes. This essay endeavours to delve into their religious universe by deploying their frames of conceptualisation and their meaning-schemes of strategic action that reveal their collective self's integration with the natural environment. It does this by engaging in a discussion on various questions and topics such as why study "religion" for ecology?, The relationship between humans and nature, conservation of nature in folk religions, folk ritual realm as a form of indigenous environmentalism, ecological concerns in folk world-view, shaman: an ecologist?, and the role of religion in the conflictual relationship between development and ecology.

While celebrating the sovereignty of the common folk in India, the essay demonstrates how religion can play a vital role in the conservation of endandgered bioregions through the folk religious forms and imaginative acts like 'Ganv' and 'Sacred Grove'— which are characterized by their regional discursive formation. It further shows how they are closely related to the natural environment and the human habitat of

the place. While modern environmental studies make us increasingly aware of nature's ability to influence and affect human lives, such a truth has always been part of the heritage of folk world-view. It describes religious beliefs and practices as cultural-ecological adaptations that are systemically involved in the maintenance of human ecosystems. It transmits habits, and attitudes of mind to succeeding generations, thereby guaranteeing the perpetuation of an ecologically sustainable religious world-view. Folk religions and their rituals basically aim at generating, maintaining, preserving and upholding a world-view that sees a fundamental unity between god, nature and humans. It is built on a philosophy that these different dimensions can affect each other, influence each other, and take care of each other. By making nature as an entity with power and by endowing on its objects such trees, hills and waters varying degrees of power, the Indian folk-world-view has constructed nature and its parts as manifestations of diving power, *shakti*. Thus it has made humans respect nature, while modernity has reduced nature and its various parts to 'powerless' objects.

The article further argues that folk religion needs to be understood as an interface between development and ecology. It also shows that the indigenous or folk forms of religious resources can be both prophetic and transformative as well as conservative and constraining.

Key Words: The Indigenous People, Imaginative Acts, Rituals, Ecology, Development and Folk Religions of India.

1. Introduction

We are on the threshold of a new era, witnessing unprecedented emergence of new trends and new debates which call for rethinking in different fields. As regards modernity, on the one hand, there is a growing awareness that "we can and we should leave modernity behind—in fact, we must if we are to avoid destroying ourselves and most of the life on our planet."[1] On the other hand, there develops among modern human beings an increasing appreciation for the wisdom of traditional societies "as we realize that, while they (indigenous cultures) have endured *for thousands of years*, the

existence of modern civilization, by contrast, seems doubtful even for *another century*"[2]

One of the things that makes the continuation of the present as grim and precarious is the question about the future of the natural environment. While such eco-concerns of the modern human beings emerge from a belief that the future of humanity and the future of the environment are intrinsically, inseparably and indefinitely related to each other, the folk and indigenous cultures have always believed in this inalienable relationship and manifested it through their religious and symbolic schemes. This paper endeavours to delve into their religious universe by deploying their frames of conceptualisations and the meaning-schemes of their strategic action of integration with the natural environment. It does not propose a return to the pre-modern, rather it highlights the folk-sensibility towards the environment and their schemes of practice-oriented engagement with the nature.

2. Clarification of Terms

The two key terms that are central to this paper, as we see in the title, are *ecology* and *folk religion*. Firstly, the very meaning of the term 'Ecology' in relation to indigenous/folk religion has to be contested and clarified. This is because 'ecology' emerged as a "hindsight" concept after the modernization project came on the scene in human history. Here, it referred to a science studying the interrelationships of organisms in bio-systems, after having done enough damage to the mother earth. But concern for the mother earth has always been constitutive of the people's scheme of things, and 'ecological concerns' always remained as unarticulated conceptual referent for human-earth interactions. The indigenous peoples have always had their own way of imagining, reasoning and interacting with the natural world and the eco-systems in their indigenous settings since time immemorial. Their discursive and non-discursive practices can very well point out to the conceptualisation and application of alternative epistemologies to western classical, medieval, enlightenment, postmodern modes of rational analysis.[3] Secondly, as regards *folk religions*, the term is used to refer to the whole realm of the symbolic religious universe

of the agrarian rural folk that encompasses their beliefs, practices, myths, symbols and rituals. Each folk religious form is characterized by its regional discursive formation, and it is closely related to the natural environment and the human habitat of the place.

3. A Methodological Note

One of the important schools which provided the theoretical framework to understand the relationship between pre-modern religions and ecology is the Cultural Ecological School. It explains religious beliefs and practices as cultural-ecological adaptations that are systemically involved in the maintenance of human ecosystems. It explains how cultures historically develop patterns of internal and external adjustments and adaptations to food environments.[4]

During the middle of twentieth century, cultural-ecological theories acquired significance through the writings of Leslie White (1900-1975) and Julian Steward (1902-1972). Marvin Harris and Roy Rappaport are the important contemporary American anthropologists who have attempted to apply cultural-ecological theory to explain religious beliefs and behaviour. Rappaport, who made a study on the pig-raising community in New Guinea, shows in his book, *Pigs for the Ancestors,* how ritual links the various subsystems to maintain or regulate the total ecosystem's equilibrium. Here ritual is linked to factors such as welfare, protein requirements of the community, and land use. It functions as a regulatory mechanism and a protective device.

The cultural ecology, though, has gone well beyond the earlier evolutionary theories, it is however seen as inadequate because "the foundational studies in cultural ecology suggested a closed system accommodating internal and external pressures as the religious ideal"[5] and it fails to see the role of resistance played by the indigenous religions in confronting the external pressures of market economy.

Given the diversity of indigenous environmental knowledge within and between cultures, the prominent issues that need to be addressed in the relationship between ecology and folk (indigenous) religion are the sovereignty of indigenous peoples and the conservation of their respective endangered bioregions with their animals and plant habitats. From the methodological point of view,

as Grim notes, these concerns cannot be covered only by formalist rational patterns. We have to involve 'the imaginative act' as a significant cognitive arena for the interpretation of indigenous life.[6] The questions posed here regarding the indigenous patterns of thinking regarding a place and its sovereignty vie with the conceptual subtleties and power relations posed by the contemporary intellectual scene.[7] The ways the traditional environmental knowledge relates to animal-plant-mineral life cannot be that easily comprehended by contemporary "eco-management."[8] Hence we need new ways of seeing and understanding the environmental issues like 'imaginative acts'. And for our paper we will focus on two such imaginative acts of the Indian folk world-view. They are: The concepts of "Ganv" and "Sacred Grove."

4. Two Imaginative Acts

a. The Ganv

In most of the Indian villages, the *Ganv*[9] stands for the community which is constituted by the land (*Ganv*), the people (*Ganvkar*) and the *Devi* (the god/goddess). The *Ganv devi* in Konkan region is called *Devi – Sateri,* the anthill deity that emerges from the land. She was there before anybody came. She is a person in several very concrete ways. She is bathed and fed daily. She is vivified through a ritual called *Pratishthana* and maintained in this state for the sake of the *Ganv.* There is an intimate relationship between the *Ganvdevi, Ganvkari* and the *Ganv* (the land). All three are made of the same substance and attributes. The *Devi* is the icon of the *Ganv.* She is the *Ganv*. She does not represent the *Ganv*. People and Land *belong to* the *Devi.*[10]

Ganv always has ritual and territorial boundaries and may not be in possession of any land. There have always been and continue to be *Ganvkars* who do not own land. The term *Gavnkar* comes from *Ganv* + '*karne*' (radical of the verb 'to do', 'to perform'). The *Ganvkars* are those who do or make the *Ganv* by their dedicated work in the land. The meeting of the *Ganvkars* is known as *Ganvpon* = 'Village-ness' or 'Village-osity.' The *Ganv* is constituted and generated through ritual and symbolic performance of its *Ganvpon.*

The *Ganv* is a dynamic entity and it is continuously *generated* through the ritual harmony between the deity, the territory and the people.[11] The deity is sovereign: the centre of moral and social obligations and the authority to command and redistribute economic and social and political resources. Issues of rank, honour and authority associated with the deity have repercussion on every aspect of social and political life. The *myth* (as a profound truth) of the *Ganvpon* constitutes and continually reproduces the *Ganv*, its multifarious beings, both ritually and materially.

Thus the imaginative act of '*Ganv*" is very crucial to the very understanding and functioning of village life in most of the villages in India. This view of the *Ganv* has enormous implications for conservation of the environment. People have tremendous respect for the land, and for the flora and fauna in it. They cannot alienate, eliminate and manipulate any of them as they wish. Since the land and the enviornemt is very much part of identity of the village, they constitute the collective self of the villagers. The natural environment is not an object to be tampered with, but part and parcel of the subjectivity of the *Ganv.*

b. The Sacred Groves

If the *Ganv* is the imaginative act which operates as a mechanism of protection of the natural environment in the plains, another imaginative act namely, the *Sacred Groves,* does the same function but mostly on the hills and mountains. Sacred groves are patches of forest dedicated to local deities. They vary in nomenclature, size and expanse. They vary from a clump of trees to large tracts of forests with a residing deity. They are unique and distributed all over India. They are seventeen thousand known sacred groves in different geographical regions and forest types of India. These protected forest patches—dedicated to gods and goddesses— have survived the axe of development, political turmoil and natural calamities because of the conservation ethics coupled with taboos and traditions. Hence, in the present context "sacred groves" are not merely a patches of forest, but are islands in desolated landscape. They represent the past status of vegetation and biotic as well as abiotic diversity of the region. Annual ritual in the sacred groves often take the form of a

blood sacrifice. The ritual is performed on behalf of and for the welfare of the society. There are beliefs and taboos associated with the Sacred Groves. Sanctity of the forests is maintained for the sake of collectivity which helped in maintaining the ecological conditions of the environment.

The above two imaginative acts reveal the fact that the common folk live their life in tune with the principle of unity of life. Their notions of gods, land, plants and animals etc. are in consonance with the notions of harmony, inter-connectedness and sacredness of all living things enfolded in the loving arms of mother nature. Thus the village/hill folk in India rightly understand the value of environment, the need to preserve the ecological balance, and the need to practise sustainable life-styles in order to survive. And they manifest and maintain these eco-friendly value systems through their imaginative acts such as *Ganv* and *Sacred Groves*. Having discussed the concrete phenomena in the sub-continent cultural soil, let us move on to theorise on folk religions and its role in the preservation of nature.

5. The Significance of "Religion" in Ecology

To begin our inquiry, let us find out why the study of religious beliefs and practices should acquire importance in the ecological perspectives. To answer this question, we must, first of all, note that religious beliefs/practices and the earth's ecology are inextricably linked, and organically related.[12] Human beliefs about nature are the distinctive contribution of the human species to ecology itself. Secondly, some of the religious rituals, especially the agrarian folk rituals, fashion human relations with the nature, and transmit habits of practice and attitudes of mind to succeeding generations, thereby guaranteeing the perpetuation of the ecologically-oriented religious world-view. "Religious world-views propel communities into the world with fundamental predispositions toward it because such religious world-views are primordial, all-encompassing, and unique."[13] Religious perspectives are *primordial* because they probe behind the secondary appearance to focus human attention on realities of the first order, life at its source. Religious worldviews are *all-encompassing* because they fully absorb the natural world

within them, thereby providing human beings "both a view of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of their own ironic position as the beings in the cosmos who possess the capacity for symbolic thought: the part that contains the whole—or at least the picture of the whole—within itself."[14] Finally religious world-views are *unique* because only religious perspectives enable human beings to evaluate the world of nature in terms distinct from all else. "[T]he natural world is evaluated in terms consonant with human beings' own distinctive (religious and imaginative) nature in the world, thus grounding a self-conscious relationship and a role with limits and responsibilities."[15] We will understand ecology better when we understand the religions that form the rich soil of memory and practice, belief and relationships with mother earth. The knowledge of religious views about nature will help us reappraise our ways and reorient ourselves toward the sources and resources of life.

Before we proceed further, we have to add a footnote here, namely the above mentioned characteristics of religion resonate more with the folk/indigenous religions than with the world religions, because the former are fundamentally earth-bound while the latter claim to be more universal, not tied down to any particular geographical or socio-economic context. Further it is the realm of folk rituals, and not of the doctrines or dogmas, that effectively translates these features into human actions and embody them in a particular local context. Nevertheless, environmental studies have not adequately explored the role of religions, especially folk religions, in sustaining ecology. By leaving out religion, they leave unprobed essential wellsprings of human motivation and concern that shape the world.

6. Folk Ritual Realm as a Form of Indigenous Environmentalism

One cannot claim that folk rituals basically *originated* to preserve environment. However, one of the functions of folk religious rituals in the agrarian or costal setting is to tackle the threats and deal with the hazards that endanger the agricultural land or the sea, and to take care of the environment. The agrarian folk rituals, which often emerge out of agricultural concerns, are in fact a reflection of people's keen interest in the maintenance of agriculture. Similarly the folk

rituals of the fishermen are often the display of their concern for mother sea. These rituals are genius and innovative mechanisms and strategies by which environment is cared for and its resources are effectively managed. E.N Anderson, who has documented the indigenous practices with impressive details, notes that "All traditional (indigenous) societies that have succeeded in managing resources well, over time, have done it in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management."[16] He notes, in various case studies, how ecological wisdom is embedded in myths, symbols, rituals and cosmologies of these people.

Folk rituals also instill a sense of fear among the folk, which leads them eventually to venerate and thus protect nature. Folk religions make sure that familiarity with nature obtained through the agro-based economic activities does not breed contempt for the environment. By instilling among the members of the ritual community a strong sense of veneration toward nature, the rituals stop the folk from destroying the environment according to their whims and fancies. Thus they ensure the non-exploitation and protection of nature.

Further, various folk religious rituals performed throughout the year accompany changes in the seasons and subsequently in nature. They commemorate the gifts of the past that nature has provided to human beings in the previous season, and celebrate the advent of new seasons with a hope for the future. These rituals open up the minds and hearts of human beings to the rhythms of nature, and enhance the human sensitivity for the environment by synchronizing their celebrations with the changes in the seasons. For the famers, fishermen and the nomadic shepherds, it is the change in the seasons that brings about the change in the quality of their life. The basic economic activities of human beings cannot defy the logic of nature and cannot go against the rhythmic cycles of nature. It is nature which determines when humans can sow, plough, cultivate and reap in the field or fish in the sea or take their sheep for grazing. Thus nature dictates to humans when they can work, and how they can work; when they can rest and relax. This indicates the process of synchronization of human life with the nature, a far cry for the situation of modern humans. Folk religious rituals such as Bihu in

Assam or Pongal in Tamilnadu play a major role in making humans realize the inalienable relationship between nature and humans and the inevitable dependency of humans on nature for their destiny. Thus such various folk religious rituals operate as mediating categories that bring about the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Besides, these rituals reinforce the already existing folk world-view which brings about a holistic view of the reality around them where everything is interconnected and interdependent. By the performance of rituals, they affirm and confirm their indigenous world-view, where environment is viewed as part of their third space[17], a lived social space, not a mere first space (geographical space)—an understating of which has led to the commodification of nature in the modernization project. By doing this, folk religions have generated among the rural village folk, a sense of responsibility towards nature. Folk religions and their rituals basically aim at generating, maintaining, preserving and upholding a world-view that sees a fundamental unity between god, nature and humans. It is built on a philosophy that these different dimensions can affect each other, influence each other, and take care of each other. By making nature an entity with power and by endowing on its objects (such as trees, hills and waters) varying degrees of power, the Indian folk-world-view has constructed nature and its parts as manifestations of divine power, Œakti.

The scheme of the hierarchy of powerful beings, wherein each being with its share of power is capable of influencing the other, is in fact an innovative design that reflects the fundamental relation between humans and the nature (environment) as a two—way process of control. It does not place human beings at the helm of creation with their power of reason. Rather, it puts them as one among many in the taxonomy of powerful beings. It shows that it is not the case that humans alone can control and influence nature, but nature and its objects can also influence and control humans. While both Abbot (1932) and Susan Wadley (1985) have demonstrated the existence of such belief systems among the Hindus, the former has also shown how such beliefs are prevalent among Muslims in India. Francis Jayapathy (1999) and P.T. Mathew (2001) have shown how powerful

beings are effective agents in the life-worlds of Mukkuva Catholics too.

Thus folk religious practices have made humans respect nature, while modernity has reduced nature and its various parts to 'powerless' objects. Through its repertoire of rituals, folk religion embeds the *'deep time'*[18] metaphors of interconnectedness of the universe in the collective unconscious of the cultural members. It teaches them that one aspect of reality can harm or help, make or break another dimension of reality. The project of 'modernity' has forgotten this dimension of 'inter-connectedness' as Heidegger pointed out[19].

However, folk beliefs and rituals are often seen by the moderns as irrational and superstitious. Does it mean that we have to throw out folk rituals totally? Perhaps we need not. Because folk religions are justified and right in telling us *that* different dimensions of reality can affect each other, but perhaps they are not scientifically well founded (hence appear to be at fault) in their understanding of *how* they can affect each other and *how* they can be related to in the process of ritualisation. Likewise, some scholars have highlighted the inadequacy of science to understand the totality of the universe and its nitty-gritty which local forms of knowledge believe in.

> Science, with its quantum mechanics methods.. can never address the universe as a whole; and it certainly can never adequately describe the holism of indigenous knowledge and belief. ....Technology has used the banner of scientific "objectivity" to mask the moral and ethical issues that emerge from such a functionalist, anthropocentric philosophy[20]

7. Ecological Concerns in the Folk World-view

Most cosmologies of the folk world-view seek to achieve harmony and equilibrium among the components of the cosmos. A wide range of their activities, both economic and non-economic, aim at providing a "balance for well-being of all" through relationships not only among people, but also between nature and deity as it is implied in the case of the two imaginative acts, the *Ganv* and the *Sacred Grove*. All their activities are synchronized in

such a way that they become an inseparable part of life where the highest value in their world-view is harmony with the earth and nature. "Most folk traditions recognize linkages between health, diet, properties of different foods and medicinal plants, and horticultural/ natural resource management practices—all within a highly articulated cosmological/social context."[21]

Now folk religions translate this world-view into action by bringing the whole of nature into the sphere of moral and ethical concern, and demands humility and respect toward living nature in return for its gifts of sustenance and shelter. It is an ancient, venerable way of seeing, based on countless generations of intimate experiences with the local environment. Our modern age with the rise of rationality and advancements in science is marked by an inexorable trend towards the abandonment of this once universal understanding of nature, and a loss of the 'sense of the sacred' in nature. The study of the relationship between indigenous/folk religions and ecology has to be understood as "a part of a vital and growing effort to arrest this sweeping pattern of change and loss.... a powerful testament to the environmental wisdom braided through traditional cultures on every inhabited continent."[22] The study will indicate that "spiritual beliefs are combined with sophisticated ecological knowledge to foster carefully managed, sustainable uses of the environment."[23]

The folk world-view and its local knowledge embraces information about location, movements, and other factors explaining spatial patterns and timing in the ecosystem, including the sequence of events and cycles of seasons. Direct links with the land, the sea or the mountains are fundamental, and obligations to maintain those connections form the core of individual and group identity.[24]

The basic principles of these indigenous/folk world-views are contained, more often than not, in bodies of oral literature passed down from ancient times. The modern mind tends to trivialize these cultural traditions by regarding them as mere human inventions, rather than honouring them as sacred truths. They should not be looked at as wonderful creative fantasies or analysed merely as dreamlike fictional tales that undergrid systems of irrational beliefs and values. Such approaches vastly underestimate the power and significance of the traditional stories and deny their due place in

their power of evocation of the sense of the sacred and the reverence that humans must have towards nature. This moves our discussion to the relationship between humans and nature, which is an important concern in ecological studies.

8. The Relationship between Humans and Nature

The relationship between humans and nature—displayed at a particular point of time through a particular human practice be it scientific or religious—has to be located in a continuum characterized by two poles: the *pole of care*, consisting of positive attitudes of wonder, respect and concern, that aims at integration of humans with nature; and the *pole of exploitation*, consisting of negative attitudes of greed accumulation, utilitarianism and a kind of neglect, which result in alienating humans from nature. While religion with its ethics lays emphasis on the 'care' side, modern science, with its lack of ethical principles (which is the case more often than not), belongs more to the pole of exploitation. But not all scientific practices are meant to exploit nature with a utilitarian agenda and alienate humans from nature. Some of science's practices definitely belong to the other side of the continuum. A considerable amount of scientific theories and discoveries, such as the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, have created a sense of awe, wonder and respect towards nature and the cosmos. They have not only revealed the incomprehensible nature of reality but have also exposed the fragility and incapacity of the human mind to grasp nature in its entirety. Thus it has struck a big blow to the positivistic litany of triumphalism over nature. However, on the whole, science and technology bisects, divides and exploits nature *at the level of application.*

On the contrary, religion, by and large, endeavours at harmonization of human lives with nature. Therefore it belongs to the 'care' pole. No doubt, major religions like Hinduism make people perceive and accept nature as parts of god's creation or part of divine self (*Brahman*). But the official version of universal religions, such as Christianity or Islam, do not offer local conceptual constructs or indigenous cultural categories of rituals, myths etc.. by which people can embody their beliefs into geographically-related meaningful

actions. But this is done by folk religions. Folk religions offer perspectives and practices towards the care of nature which are closely related to the soil, flora and fauna. Through folk ritual practices people remember, confirm and affirm their symbiotic relationship with nature. Folk religions, as one of the components of culture and cultural patterns, can function at the pragmatic level[25] as an effective and vibrant ideology. At that level, it operates not only as a "historically created system of meaning in terms of which we form, order, point and direct our lives," as Clifford Geertz[26] notes, but it also brings about an effective and positive relationship between humans and nature. This is not to deny the element of magic in the folk religious realm which reveals an exploitative tendency towards nature. Similarly among classical religions too, we find a negative tendency towards nature in concepts such as *mâyâ* in Hinduism or in the famous Greco-Christian dichotomy between the sacred and the profane leading to the hierarchisation of the sacred over the profane, mind over body, the spiritual over the corporeal, and humans over nature.

9. Conservation of Nature in Folk Religions

Another way by which folk/indigenous religions contribute to ecology is through their emphasis on 'conservation of nature.' Modern humans have to learn about the folk's intricate knowledge of ecology, religiously and empirically based conservation ethic and sustained practices (like the sacred groves of India). The indigenous people apply their ethic in their various economic activities, agricultural or otherwise. Conservation is a pervasive element in the common woman/man's sustenance of life, governing her/his entire relationship with the natural world. Conservation of nature is not a matter of great concern for major religions such Christianity, Islam etc... either at the conceptual level or at the level of performance of rituals. Folk rituals, on the contrary lay great emphasis on the 'conservation of nature.' The folk religious rituals, such as *Vettai* (ritual hunt) in Tamilnadu, and other rituals for the sake of good rain or a good crop etc., do reinforce the idea that the folk care for the nature and conserve its resources. What is obvious in all these conservation practices and religiously based environmental ethics is

the fact that stewardship of the environment is prevalent more among the folk/indigenous people all over the world than among the modern humans. Accordingly, this indicates that the local forms of folk/ indigenous religions, much more than the universalizing world religions of modern human beings, effectively embrace humanity and nature as one.

Furthermore, it is to be noted that people view their knowledge about conservation and management practices as emanating from a spiritual base as mentioned earlier. All creation is sacred, and the sacred and the secular are inseparable. Their relationship with fellow human beings and with the environment is both physical and spiritual. "The unseen is as much part of reality as that which is seen—the spiritual is as much part of reality as the material. In fact, there is a complementary relationship between the two, with the spiritual being more powerful than the material.... And in nature, behind visible objects lie essences, or powers, which constitute the true nature of those objects"[27] The many 'dimensions' of nature for indigenous peoples become an extension, not merely of the physical world, but of human society. The modern human being may find this difficult to understand, as in the modern era, the extension of self is through 'hard technology', hence man-made not naturally given.

10. Shaman: An Ecologist?

The shamans, the key figures in the folk religious realm, function as effective ecologists, in the sense that they are peculiarly aware of nature's organizing principles. They are deeply attuned to nature and extremely attentive to its dynamics, which become signs for their interpretation, heralding the advent of new situations. They claim to have learnt to listen to the plant's talk, and to confer with the plant spirits in order to heal. Often, these communications come through the transformative powers of altered states or trances. They are able to see 'the links between life, land, and society' identified as a "Sacred Balance" by some thinkers.[28]

During the folk rituals, the shamans extol the importance of plants and animals as keys to the health energies of the human community. They instill a sense of respect for their overall role in the socio-ecological balance. They know that the future well-being of the

community is dependent upon plants and animals and the forces of nature. They have perceived the innate power of the material world, with its flora and fauna, to harm or to enhance life on earth. Their indigenous systems of knowledge have taught them that plants and the different manifestations of nature have both curative and destructive powers (can cause blindness, insanity, and even death). Modern science and the rational human mind may not be able to understand the workings of shamans and the rationale of their thinking processes. Posey, based on his field experiences of the shamans among the Kayapo peoples of Brazil, attempts to highlight "the notional and mythic character of indigenous environmental knowledge and the manner in which those ways of knowing are largely unavailable to Western categories of linear, historical analysis."[29] This paper will be incomplete if we do not deliberate on the question of the role of folk religion in the relationship between the developmental process and ecology.

11. Folk Religion as an Interface between Development and Ecology

Living in the age of globalisation and in the post-modern era of identity assertion of 'differences', and going beyond cultural ecology as noted earlier, we need to take into account the contestations and negotiations of the indigenous communities with the process of modernization or globalization. At this juncture, we need to explore the roles of indigenous religions in their efforts to maintain a spiritual balance with larger cosmological forces while creatively accommodating current environmental, social, economic, and political changes. John Grim takes note of the small-scale native communities like Andeans who, through the insights of elders and the revelations of dreamers and visionaries, manage acceptable forms of modernization, mount resistance to development schemes in which they have no voice.[30]

With the increasing globalization of capitalist economics in the late twentieth century, indigenous peoples have come under intense pressures to assimilate themselves into mainstream cultures and to open their homelands for resource exploitation. However, indigenous peoples have alternative development models that value homelands

very differently from the capitalist sustainability models. They embody alternative models of sustainable life, even though the natives use those lands and living beings for food, habitat, and trade. Such alternative models of sustainability are most boldly demonstrated in their symbolic and religious realm. Besides, they also appropriate the religious realm for the confrontation with outside forces and contestation of their powers. The emergence of phenomena such as the "Cargo Cults" of the Pacific region, the "Ghost Dance" of the North American plains or the "Mau-Mau" uprisings of East Asia, and the Devî movement in North India are all social movements which manifest strong religious expressions whose inner dynamics is connected deeply to the local ecology.

The effort to subvert indigenous 'lifeways'[31] by development agendas is the subject of a broad-based analysis called political ecology.[32] The perspective is much more receptive to considering indigenous religions and other cultural knowledge systems as contributing more to production than earlier Marxist-oriented political economy analyses conceded.[33] The focus here is on the imaginative act (closely connected to indigenous /folk religions), which is present in indigenous societies, whereby local environments become central to ethnic identity. Richard Peet and Michael Watts call this imaginative act as "environmental imaginary," which means a way of *imaging* nature, including visions of those forms of social and individual practice which are ethically proper and morally right with regard to a particular natural environment. Environmental imaginaries are frequently, indeed usually, expressed in abstract, mystical, and spiritual lexicons, and typically developed through regional discursive formations. In this line, they propose a programme of praxis, called *Liberation Ecology,* which should study the processes by which environmental imageries are formed, contested, and practised in the course of specific developments of political and economic structures. Liberation ecology would look at nature, environment and place as the *source* of thinking, reasoning, and imagining.[34]

12. Conclusion

This paper reveals that the study of folk/indigenous religions can enable us to identify resources from within a particular culture for a more ecologically sound cosmology and environmentally supportive ethics, as these religions can provide the transforming energies for the ethical practices to protect endangered ecosystems, threatened species and diminishing resources. It shows that the indigenous or folk forms of religious resources can be both prophetic and transformative as well as conserving and constraining.

Before I conclude this paper, let me add a note on its limitation. It is impossible to map the complex nature of the relationship between ecology and folk/indigenous religions in a few pages. A lot more needs to be explored with regard to the trajectories of the dynamic relationship between these two components. What is missing in this essay is an extensive concrete example of such relationships in the Indian context. While such a limited approach widens the theoretical scope of the arguments for the application, it lacks concrete context-based deliberations. Perhaps, we need more field-based studies from the viewpoint of political ecology to investigate the emerging patterns of relationship between folk religion and ecology in the context of the globalization process rapidly affecting the subcontinent.

Notes

1. GRIFFIN, 'Introduction to SUNY Series', vii.
2. Ibid.
3. GRIM, 'Introduction', xxxviii-xxxix.
4. PANDIAN, *Culture, Religion and the Sacred Self.*
5. GRIM, 'Introduction', xxxv.
6. GRIM, 'Introduction'.
7. Ibid.
8. GRIM, 'Introduction', liii.
9. The term *Ganv* is used for villages in north India while the term *Gramam* is used in South India.
10. This insightful idea of *Ganv* was shared by Prof. Alito Sequeira in his talk on "The Troubled Land: Religion and Deep Ecology" in a nation seminar

on *Science-Religion Dialogue and Ecological Concerns* at Goa from 10th to 11th of March, 2007.

11. FULLER in his famous book also shares the same view. See FULLER, *The Camphor Flame*, 128.
12. SULLIVAN, 'Preface', xi.
13. Ibid., xi-xii.
14. Ibid., xii.
15. Ibid., xii.
16. ANDERSON, *Ecologies of the Heart*, 166.
17. SOJA in his book *Postmodern Geography* (See pages 74-85) refers to the third space is as lived space. It is created by social practice and it is known by experience. Third space, lived space in the case of oral/segementray societies, is produced through living in the first space. It is constructed through material practices such as hunting, gathering, pasturing, farming, wandering, and the like.
18. Dusan BORIC in his article 'Deep Time Metaphor' uses the term 'deep time' to describe the cultural attitudes and practices that relate to the past through retrospection and deepening temporal surface. It refers to the memory of the past envisaged as a non-linear temporal network where objects, ideas and material fragments of memory are disseminated in multidimensional time and space.
19. LOVITT, *The Question Concerning Technology.*
20. POSEY, 'Intellectual Property Rights', 5.
21. Ibid., 4.
22. NELSON, 'Environmental Wisdom', lx.
23. Ibid.
24. POSEY, 'Intellectual Property Rights', 4.
25. Michael AMALADOSS in his article on "Ecology and Culture" (See pages 45-47)speaks of religion's mediating role between culture and nature
26. GREETZ, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 52.
27. POSEY, 'Intellectual Property Rights', 4.
28. David SUZUKI and Peter KNUDTSON hold such a view. See SUZUKI, *Wisdom of the Elders.*
29. GRIM, 'Introduction', xliv.
30. Ibid., xxxv-vi.
31. 'Lifeways' refer to the remarkable diverse ways of a central, seamless organizing orientation of the indigenous peoples, and stresses on the

interrelatedness of diverse aspects of individuals, community, and natural life and maintains a balance or harmony between them. Each particular lifeway is an ongoing, creative practice that is simultaneously rational, affective, intentional and ethical.

32. The Anthropologist Eric Wolf introduced the expression, 'political ecology' in 1972. Both anthrogplogists and geographers have shown interest in this filed, which is growing in the contemporary world. Several journals started by activists carry the title 'Political Ecology' in Germany, Mexico, France, Austria, Italy and in other countries since the 1980s and early 1990s. See MARTINEZ-ALIER, *Environmentalism of the Poor,* page 71.
33. GRIM, 'Introduction', xl.
34. PEET and WATTS, *Liberation Ecologies*, 263.

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