

## The Nature-Culture question

Discussing the role of tradition and religion in the mediation of resource use

Societies in the Indian subcontinent has seen multiple cases of indigenous societies practicing measures in a manner such that natural resource use in their vicinity has been moderated and/or left in a pristine form. This piece will discuss a few such cases found in India, and an analysis will be done on the question of whether these measures taken by the local societies was a voluntary step towards conservation of resources and the balance of the system or the positive outcome was just a plain correlation and nothing else.

### ***Aryans & the Jangala:***

The word *Jangal* in Urdu and locally spoken languages refers to a full-fledged forest, with dense tree-dominated cover, whereas *Jangala* in Sanskrit refers to ‘arid, sparingly grown with trees and plants’, representing a Savannah. Professor Michael R. Dove tries to draw a relation between the two, by looking into studies done on certain regions of Indo-Pakistan.

The Burani region of Pakistan is an arid tropical thorn forest, which had a record of housing wildlife such as the Asian elephant, the rhinoceros and lion in the distant past. According to *The Laws of Manu*, the King must reside in a dryland, where crops are in plenty, the area is dominated by Aryans and free from disorders. As per Zimmermann’s research, the Jangala was located in the Indus River Valley, was arid, but fertile enough to support agriculture with an open-bush savannah vegetation.

Zimmerman’s study led him to the conclusion that the dominance of the Aryans over the Jangala areas was mainly due to the advent of a pastoral lifestyle. Slash-and-burn cultivation was responsible for the destruction of the sal forests of the surrounding non-Jangala zones.

The Jangala is just an intermediate, and not the ultimate vegetative state in the Indian plains. Professor Dove believed that the animal husbandry practiced was the reason for the Jangala staying as it was. Slash-and-burn agriculture was conducted by the invading Aryans in order to create a grazing space for domestic animals and for timber. Hence one can conclude that this “artificially maintained savannah”. Quoting Mizra,

*“Periodic burning carried out before the rains, retards the growth of unpalatable woody species and destroys older and less nutritious grass.”*

The Aryan state considered Jangala as natural and associated it with presence of civilization, and followed an extensive approach towards agriculture, which was accompanied by ecosystem conservation as a side-effect. The British, however saw the fallow as a concern, and they forced for an intensive agriculture methodology, which saw the loss of forest as well as infertility in the agricultural land. This is an example of a drastic cultural change imposed by the colonial government, that led to a complete environmental degradation.

### ***The case of Sacred Groves:***

In many regions of India, certain sizeable patches of forests have been maintained untouched, or nearly untouched, in the name of culture or religion. Two cases of these 'sacred groves' will be discussed here: one, in the hilly regions of Western Maharashtra, and in the Malabar Coast in Kerala. The hilly regions of western Maharashtra remain fairly inaccessible by road, and are rich in sacred groves. The area of focus is the catchment area of the Panshet Dam, 40km from the Poona district, which is a lake formed by the valley, with sparsely populated villages surrounding it. The sacred groves originated due to two main reasons.

The first main reason is the potential economic significance of conserving the biodiversity. It involved the preservation of a certain tree or climber that provides good timber or is of medical value. The second reason was the fear of the 'Female Deities' manifested in the form of rice-grain-shaped stones. These deities were considered to be ferocious in nature: asking for animal and human sacrifices and meting out illness or death to any person who offends the rules of the grove. The taboos that are followed are violated under extreme duress or by outsiders. These groves are the only source of forest produce, and serve as emergency supply of resources such as timber. A grove in the Kolaba district serves as the sole perennial source of water for the cattle. These groves are also sanctuaries of rich forest biota.

However, since the independence of India, these taboos have begun to wear out. Many groves have been destroyed (especially by coal vendors, who fell trees and convert it into coal), or gifted to priests, who use it for personal income.

Coming to the case of pre-colonial Kerala, the local culture was inculcated with a set of beliefs and practices (in particular, of Hinduism or its folk variants) that acted as an effective checks-and-balances mechanism on the human use of the environment resulting in an 'ecological homeostasis'. 'Kavus' in Kerala are usually pieces of forest land, which are guarded in the interests of particular deities. Only a few Kavus are left untouched due to religious sentiments, but most Kavus are not treated the same.

The origin of these Kavus vary from cultivated toddy farm, a patch of shrubbery, a tank in the middle of a paddy field, or a patch of a virgin forest, majority of which were parts of the small body of landlords, the Janmis.

The rules for use of resources from these Kavus were not consistent among the Kavus. Each Kavu had a different practice, which was dictated by the 'histories and personal needs of the gods involved'. What the 'gods' wanted in practice was determined by the owner of the forest and persons of the higher castes. The people of lower castes could access these resources only on certain conditions, which would either be a cash payment, a share of the resources gathered or a contract of bonded labour.

Protective rites (Theyyam) were performed in order to protect them against all 'spirits' that they believe existed, feeling that if they prayed to nature (with a combination of fear, reverence, and a vow to kill only for self-defense), they would be spared from the spirits' wrath.

As far as the environment is concerned, there is no sensitivity to the protection of the environment by the users of forest. Often forests of the Kavus were cleared for agriculture. The trees were felled and burnt to get the ashes for fertilization.

## Conclusion

A common pattern seen in all cases is that there is no romanticism of the environment involved. No community discussed in any of the cases have specifically expressed endearment towards the environment in their actions.

The Aryans shifted into the Savannah in order to access the resources involved. In the ancient times, the population was low, and the Aryans did take steps in order to promote sustainability and maintain the nature, following a systematic methodology (fallowing, burning the grassland before rains etc.) to maintain the land's composition and keep it fertile. Hence, they had an awareness about sustainability of natural resources, & tweaked the environment for their needs.

The tribes of Maharashtra treated the sacred groves as they were being treated only out of fear over a certain godly power, and the drive to conserve natural resources due to their economic value. In fact, the exploitation of the sacred groves spiked up, ever since the taboos regarding the same started to die off. The Kavus, clearly, were not created and maintained for environmental issues, rather, was an utensil to strengthen and maintain the caste hierarchy and supremacy in the society in Kerala.

The case of the Aryans seems to be an interesting one, where actively conserve the environment, while tending to their own personal needs, following a conservation model involving activities sustainable for both the nature and the community. This was opposite to the western conservation model, which basically calls for human non-intervention in nature, and wants nature to be left in its original, pristine state..

On the contrary, in the case of the sacred groves, the causation of the actions of the societies being studied can be traced back to three main reasons: A personal need for sustainable resource use, a fear of a supreme power, or to hold resources in a demonstration of power. All the above inadvertently create an effect where nature remains untouched to a considerable extent, and hence gives the action a conservation-like consequence. All the above reasons seem to be of a personal concern or gain for the individual or a community, and there is no such relevance of the well-being of environment. As Dove suggests:

*“Linkage between cultural and natural system is dialectical in nature...”*

In the case of the Aryans, culture and nature were involved in a perfectly-synced dialogue, where the culture and nature patterns fit with each other like pieces of a puzzle. However in the case of the groves, the changes in culture provoke a change in nature, but in all the cases that have been discussed, when the change in nature being discussed about is environmental conservation(if there was any), the link is coincidental in nature, and cannot be attributed to deliberation of the individuals or communities involved in the action.

## References:

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2. Michael R. Dove, "'Jungle" in Nature and Culture', Social Ecology (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 90-111.
3. J. R. Freeman , 'Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala'