Folklore and Environment

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Introduction:

Two recently published books on India's environmental history Rohan D'souza, *Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*, (OUP, 2006) and Ghazala Shahabuddin and Mahesh Rangarajan, *Making Conservation Work: Securing Bio-diversity in this New Century*, (Permanent Black, 2007), though far way from the primary objective of the present volume, had again called for re-investigating the paradigms of the colonial postulations about science and development. That the colonial era had demonstrated the inevitable strength of science as the only way to understand nature has always been under scanner. What was missing in the whole history of the 19th century is colonial attitude towards natural resources and the intricate relationship of people, who were dependent on these resources for their survival, with the nature. In the post-independent period, with the growth of India's environmental history, despite occasional expression of doubt about the nature of historical documents to speak the language of the everyday experiences of the people, the people remained at a safe distance from the nature's home. Yes, there has been tales of people's resistance to various colonial policies which were detrimental to their dependency on nature. But the everyday life of people is more than that.

It is a known fact that historians and other social scientists had to rely extensively on ranges of written documents, fashioned as archival sources and produced at the behest of colonial government, to examine historical dimension of colonial environment. However, as mentioned above, such reliance has been often under serious apprehension. There has been call to further investigate the nature of these documents so that truth can be unravelled. The foremost British historian of the 20th century Edward P. Thompson while speaking to the Indian historians in 1970s had called for serious attention to crucial world of folklore to write better social history. It was not that Indian historians were not sensitive to these issues. In fact in the 1990s Ajay Skaria, for instance, had masterfully handled various folklore materials to tell a masterful account of the tribes and forests in western India. An increasing number of scholars from across the disciplines had become more sensitive to this complex world of folklore and general ecology. Similarly historians of environment have in the last decades become more sensitive to the questions of popular perception in matters of environment and ecology. An increasing number of works have been produced re-emphasising the need of locating crucial documents in understanding man and nature relationship.

The theme of this volume is Folklore and Ecology. There is no doubt that in the context of our relocation of attitude towards ecology, folklore plays and would play an important role. Folklore in the form of tales, sayings, songs, ballads, dances and other music and poetry can be highly illuminative of man and nature relationship. Often it has been asserted that many of our fundamental scientific ideas and policies about nature draw from myths and modern folklore. We manage our natural resources on the assumption that a balance of nature that never existed and is frequently invalidated by scientific observations, but oddly still shapes much of the foundation of the science of ecology. The accumulated traditions, in the form of folklore could throw significant light towards re-understanding of ecology particularly in the age of technology. This has become a more relevant subject in South and South-East Asia.

The essays in this volume clearly show how folklore can play a vital role in a more sensitive understanding of ecology. Sarit Chaudhuri, drawing from his field studies of Arunachal Pradesh, indicates the link between ecology and folk belief systems which traditionally served the purpose of resource conservation in direct or indirect ways. Chaudhuri also tells how such tales can be textualised looking at the length and breadth of Arunachal Pradesh which is considered as one of the biodiversity hotspots of India. This need not be romanticized. One need to look at the other side of the coin, Chaudhuri again reminds, as with the growing influence of money, market and other agents of change. In the last two decades there was a boom in timber trade in Arunachal which ultimately lead to the predicament of resource use in the province. And that was done with the active nexus of the people whose narratives are depicted above. The essay by Benita Stamble studies the perception of rain god in Gujarati folklores. Stamble argues that folksongs are often referred to as expressions of a primitive society, or as primitive expressions of a social group. But this notion of primitive has pejorative overtones, implying that the society that produced or uses such cultural elements may be crude or less developed, maybe even undeveloped, in some way. Those who study Gujarati folksongs, often note, for example, their expressions

and attitudes concerning rain, a natural phenomenon, and explain that the sentiments expressed in such songs derive from the simple and less-developed social systems that fall victim to such natural elements. Annu Jalias told us the complex story of the archipelago of islands that are the Sundarbans where a little-known goddess graces its forests. For Jalias, the story goes that *Bonbibi*, the 'woman of the forest', was chosen by Allah to protect people who work in the Sundarbans against a greedy man-eating half Brahmin-sage half tiger-demon, *Dokkhin Rai*. Meena Bhargava, also drawing from the same location like Jalias, tells the story based on eighteenth century account. It relates to how forest dwellers and wood-cutters, who also often worked as salt makers allegedly protected themselves or at least believed to have secured them from tigers and alligators, who abounded the forest tracts of Sunderbans. The last essay by Ashok Kumar Sen discusses the methodological constraints of studying myths, as an element of folklore, to understand contem -porary ecology. Sen argues that Ho myth is neither as comprehensive nor diachronic as the Santal myth is. ✠

Folk Belief and Resource Conservation: Reflections from Arunachal Pradesh

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With in the tremendous boon of science, technology, medicine etc., there is a gradual realization all over the world that still there are so much to learn from the people who are rooted with in the nature and whose sense of collectivism, respect and reciprocity with their surrounding ecosystem not yet driven by market forces or by the narrow sense of individualism and instant culture under the fashionable wave of globalization. This provides us some ground to think or rethink about the people's belief system. Folk beliefs may be sacred or secular, as a dimension of folklore tradition in understanding as well as popularizing conservation to our natural resources or even biological diversities which are conceived as the priority concern on the international environmental agenda.

In spite of various contested voices concerning many intricate issues, such as, Traditional Knowledge, IPR, politics of power structure, access and sharing of benefits etc., there is a general agreement that there are various important lessons to be learned from the cognitive and empirical dimensions of folklore tradition for conserving our natural resources aiming at the sustainable development of the communities in specific and mankind in general. There are significant contributions which deals with such issues (Kothari et al 1998, Ramakrishnan et al 1998). This paper only supplements the above notions taking a few examples from the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh.

Backdrop

Arunachal Pradesh, the erstwhile NEFA, being part of great Himalayan range, reflects huge heterogeneity in physiographic, climatic conditions, cultural as well as biological diversity. This is the largest state in the north east India with a population of about twelve lakhs constituted primarily by 26 tribes and more than 100 smaller sub-tribes. On the basis of religious and some other cultural commonalities, sometimes the whole tribal population is divided into four broad cultural areas. Generally *Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Monpa, Wancho*, *Mishmi* etc., are familiar names who are the major tribes though there are good numbers of smaller tribes exists, such as *Aka, Miji, Khowa* etc., who are equally important in understanding linkages between the ecology and belief system.

Folk belief and resource conservation

Most of the tribes believe that the forest is the abode of their numerous gods and spirits, both benevolent and malevolent in nature. For example, Adis believe that the huge tree like *Rotne* found in their surrounding forest is the abode of the evil spirit called *Epom* for which they usually don't fell such tree. In case it is inevitable then they perform rituals by sacrificing pig and fowls to appease the spirit whose habitat is destructed. Similarly, they never indiscriminately cut cane bamboo and leaves for thatching traditional houses. For instance, *Epoeng* (big bamboo with huge circumference) has been felled during the *Ruruk* - the dark fourth night just after the full moon night as it is commonly believed that during that period this bamboo remains free from a insect locally called *Takit* which can reduce its longevity. There are some specific plants, such as, *Tattong, Taapit,Tan* etc. having sacred value. According to their belief such trees have sprung from the bones of *Kari Bote* - the great mythical hunter who is considered to be repugnant for the evil spirits and for this they hardly cut these trees unless and otherwise it is inevitable.

Folk perception related to a creeper called *Ridin*, which is a sacred plant used to ward off evil spirits, can be mentioned here. Padams believe that this plant