

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 *Bonbibibi*, 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 contemporary 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*, *Howa* 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

emerged from the placenta of *Pedong Nane*- the mother of all living beings. While *Litung Liman* was giving birth to *Pedong Nane* her placenta was thrown beneath the house from where a creeper grew which is identified as *Ridin* with great difficulty by the expert *Siking Kepir Leni Taabe*. And this is narrated in their *Abang* (ballad) in the following words:

*Keyum Pedonge Rindo Si
Rindo Torgo Em Torge Bomye
Keyum Donie Aji Me
Aji E Einem Dutum Bomye*

This ballad reveals that the *Ridin* which is originated from the placenta of *Pedong Nane* would guard and protect mankind from any misfortune (Tayeng1996). During various ceremonies and rituals Padams exhibit various taboos, specially after both of a child and death funerals people abstain from cutting plants or visiting the area where bamboo shoots sprout otherwise it may cause damage to the new shoots (Megu 2007:72). The concept of sacred plant is also traceable among the Hill Miri tribe of Subansiri district. Surrounding areas of certain plants, such as, *Sigrek Sin*, *Tam* etc., are considered as sacred place and naturally Hill Miris don't spit or throw stones or urinate in such area which may affect the spirits residing there.

Among the Wanchos of Tirap district log-drum, the biggest musical instrument found among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, constitutes one of the finest symbol of their culture and it is found in every boy's dormitory (Pa) and in Chief's residence. During the days of head hunting listening to the beating of this drum and organizing defense mechanism defined survival of the villagers. A number of different beats symbolized different meaning to the villagers. Construction of such huge drums involves series of sacred and secular activities. But when this is dragged towards the village from distant forests Wanchos sang songs through which they beg pardon from each and every creature of the forest expressing how inevitable that tree was to them for which they had to cut it and disturbed their habitat. Perhaps this can be taken as one of the finest examples which reveals traditional notion of sustainable use of resources by the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

The concepts of sacred resources are evident among many tribes. Aka of West Kameng district have a concept called the *Nowu-yiew* which means forest lands and water resources (pond/lake) which are considered sacred. They believe that interference to such resources will result loss of life as it is the abode of supernatural force called *Ubro* or *Ubram*. The highest mountain peak in the Aka inhabited area called *Wojo phu* is considered as sacred mountain and extraction of any resources from that mountain and even hunting is strictly prohibited. Akas believe that breaking of such taboo will lead to bleeding from nose and mouth finally leading to death. So, even today this mountain

has a huge dense forest cover. Similarly, they have the concept of sacred pond (*Nearma Husu*) which is located near Nechiphu pass which is about 5000 feet above the sea level. People worship this pond and plucking of even leaves from the plants surrounding the pond is tabooed. They believe that if some one pluck leaves from this pond then he or she will loss direction on the way back home and they will reach the same place again and again (Nimachow2002). Such concept of sacred pond is found among the Khamptis of Lathao village located in Lohit district where fishing is strictly prohibited and this pond is used during the most important Buddhist festival of the village known as *Sangken*.

Various beliefs and taboos of Arunachal tribes related to animal world promote an indirect mode of conservation of various animal species. For instance, killing of tiger is tabooed among the Mishmis and Galos. However, if some one kills a tiger by mistake or due to inevitable circumstances then not only the person but the whole village has to go through various restrictions and performance of rituals. Among the Galos a tiger hunter can not consume certain types of birds, fish, meat and even he has to prepare his own food for a month and more over consumption of certain spices like local onion (Dilap) and ginger (Takee), are tabooed for life time (Lollen 2007:103). In fact, Galos believe that man, tiger and elephant originated from the same stock. They even don't kill certain seasonal birds which they consider sacred and they are also perceived as the agents of new season and symbol of good productivity (Riba 2003:94). Any one who visits Mishmi Hills of Lohit or Dibang valley districts will be moved listening to the howling of Hulloock Gibbon which is profusely available in the forest habitat. None of the Mishmi tribes kill this animal as they strongly believe that it will bring severe misfortune to the killer. Digaru or Miju Mishmis even don't go nearer to them while moving within the forest for hunting as they believe that incase Gibbon urinate on any individual then for at least next seven generations one will suffer from acute poverty. Many individuals are having strong faith on such belief system which has saved this particular species where as many other species became rare in their surrounding forest areas. In case of any killing the whole village has to follow certain taboos followed by certain rituals. Though hunting is very much important aspect of livelihood pattern of the Mishmis there are lot of restrictions related to the consumption of hunted animals. Among the Idus in case someone hunts wild animals than he has to undergo taboo by restricting eating of spices like onion, chilli, some leafy vegetables he cannot touch and use domestic utensils and cannot prepare the meat inside the house. He is not allowed to drink local brew prepared by women who is under pollution period. Idus also strongly believe that wild animals which are hunted by the male members are the gift given to them by the forest spirits like *Golo* and therefore, consumption of such meat by a

woman may cause harm to her as well as the child she would conceive. Such belief of Idus let their women in restriction in eating wild animal's meat, such as, deer, bison, wild goat, monkeys, boar, etc.

While sacrifice of animals in various rituals is very common in majority of tribes this is not allowed by the Buddhist tribe like Monpas of Tawang and West Kameng districts. They use varieties of animal products in rituals and animal motifs find a special space in the Monpa oral tradition as well as in their performing art tradition.

Conclusions

Our discussion provides some indications linking ecology and folk belief systems which traditionally served the purpose of resource conservation in direct or indirect ways. More 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. But this need not be romanticized as we need to look at the other side of the coin which has emerged with the growing influence of money, market and other agents of change. In the last two decades there has been boom in timber trade in Arunachal which ultimately has led to the present predicament of resource use in the province. And that has been done with the active nexus of the people whose narratives are depicted above. With the intervention of Supreme Court such indiscriminate exploitation of forest resource, which goes against the traditional conservation ethics, has come to a temporary halt. There is no doubt that

through such appropriation of natural resources a few powerful elites have accumulated wealth whereas even today people living in interior villages still strive for their livelihoods by upholding traditional sacred or secular belief systems that encode the message of sustainable resource use.

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Bonbibi: Bridging worlds

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In the archipelago of islands that are the Sundarbans a little-known goddess graces its forests. 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. Dokkhin Rai, 'King of the South' (in this case to be understood as referring to Lower Bengal – i.e. the entire region that was once part of the Sundarbans) was a Brahmin sage who lived in the forest. One day, in a fit of greed he decided to feed on humans. For this, he took the form of a tiger. This was possible for him as, through his ascetic powers, he could magically transform himself into anything. His greed increased and soon the sage was refusing to share any of the forest resources with humans. He also started legitimising their killing by calling these a 'tax' (*kar*) – one they had to pay with their lives for the products they usurped from

what he had come to consider as 'his' jungle. Soon his arrogance and greed knew no bounds and he proclaimed himself lord and master of the Sundarbans mangrove (*badabon*) and of all the beings that inhabited it: the 370 million spirits, demons, god-lings, spirits and tigers. With time he became a demon (*rakkhosh*) who preyed on humans. Tigers and spirits became the chosen subjects of Dokkhin Rai and, emboldened by him, also started to terrorise and feed on humans. The trust that had existed between tigers and humans has now been broken.

But Allah, on noticing the frightening deterioration in relations between tigers and humans, decided to take action. In his compassion for the people of the 'land of the eighteen tides' (*athero bhatir desh* – another name for the Sundarbans) he decided to put a stop to Dokkhin Rai's reign of 'terror' and insatiable greed. He chose for this task Bonbibi, a young girl who lived in the forest. Bonbibi's father, Ibrahim, following his second wife's wishes, had abandoned his first wife Gulalbibi