

Tradition, Culture and Sustainable Living: Comparative Study of Customs and Practices of Bishnois of Marwar Region, Natives of Alaknanda Valley and Indigenous Americans
Dr. Sunita Dhankhar

Tradition, Culture and Sustainable Living: Comparative Study of Customs and Practices of Bishnois of Marwar Region, Natives of Alaknanda Valley and Indigenous Americans

Dr. Sunita Dhankhar

*Associate Professor, Department of English
Aditi Mahavidyalaya (University of Delhi)
Email: sunitadhankhar200@gmail.com*

Abstract

Ecological practices and culture are interlinked. Local traditions carry within them the moral code which determines the relation between man and nature. This paper will focus on how forces of imperialism and capitalism have disrupted this symbiotic relationship. Developmental or security needs of the nation or state are often at variance with the traditions of the native inhabitants and ecologically unsustainable. These disruptive forces have wiped out civilizations and snatched people's rights over natural resources. European settlers in America, rulers and governments have had a transactional approach towards nature which is based on exploitation and control over human and natural resources. The relationship with nature for the Bishnois of the Native American is one of brotherhood, a relationship that is reflected through the traditions and socio-cultural practices of these societies.

Keywords

Native Rights, Tribal Rights, Environment, Development policies, Government control, Afforestation, Cultural practices, Tradition.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Dr. Sunita Dhankhar

Tradition, Culture and Sustainable Living: Comparative Study of Customs and Practices of Bishnois of Marwar Region, Natives of Alaknanda Valley and Indigenous Americans

Notions June 2021,

Vol. XIII, No. 1,

pp. 44 - 49

Article No. 6

Online available at :

<https://anubooks.com/notions-vol-xiii-no-1-jan.-june-2022/>

This paper aims to find the correlation between the ecology of a region and its traditions and cultural practices. The impact that government policies, security concerns of the nation-state and economic development activities have on the traditions and cultural practices of a region. The erosion of culture due to the imbalance in the power-driven relationship between the native and outside has a lasting impact on the traditional practices that ensures harmony between nature and man. Whenever the undocumented traditional rights over land, forests and natural resources are challenged by government policies it has a lasting impact on the socio-cultural practices being followed by the people residing in these areas. The paper will discuss the first documented case of the environmental movement which was inspired by sacrifice of Amrita Devi of Khejarli village located near Jodhpur in Rajasthan. This was the inspiration behind the Chipkko movement that originated in the Alaknanda valley in present-day Uttarakhand. A similarity between the ecologically sustainable belief system, traditions and cultural practices being followed by natives will be scrutinized. The similarity between these two along with the famous speech attributed to Chief Seattle of the Squamish tribe will be studied.

If we examine the three very different locations, with their ecological challenges there is a commonality that can be observed between them. In all the three regions the cultural practices and belief systems are a product of the unique environmental needs of the place. The traditions carry within them the native knowledge of the flora and fauna of the region. For that particular society to keep on thriving in that region certain sustainable practices have to be followed. In case these are violated it will lead to ecological disaster making it difficult for the subsequent generations to survive. The trees or plants that are deemed holy have a role to play in birth, marriage or other pious rituals. The relationship with the fauna of the region as practiced through the rituals are all a product of the same.

The Bishnoi community residing primarily in the Marwar region of the Indian state of Rajasthan are hailed as the original eco-warriors. They are all followers of Swami Jambheshwar Maharaj, a native of the area who laid down twenty-nine tenets to be followed by the people of the Bishnoi faith. He was prompted by the hardship being faced by the people living in that dry region to come up with these rules to be followed by the people of that area. Of these tenets six deal exclusively with the protection of the environment. The two most prominent amongst implore the followers of this faith to be compassionate to all life forms (*Jeev Daya Palani*) and to refrain from cutting trees (*Runkh Lila Nahi Ghave*). Although the Bishnois are Hindus, they do not cremate their dead but bury them. Similarly, cow dung is used as fuel for cooking and is preferred over firewood. They consider all life forms

to be equal and are to be treated with equal reverence and love, human life is not considered to be superior or special in any way.

The distinguishing characteristic of the Bishnois is that they follow these aspects of their faith in letter and spirit. In 1730 AD Maharaja Abhay Singh the ruler of Marwar needed wood for the construction of a new palace. For doing so his soldiers set out to procure the necessary resources. Amrita Devi a follower of the Bishnoi faith could not let this happen and tried to stop them. When they did not relent she hugged a tree to prevent it from being cut. This did not deter them and they chopped off her head. Her three daughters emulated her brave act. Inspired by them and in solidarity with the belief system people from surrounding villages followed suit. Approximately 363 people sacrificed their lives trying to save the trees. It is notable that they knew if they hugged the trees to protect them, they would be chopped down. An extremely painful and gruesome way to die, but this did not deter them. The unflinching faith of the Bishnoi people in their dharma egged them on to do the right thing as per their faith, culture and traditions. It was a non-violent protest that in the end was successful. The King on hearing about the massacre apologized to the people and declared that the felling of trees and hunting would be banned in the region. The ban continues.

This incident is an example of the ecologically sustainable nature of the local culture and tradition, especially in an ecologically sensitive environment. The tradition continues to this day making the region greener and more ecologically diverse both in its flora and fauna. There are social and cultural mores woven into the very fabric of the locals' belief system that prevents them from performing activities that may be economically fruitful in the short run but unsustainable and harmful to the environment in the long run.

Namit Hans in his article written in Indian Express about the importance of the Khejri trees states that:

Culturally, the tree holds a very important place in the lives of the Rajasthani people, especially the Bishnois. The tree (*Prosopis cineraria*) is considered as sacred as 'Tulsi' by many giving it an important religious significance.... As per local mythology, the 'Pandavas' hid their weapons under this tree when they were in exile. Moreover, the tree's branches are also used as a good luck charm during weddings.

The tree is extremely important in this ecologically sensitive region as it can survive in the dry arid region where few other species of flora can survive. In addition to that, almost all parts of the tree are useful. Its leaves are used for fodder, bark for its medicinal properties, dry branches serve as firewood, and the local

vegetable 'Sangri' is obtained from this tree. The tree also helps in enriching the soil and making it fertile. This indigenous tree plays an important part in maintaining the ecological balance in the region.

The Bishnoi culture places a higher value on the protection of flora and fauna as compared to human life. The Bishnoi saying, "Sir santhe rooke rahe to bhi sasto jaan" means that even if you have to die protecting the life of a tree it's a profitable proposition. This saying best transcribes this belief system demonstrated by the fearless opposition put up by Amrita Devi against the king's soldiers when they came to cut down the Khejri trees surrounding the village.

A similar spontaneous movement was witnessed in the 1970s in the Tehri Garwal region. The government policies that dictated the control and use of the natural resources of the region were at odds with the ecological needs of the region. They were impacting the life and livelihood of the people of the region. The taking away of the forest resources that were traditionally available to the villagers living there began during the colonial era. The economic exploitation of resources with the exclusive aim of maximizing profit began in 1821 when portions of the forest and its resources were taken over by the government. After independence, this practice of favoring the commercial exploitation of resources by outside agencies continued. This was not an ecologically sustainable approach as the sole purpose was to maximize profit. This blinkered approach led to a devastating impact on the fragile ecosystem of the region. The unsustainable process of felling down trees and construction activities were largely responsible for making the region landslide-prone. The anti-people and skewed government policies were responsible for the confrontation between the state and the local people. Ramachandra Guha in his article *A Gandhian in Garhwal* recounts the origin of what later on came to be known as the Chipko movement. He recounts how in the year 1973

the Forest Department refused to allow it a batch of hornbeam trees from which to make agricultural implements....the same trees were then auctioned off to a sports goods company in distant Allahabad....the villagers threatened to hug the trees rather than allow the loggers in....the term originally used by Bhatt was the Garhwali "angalwaltha", or embrace

If we examine the local traditions and belief systems of the native inhabitants of the region we find that they contain within them environmentally sustainable practices. Ramachandra Guha while recounting the childhood of Chandi Prasad Bhatt talks about his journey to the temple Rudranath situated at an altitude of 13,000 ft. above sea level had on him. He says, "As a boy, Chandi Prasad went up often to the family shrine, the journey also alerting him to the local traditions of folk

ecology.” He had to make this journey barefoot so as not to damage the plants and delicate flowers growing in the region. Guha says:

In one four-kilometer stretch above the Amrit Ganga, there was a ban on spitting and coughing: on anything that might lead to the pollution of the river below. There were taboos on plucking plants before the festival of Nandasthmi, in September: after which the restraint was removed so that the plucking of the now ripened flowers also released their seeds.

The people of the region followed the traditions diligently. The faith of people was such that they adhered to the cultural norms and practices independent of any fear of being caught flouting them. Ramachandra Guha narrates how

Once, on the walk to Rudranath, Chandi Prasad met a shepherd burning the flowers of the sacred and beautiful Brahma kamal. He asked why he was doing this — it was the week of Nandasthmi — and the shepherd answered that he wouldn’t have, normally, except that his stomach ached horribly and he knew that the extract of the flower would cure him. But, the offender quickly added, I broke off the plant with my mouth, like a sheep, so that the deity would think that it was nature’s natural order, rather than the hand of man at work.

This incident captures how the cultural ethos of a place gets impacted by the unique environmental needs of the region. The traditions may have religious connotation and be couched in terminology that reflects this, but the ecological significance of these belief systems are unmistakable. This movement was a success as the government of the day banned the felling of trees till 1980 fifteen years.

The third region that is going to be taken up is the speech attributed to Red Indian Chief Sealth of the Duwamish tribe. Without going into the historical veracity of the exact words that had been spoken by him, the essence of the speech is not under question. This speech which was put in its present-day written form by Dr. Henry Smith first appeared in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887. The speech is said to have been delivered in 1853 or 1854, an event attended by H A Smith. He claimed to have written it based on the notes he had taken on that day. As Rudolf Kaiser in the book *Indians and Europe* says:

We can . . . take it for granted that there is at least a core, a nucleus of authentic thinking and, possibly, language in the text, as Dr. Smith was able to base his version of the speech on ‘extended notes’ in his diary, taken on the occasion of the delivery of the speech. (512)

Without delving into the controversy surrounding the exact words that were spoken by Chief Sealth we will look at the essence of these words. He says:

How can you buy or sell the sky-the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water....Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, and every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

The European settlers are not familiar with the belief systems of the natives and plunder the earth without knowing or caring about the long-term impact of their actions. There is a similarity in attitude between the Kings men of Marwar and the government agencies and contractors in the Garhwal region. They are all outsiders with no respect for the land and its inhabitants. Chief Sealth says that for the white man:

The Earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it he moves on....He kidnaps the earth from his children....His father's graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert.

The lack of understanding of the unique landscape and its needs are the dominant traits that emerge. The native hunts to survive and forage the forest resources in a manner that will ensure its continuation. There is a need to understand the ecological wisdom inherent in the cultural beliefs and practices of the native inhabitants of a region. Those beliefs and socio-cultural practices have evolved over a period of time and understand the unique needs of a particular environment. The traditions of the Bishnois reflect the needs of the aird Marwar region, the upper reaches of Uttarakhand have different challenges. All these

References

1. Furtwangler, Albert. (1997). *Answering Chief Seattle*. University of Washington Press: Seattle. Pg. **10-17**.
2. Bagley, Clarence B. (1929). *History of King County, Washington*. S. J. Clarke Publishing Co.: Chicago.
3. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/khejri-the-tree-that-inspired-chipko-movement-is-dying-a-slow-death-4409701/>
4. http://www.surendranathcollege.org/new/upload/SHAYEARI_DUTTAA%20Gandhian%20in%20Garhwal,%20text2021-06-16A%20Gandhian%20in%20Garhwal.pdf
5. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Indians_and_Europe/