

Owning North Bengal: Re-imagining Human-Nature Relationship

George Thadathil is presently the Principal of Salesian College, Sonada, Darjeeling and its Siliguri Campus. Besides teaching and administration he is engaged in coordinating the research projects of the various departments of the college engaging the scholars of the region of North Bengal and Darjeeling where he has been serving the cause of education for the past 25 years. He has authored and edited seven books and published over thirty articles in journals and as chapters in edited volumes. He is also the series editor of Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, in its eighth year and the founder director of Salesian Research and Translation Centre.

Since there were no avowed literary theorists among the official participants, let me begin with their perception and the ongoing debate in the field of theory on “nature”. The theorists who make much of the ‘linguistic constructedness of reality’, when, they, take a look at “nature” what do they see – the wild forests, the sublime scenes of beauty as in waterfalls, the countryside of hamlets nestling within the edges of groves or the domesticated picturesque parks? In all of these, is there an unconstructed (linguistically) pure nature out there? Or all of it, whichever way we conceive it, is a matter of how we have come to perceive it, or construct it ourselves in and through the language we have acquired, or, have been brought up to see reality through? While the literary and critical theorists position would be in the affirmative, needing a deconstruction in order to get to the bottom of whatever truth there may be to the claim for ‘nature’; the opponent, with a scientific bend of mind, on the other side of the debating table would make the claim based on the ‘hole spotted in the ozone layer’ and measured by the scientific evidence; the latter would then be no mere linguistic construct, but rather, the hard veritable ‘reality’ out there. There is indeed a reality out there, irrespective of the manner in which we have been brought/taught to perceive by the advertising companies and market forces. ‘Nature’, therefore, ought to be taken care of and that very concern has brought us together. (Prof. Ramakrishnan made this case well as the underlying premise of all the theoretical presentations of the first day including the inaugural and keynote addresses)

How do we go about this task? Many approaches and many fact finding analytical discourses have been presented over the two days, and each one of them deserves attention and further study and engagement with policy makers in order to make our contribution to North Bengal and the sunshine it hides from being unveiled (or the rain it prevents or brings in uncontrolled cloudbursts be normalised) or the dump heap be treated or shifted out to make way for another bit of ‘nature’ in any one of the four above senses. However, I would like to look at this project from a philosophical perspective and that too by introducing an ancient conceptualisation that is gaining currency once again in contemporary intercultural philosophical discourses.

Jewish philosopher Gunther Andreas coined the phrase ‘apocalyptic blindness’ to refer to the ‘fatal inability’ of human imagination or failure of human beings to imagine the dire consequences/results of their actions, especially of total annihilation in atomic disaster; and on the other hand, of the imaginative ability to feel (apocalyptic fear) at the same time and such contradictory consciousness and its imperatives as an antidote to the impending end of time or apocalypse!¹

¹ cfr. Jurgen Bach, *Biblical Apocalyptic, or It won't be always like that* in Concilium 2014/3, 20-21.

The 'urban churn' that Ricky Budett, professor of Urban studies, London school of economics, refers to in his work *Transforming Urban Economies: Policy Lessons from European and Asian Cities* is a place to start. We are located for now in the hub called Siliguri where both the kinds of 'churning' he refers to are occurring: first the spacial expansion and related growth of the city in physical spatial terms with its travails. Second, in terms of the mix of the people in this great expansion that is occurring.² A third factor of the churn is the dramatic polarization between the rich and the poor; the top and the bottom. We listened to this too, in the arguments put forward in terms of who bears actually the brunt of the environmental havoc that a neo-liberalist capitalist economy is thoughtlessly or very consciously effecting on the planet earth.

The two big spheres of concern revolve around social churning due to development, migration and political features, and, the other is the impact of these on the environmental sphere. He says that one out of every 3 new urban residents for the coming 25 years will be living in slums as per UN assessment; slum or informal settlements rather. Living with shortage of basic amenities is like a time bomb waiting to explode in the form of dengues and Ebolas and plagues. 60-75% CO2 emissions are expected to be from cities of the world. The Human-nature relationship of North Bengal cannot be imagined without the role Siliguri as a city is going to play in the region. Our role as education institution in this endeavour is to engage deeper with the city's role itself.

Our discussion has a theoretical and practical side; it is about reimagining theory and praxis. What type of nature-human relationship do we want, did we have, can we have and how do we need to prepare, act, for achieving the same. The case of smoking is an example. What is the trade off between personal choice and collective good? Some years ago smoking was normal; however, now it is almost criminal and even in public space and private an awareness of being sensitive to the non-smoker has come to stay because of what it does. Something similar is to happen as to the environmental impact of private choices. For example should one use a private car or public transport to work? Cities with high car ownership but low car usage: London, New York and European cities. The planning behind the creation of newer living spaces in the suburbs of growing city with compulsion of all essentials available within the space provides for less connectivity across length and breadth of cities causing environmental, psychological and social problems.

The case of London again is worth going back to. A city which is 2000 years old with a democratic governance history of 1000 years and the first city of Europe to have local government system, already in 1870, decided only in 2000, to have a directly elected Mayor. In the past 15 years this decision has been observed as having had an impact on the more just society it has become (p.73). Or, the example of police force in London having to rise to the topmost rank having begun as a constable with the record of community nominations against service being the criterion for promotion.³ I make reference to these just to compare that, firstly, Siliguri has witnessed the kind of growth it has, in the last two decades; it was just a village in the memory of the senior citizens living amidst us (Mrs Mahbert whom we

² cfr. Ricky Budett & Priya Shankar, "Interview" *Seminar* 663, No.2014, 68.

³ cfr. Amir Khan, Satyamev Jayate series on India; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9J12dUxuVQ>; <http://www.satyamevjayate.in>

honoured a couple of years ago started the first English medium school⁴ in Siliguri and we have now probably over 200 English medium private schools). Coming to private choices, how come we join the swatch bharat bandwagon happily for public display and yet allow a wedding reception to happen in our locality with grand fanfare, without having cleaned fully the drains over which the party food is being served? How come we (me included) do not do sufficient to raise the consciousness and demand public action against the dumping pit in the midst of nearly a dozen educational institutions and housing colonies? We can't achieve the democratic citizenry growth of a 1000 years in just a decade, but we need to be at it and very urgently at that.

Why are we silent about Satyarthi, the Nobel winner? Because he highlights to the world that as a social activist working for child rights his award forces us to acknowledge that we do have a problem that we have not resolved yet – a human rights issue. Or for that matter you haven't even heard of one of my acquaintances Wolfgang Theurkauf,⁵ 66, who passed away a week ago in Peria, in Wayanad, Kerala, Western Ghats, a home he adopted as a German and adapted to as a naturalised Indian citizen by choice and who won the best nature preservation global award for the year. We are grappling with the human-nature rights issue focusing on the region we are located in, though relevant for all similar and affected regions across the world, and non affected regions on the planet are dwindling from the global planet earth impact measurements we can directly observe and monitor. We as mountain dependent people sharing as one of the paper presenters well put it living in the vicinity of the Himalayan region that is providing subsistence to more than half the world population have a great responsibility towards, monitoring the changes, creating awareness among ourselves and others, and be engaged in the action that can address meaningfully the issue of environmental degradation, which in other words, is the increasing deterioration of the human-nature relationship.

The larger picture within which we draw our past-present-future for an 'ideal' (I say ideal because what we imagine to be or can be has this utopian, dimension of doing away with the pitfalls and lacuna of the present) 'human-nature relationship' can be seen, as the Vice Chancellor Prof Somnath said, from the mammoth magnitude of the interstellar universe perspective within which we are occupying a planet which is the billionth part of a mustard seed leading to the nullification and numbness of any action, or, on the reverse, look at this region itself as so vast when it comes to what one social activist or volunteer student can achieve in a life-time to educate and streamline and effectively act to bring about desired lifestyle. We make the choice for action, for we are gifted with this life which we value as precious and unique even in the vastness of the universe and as constitutive of the collective wisdom of all peoples on it irrespective of their differences.

We do this for an external and an internal reason:

David Brooks in his editorial comment in the New York Times (11/11/14) drew attention to 'the legacy of fear'⁶ stating that only 10% of the soviet erstwhile communist countries that shifted to capitalist mode with soviet break up in the past three decades have attained a better

⁴ <https://www.indiastudychannel.com/schools/29889-Mahbert-High-School-Siliguri.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/german-who-created-noahs-ark-for-the-western-ghats-is-dead/article6577872.ece>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/opinion/david-brooks-the-legacy-of-fear.html>

living standard than where they were when they took the decision. We in India, as Mithi Mukherjee in her study of 'India in the Shadows of Empire'⁷ shows, have had imperialist aspirations from the times of Mughals and one could even go back and say, from the time of Asoka or Chandragupta Maurya, for that matter, and even in post colonial, British Imperialist period are tracing the remnants or even the backbone of that imperialist tradition. Bernard D'Mello in his assessment of contemporary political turns in the country and drawing parallels with the European pre World War experience cautions about the tendencies to semi-fascism surfacing within our shores and the need for the critical thinking traditionally provided by the leftist scholarship and political formations as having to reassert their presence for the antidote India needs to avoid the kind of 'legacy of fear' David Brooks refers to.

We could model our future on the cutting edge research and scientific advancements, as they have brought us where we are with the gains and losses of modern civilization, bringing us to the brink as Prof Ramakrishnan reminded that we need to be reminded and taught environmental science and ecology after having been taught for a generation and more that we need to conquer and subdue nature. One model is to believe and to accept that not all are going to survive, and the survival need not necessarily be on planet earth itself; that the evolution is concerned with not individuals but species, and therefore a better AI enabled/inbuilt species is on its way and they will carry our stories to those possible planets waiting to nurture the new version of human life, and therefore we need not too much worry about the cleaning up and restoration of nature to its pristine purity.

The other, is the possibility that the scientific advancement story is one more mode of domination and control, by the few, of the masses. The vast majority are made gullible citizens who can be thwarted by the vicious daring by the few, for the sake of the few and this trend needs to be reversed, redesigned and remodelled and reimagined for the welfare of all (lokasamgraha) as all religious philosophical traditions have upheld and continue to do so. This return to and recapturing of the ancient and yet contemporary holistic vision of reality is what can be called cosmotheandricism: Cosmos (physical, material, elemental world/universe dimension)giving birth to Anthropos (the human man-woman mental psychic dimension) and both together meeting up with the Theos (the divine, spiritual, soul dimension).⁸

While Cosmotheandricism, or theoanthropocosmism or anthropotheocosmism is the larger picture of our endeavour, the seminar, true to its concept note and the areas it wanted to explore did some true justice to the development of the thematic, despite quite a few promised papers having not reached. The issue of Human (man-woman) perspective, the nature understood variously in the micro and macro sense of geographical, socio-politico-economic senses have been addressed through the sessions on "engaging the nature - theory and practice", "strategic significance of the region in Indian security paradigm", "Need for viable Disaster Management policy for the region", "Communities and demographics of North Bengal", "Environmental Sustainability based case studies", and "people, migration and urbanization".

The institutional history of this seminar goes back to the theme "communities and demographics of North Bengal" because ICSSR had funded and the project is just nearing

⁷ <https://www.amazon.in/India-Shadows-Empire-Political-1774-1950-ebook/dp/B0746L918S>

⁸ Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: The Emerging Religious Consciousness*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1998).

completion on “Status of Enrolment in Higher Education among Tribal Communities of NB”. This search for a fact finding that could lead to some new policy decisions or suggestions towards the same, emerged from our involvement as an institution as part of Don Bosco Skill Mission’s collaboration with the government to skill India. The young people in search of employment with the desire to enhance their capabilities and the kind of response the mission generated inspired the study on the status of higher education in the tribal tracts of North Bengal. The study is indeed revealing, as are other presentations on the demographics presented already – The medium of instruction, the lack of sufficient higher secondary schools vis-a-vis the student population coming out from the high schools in the same Block, point to the high dropout rate at plus two level. It shows the kind of low enrolment in higher education, despite aspiration to engage in and enter into higher education. The utility of education is however more appreciated in terms of the skill it offers in terms of earning an income. This is therefore, in line with the policy of the government to introduce vocationalisation into the undergraduate education itself.

However, to sum up our enterprise, I make three points: firstly, we have known from the history of the evolution of the knowledge we presently pride in that it began from “philosophical” visions – be it in any culture, this could be substantiated, but the western knowledge system all the more goes back to this scheme and therefore the saying “philosophy is the mother of all sciences”. Where and how do people arrive at a philosophy, be it in the strict sense of codified philosophical systems or in the broad sense of people having a perception of and understanding of the reality in which they are embedded? It cannot but be assumed that the context within which people have been nurtured have provided the substance to the philosophical visions and perceptions. In other words, ‘nature,’ in whatever holistic sense we can conceive it, is presupposed in the discovery and elaboration and subservience to a philosophy. This could be shown as true even with regard to the philosophies of science, technology and not to say the contemporary modes of critical theories and philosophies. Therefore, the truism, so to say, “nature is the mother of all philosophies”.

Every culture has had a religion or religions and every culture-religion combination has had its sustenance through its philosophies-cum-theologies. These philosophic-theological core visions of culture-religions we can identify as the perennial wisdom traditions of the world, to be culled from mythologies, codes and canons, literatures and scriptures, from primeval practices. Perennial philosophies are then those that have had a ‘market’; a demand, always down the ages for peoples of the respective cultural religious contexts. We also observe the modes in which these have been preserved through socialisation and promoted through passive or aggressive propagation within the home of religio-cultural spaces as well as across such spaces. These efforts and diasporic presences have created the world of today a multicultural multi religious space wherever we go or are located. These processes of practice, preservation and promotion have also succumbed to dynamics of dominations of the lesser by the greater or the smaller by the bigger, the very such nomenclature having to be questioned. So we have cosmic religions being overridden by metacosmic religions even in the Himalayan region and that task being done neatly by all four major so called world religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Therefore, seen from the stories of smaller groups and

traditional ways of life (prof. Subba was referring to and their spiritualities) domination has occurred through the very processes of subscription to mega religio-philosophical visions.⁹

In re-imagining the human-nature relationship, the task cannot be accomplished without bringing into the imaginative exercise the third element – the divine/spirit/god dimension. The nature of humanity (man-woman existence of the human being with all its variations) cannot be conceived without the nature – the cosmos and all that it implies, the material, elemental, dimensions that an anthropocene age seems to overlook or deny in hope of utopian better times. The misconception or the super dominance accorded to the “human-anthropos’ dimension has given rise to gargantuan problem of environmental crisis we are awakened to. Yet at the root of this misconception also lies the deathknell of the Godly, divine, spiritual of a still earlier age that has been downplayed and discounted. The Divine as the true origin and the true summation –ever elusive and infinitely – non graspable and constantly needing reframing; Yet at the same time as a circumincession of all three dimensions of the one reality. No Wo/Man without the World and God; No World without the Man-Woman and God and no God without the Wo/Man and World. This insight about reality is the most ancient and perennial of the wisdom traditions of the world.

The more we immerse in this eternal/perennial truth and appropriate it, we have the possibility of reimagining a future for US. Just as we search the ‘heavens’ for a future probably we need to trace cautiously the remaining fragments of the ancient in our modern times in the form of primeval communities, their conceptions, perceptions and vision of an idyllic life in and through, with and for Nature. The Lepchas and the Totos, the Adivasis and the Mountain communities have had an integral relation with nature which is still around us, to be observed, noted, imbibed and allow such visions to challenge our theories and practices, our proposals and projects. Which of the two routes may ultimately be favoured by the humanity inbuilt in Nature is a matter that the Divine throbbing in nature and the human might yet unveil in and through us for posterity.¹⁰

Finally to end on the note we began, if nature and the human in the game of the divine-human-nature combine that reality is truly understood, the non-mention of the divine is perceived and felt, lived and surrendered. This voyage into the truth of who we are in the nature for the divine is the true relationship that fulfils, sustains and nurtures. May our two days endeavour truly fructify in the better more wholesome future we have reimagined and are ever in the process of discovering.

The human side of the human nature relationship is one story to end our experience: the choice of people with other options around them choosing to live in a place makes you appreciate them the better. I think for instance of Dr Anand, on retirement from Delhi as Medical Officer choosing to live in Siliguri, offering his services to the poorest of the poor, the leprosy patients and free medical service to a mission hospital. He adds value to the region and the medical profession and the quality of human nature relationship in NB. Congratulations and many a thanks to the organizing team and each of the participants.

⁹ Biju Mathew & Terence Mukhia (eds.), “Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayan Communities”, *Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol III, (2012), No. 2.

¹⁰ George Thadathil, “Introduction: Positioning the Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayas “ in Biju Mathew & Terence Mukhia (eds.), *Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayan Communities*, *Salesian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol III, No, 2, (2012), 1-18.