

Editorial

Positioning the Indigenous Philosophies of the Himalayas

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Abstract

There is a growing 'globalisation', (an all-inclusive name for the present era of global connectedness) that undermines 'the politics of location' (being Dalit, Tribal, woman, Himalayan Primal peoples) into an illegible, irrelevant or even illegitimate category. However, this trend needs to be reversed and viewed from 'post national' standpoint that opposes the essentialisms of yesterday without being indifferent to place. Locations matter not because some places are superior or inferior to others but because places differ. These differences do not need to be celebrated, museumised or protected from contamination, but they must be allowed to survive. If social theory is partly shaped by its contexts, then 'we' – no matter who we are or where we are located – are better off with a multiplicity of such contexts.¹

To begin with three different meanings of the word 'indigenous' could be identified: first, anthropological, referring to people and their belongingness to a place; second, social scientific, referring to a theory of knowledge as an alternative to western dominant globalising knowledge systems; third, philosophical, referring to a combination of the above two in as much as indigeneity is a given to any culture and thus not a superimposition nor a retrieval, nor as standing in opposition to another. In this sense, it is an acknowledgement of the given location of every culture, people and knowledge. Besides, in this sense, every knowledge is indigenous and not something of an add-on or prerogative of some special group called the mountain people. It is also to be noted that no location is or provides an absolute viewpoint. Precisely for this reason multiple locations and viewpoints are a necessity. However, to promote and preserve 'location' from where alternatives are theorised becomes difficult because of the process of coopting that accompanies any genuine 'standpoint theory' that surfaces, or research knowledge that is trawled in.²

In the context of this seminar the word 'Philosophy' is to be taken in its broadest, most inclusive and inter-disciplinary (or in the traditional 'mother-of-all knowledge') sense of the word. Therefore, it refers to the worldview of a people, constantly in

1 Satish Deshpande, "The Practice of Social Theory and the Politics of Location," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV (March 7, 2009) 10, 40-45.

2 Cfr. The experience of Walter Fernandes and his research on 'Development Induced Displacement in Sikkim' awaiting publication. This research was carried out by NESRC, Guwahati and Salesian College, Sonada.

engagement with other worldviews, reformulating its own and contributing to that of others who come into contact with them. Specifically, given the multi-disciplinary perspective, the ethno-knowledge and its cultural as well as scientific permutations turn out to be plural. The explorative edge consists in the dialogue possibilities between the diverse 'philosophies' of the indigenous peoples.

The word 'Himalayas' refers to the geographical position of peoples living within its purview: an encounter between environment and peoples providing a particular texture to the land they inhabit as much as the texture of perceptions the environment impinges upon them.³ India has a mountainous landmass which constitutes 18 percent of the total area. Yet in these difficult terrains only 2 percent of the population resides. This partly is the reason for the feeling of alienation and distance from the mainland even in socio-psychological sense. The racial, linguistic divergences between the over 300 communities and between them and the rest of India adds to this sense of alienation. This has in turn given rise to separatist movements or ethnic-linguistic identity movements and also insurgencies. Though each such expression of aspiration requires a separate study the present work intends to look at the root issue behind these expressions of discontent. The aspiration of each individual and thereby one's community is to be acknowledged, recognised and accepted. When it comes to communities, therefore, cultural, linguistic religious matters (even of dress, food etc) becomes significant. Any of these can be used as expression of assertion of the identity in question. A culture in its language and religiosity, arts and architecture, music and literature, rites and rituals manifest a visible or invisible philosophy is the premise of the various presentations. Identifying these original sources as found in the above expressions is a way of building the people and thereby the nation.

In what follows, having clarified the terms, I shall touch upon three issues: first, the positioning of the discourse on indigeneity; second, look at the relationship between religion and worldview in a cursory manner and thirdly, introduce the papers of the issue.

Taking an overview of the knowledge production scene across the world Satish Deshpande comments that though there are thousands of intellectuals living outside the West when it comes to keeping alive the distinction between 'providing knowledge, or research and producing researchers' the generative ability to train and inspire those who will produce knowledge is 'fast disappearing from large parts of globe.'⁴ He attributes this to the fast globalising phenomenon of economy with a total subservience

3 Diaries of India Explorers 1866-1886: "these are original diaries of Indian explorers viz, Nain Singh, Kalian Singh Kishen Singh, Hari Ram, Ganga Ram, Mani and Lala. The diaries were received in 1953. The various memorable exploration journey undertaken by these Indian explorers in the trans-Himalayan region, Tibet and Central Asia are described in these diaries. It may be noted that relying on the information of these Indian surveyors, Trelawney Saunders produced his map of Tibet, which is found in Markham's "Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa" (London, 1879) and in Edwin T Atkinson's "The Himalayan Districts of the North-Western provinces of India", Allahabad, 1882, p. 193.

4 Satish Deshpande, op.cit. p. 45.

to those who control the monocultural worldview. Therefore as he asks 'how then are we to respond to the fact that everything in the present and foreseeable future seems to be working towards narrowing the number and nature of contexts from which the full spectrum intellectual activity remains viable?'⁵ It is also to be noted that similar attempts at reducing multiple voices (Tribal, Dalit, Feminist) occur at the national scene as well if one is to critically analyse the operative strategies of the rightwing fundamentalist forces.⁶ The rights of the Tribal peoples, Dalit peoples and voices of women who form more than half of the Indian population is being muffled, muted and sometimes outright negated. What forces are operating behind such intellectual as well as physical exterminations? What can we do in the face of such disregard for the values of the constitution and the democracy we take pride in? The response can only be an undimmed hope in the possible emergence of some theory, some networking, some empowering out of honest and humble efforts.

The 'indigenous' in this journal issue is not to be seen as yet another effort/attempt to museumise the past of the Lepcha, the Dogri or the Wancho through a preservation of their anthropological history or their medicinal knowledge systems through a semi scientific attempt. Rather, the indigeneity being researched, at least to my mind, is an attempt to keep open and alive the fact that a diverse range of research and discourse is on way even in apparently peripheral locations like Darjeeling-Sikkim. It is an attempt to explore the potential in resisting the centre-periphery distinction and resultant subordination of the latter that keeps happening. In other words, we are here to ask whether there is something that the small peoples, little traditions, vanishing tribes can still speak to the mega religionists, the post religionists, post-nationalists, by way of these communities' practices and beliefs as containing the roots of what it means to be genuinely a people. The notion of 'indigeneity' has value not only in terms of a neglected location or standpoint asserting itself but more so as engaging the privileged discourse on religion, worldview and philosophies from an originary, source-system-philosophy nexus encountered in primal religions. These offer life sustaining truth force even if camouflaged behind the cover of one or the other mega religious/philosophical visions.

The contribution of the 'indigenous' group's search for recognition can be seen firstly in the manner of containing differences by giving space for individuality as well as collectiveness. This is a norm that would sample with the feminists 'quilting' model or the 'unity in diversity' paradigm. Secondly, the critique that once indigeneity is submitted to it creates a closure and prevents historical cultural changes contains a response in the varying forms of adaptability manifested by these communities.⁷

5 *Ibid.*, 46.

6 Cfr. Harish Wankhade, "The Political Context of Religious Conversion in Orissa", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV (April 11, 2009)15, 33-38.

7 Cfr. Parvati Raghuram, Ajay Kumar Schoo, Brij Maharaj and Dave Sanghe, *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations*, Delhi, Sage Publications, 2009, p.42.

The move from indigenous to endogenous is precisely the response this critique has generated. As mentioned earlier, the heritage of tradition in small communities is not one without negotiations with the modernising interventions from outside. Despite such reworking, there is to be found a resistance and preservation of the 'traditional' is what endogenous knowledge systems proclaim. Thirdly, these mountain communities provide strategies for coping with hardships that are learned from nature friendly coexistence. The dissociation from nature which is essential to survival elsewhere is reversed in the way eco-friendly life gets promotion in mountain communities.⁸ Placing the above orientations together gives the outline of what is being claimed as an 'indigenous location' giving a theoretical framework. It consists of the language (Nepali, Dogri, Lepcha), the religion (rituals, folklore, beliefs) and the culture (derived out of its particular interaction with the environment giving rise to unique food habits, dress, style of habitat maintenance). In what follows we shall explore in some limited way the religious dimension of this triumvirate of indigeneity.

The religious diversity has been variously described: personal-impersonal; great-little traditions; cosmic-meta cosmic, organized-unorganized, of scripture and without scriptures, with founders and without founders, theoretical oriented and non-theoretic; orthodox/traditional and new age. There is also the delineation of the religious reality into the three broad categories of 'world religion', 'new religious movement' and 'indigenous religions'. Along these diverse categorisation process of religion and their underlying religious experiences what is attempted is to map the contours of the primordial religious experiences enshrined in practices that still continue even under the cover of meta-cosmic, major religious traditions of the indigenous communities along the Himalayan foothills of eastern India. The hill tribes have been agents of assimilation and resistance to the mainland practices whether political, social or religious.⁹ This can be and ought to be seen as part of a process of establishing their autonomy and means for claiming acknowledgement for their uniqueness is an underlying submission.

Study of indigenous religions is often taken to be an overflow from the anthropological studies on 'indigenous cultures'. In describing the varieties of religions or activities known as indigenous the focus is on 'finding the common ground'. In capturing the sense of 'indigeneity,' often the labels used - 'primitive,' 'archaic' and 'pre-literate' or

8 *Ibid.*

9 For instance, I would like to draw attention to a description that struck me while going through the people of India project on Scheduled Tribes. On page 12 second para it states that 'the Scheduled Tribes are mainly the followers of Hinduism.' It is stated that 87.05 percent of the total tribal population as per 1981 census is Hindu. It states that in comparing 1961 census with 1971 there is a lessening from 89.39% and that it 'is due to the rise of Christianity.' However, in the same page final paragraph it says, 'a major finding in terms of religion has been the continuance of the autonomy of the tribal religious system in spite of the tribe's close interaction with Christianity and Hinduism (or Buddhism as the Himalayan Tribal population of Sikkim and Himachal and Ladakh and Arunachal would show). Cfr. K S Singh (ed.), *People of India: The Scheduled Tribes*, National Series Volume III, Delhi, Anthropological Survey of India, Oxford University Press, 1994. See also Janet Rizvi, *Ladakh: Crossroad of High Asia*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, (Second Edition), 1996, p.167.

'non-literate' – turn out to be misnomers. The word 'primal' though objected to by Harvey as suggesting something of the 'archaic' meaning technologically simple could carry forward a positive meaning of being original and of the source. Any of these terms if intended to describe a people's situation to be replaced by 'western rationality' or by any 'one of the missionizing world religions' would be a problem notwithstanding the possibility of agency being granted to these communities to rework these intrusions to their advantage. How they attempt this reworking and recording the same is the project we are and ought to be engaged in.

In capturing the indigeneity of the religious experience there is a stress and emphasis on the 'traditional.' It is 'indicative of strong links to remember past activities and intimates various interesting ways of encouraging memory, acknowledgment and observance.'¹⁰ It refers to the non-personal power animating all of reality, visible and invisible and approximation of that power through religious activity and its manipulation for the personal and community benefit. In this sense every 'tribe' is a nation however small and localised numerically or spatially and not to be taken in its pejorative use by the dominant forces to subdue and assimilate peoples at the peripheries to bring them into the mainstream of language and religion shelving their ethnic identity and uniqueness.

In contrast, the indigenous experience is viewed within the alternative modernity scheme by scholars, be it in the studies on religion or medicinal knowledge systems¹¹ and be it of Australian Aboriginals or African populations or Indian Tribals and Dalits.¹²

10 Graham Harvey, *Indigenous Religions*, New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002, pp. 8-9. The category 'non-literate' or 'preliterate' while emphasising the fact that many indigenous groups had an inclination or practice of writing down ceremonies or meditative or ritual processes it however exposes other problems as shown by Graham Harvey: first though the Mayan people did write their religion they did not differ vastly from their non-literate neighbouring religions, second, in prioritising/privileging writing in the same breath the 'power and adequacy' of other oral, artistic dramatic forms of communication are dismissed; thirdly, the privileging of written literature is another way of acceding to the dominance of 'texts' in world religions, and thus in turn 'legitimizes' and gives undue positional value to the 'hierarchical authority of experts' above the lived experience of 'ordinary people'. Besides, it also is a means by which as from protestantist reformational enlightenment valuation lack of individualism is loaded as a negative point of reference. Finally, and this is most to be noted, it refers to the past when indigenous peoples did not take to writing, but, contemporaneously much is being written about.

11 Traditional knowledge systems (TKS) are the corpus of accumulated folk knowledge gained through trial and error through millennia. This folk knowledge therefore has a parental relationship to the elite science. The micro-variations in the ambient and the harsh environment of the hills have been responsible for the extremely rich community knowledge systems and a bio diversity necessary for sustainability of human life here. The mountain people also cultivate many lesser known crops and medicinal plants and this biodiversity is of immense value for the future, for genetics, health and breeding. Most of the village people depend upon the Himalayan medicine system rather than allopathy. There are folk medicines to treat animals; Naulas are a water hydrology technique, traditional domestic architecture enables people to build quake resistant houses. Traditional technology to distil alcohol for drinking, food and beverages; Technology for dyeing wool and cotton through natural dyes are examples. Despite its reliability and sacredness, utility and perennial relevance it's under threat of being displaced and lost for posterity. (D P Agarwal, Sameer Jamal, Manikant Shah (eds), *Traditional Knowledge System and Archaeology*, New Delhi, Aryan Books International, 2009).

12 Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture, and Indigenous Philosophy*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2004; Cfr. V.Sujatha & Leena Abraham, "Medicine, State and Society," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLIV (April 18, 2009)

Some would like to link the indigenous experience as a continuation of the vitalism that Henri Bergson referred to; a promotion of the primal life force into modernity, against modernity and seeking its own modernity. In this worldview the earth is a 'magical territory perceived as the extension of the community body in relation to the ancestors'.¹³

Relationship to God, in African Tribal religions is a comparative case in this regard. In a number of traditions, the supreme God is not any farther nor less active than other entities: it is the mode of His presence and action, which is different. It is not human being who commands His manifestations. He has neither temple nor priests. One does not pray, one does not offer sacrifices, one only thanks Him. He gives those things which human beings need and it is offensive to ask Him 'for one does not tell the boss what he should do.'¹⁴ It is up to the human beings not to place any obstacles to the circulation of God's gift. It is up to him to re-establish the harmony with all creatures. He does it through a collective meal as a sign of communion with God, with spirits with ancestors, and human beings. It is not a question of mediation nor an efficacious right to placate God, but a gesture of communion to signify that human beings are disposed to receive his gifts. Love does not constitute the background of this relation and it is difficult to speak of an alliance because an alliance is tied to a cult and gives its *raison d'être*. God is not the principal object of cult in animist religions. According to Goetz "the ultimate conduct of God is to leave to human beings to decide for themselves in what concerns them... He is a gentleman more than a Lord, who, having decided to create human beings, free and responsible, plays the game till the very end. He is too great to make histories."¹⁵

The traditional conception of the divinely human and humanly divine religiosity is best seen in the diverse forms of accessing the spiritual realm found in various communities. Hitchcock comments that

16, 35-43.

13 Cfr. Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Melbourne, University of Melbourne, 2004; http://www.api-network.com/cgi-bin/page?archives/jas81_grossman. Besides the attempt to invest the traditional religiosity with a philosophical explanation would mean being personal is an attribute of having body. The personal-impersonal traditions of talking about God have this defining feature from the human side of the relation. The infinite, bodiless absolute is mirrored in the worldly anthropomorphic human language in its relationality from the personal view point. God incarnates, reveals, cares, loves and is compassionate and forgiving, just and impartial. The ideal father figure or deity emerges as being kind and benevolent. The impersonal tradition pictures or mirrors the nature of the divine from the other side of 'being' as it were. Being minus the human reduction of being: neither above nor below; neither complete nor is there a lack; there is no possibility to qualify, to describe, to measure, to imagine. Instead, it is the beyond or the absolute within. All relationality is reduced to being a characteristic of 'bodiliness'. God is author of being and non-being. His being encompasses all lack, absence, which is but another name to his mode of being. Understanding God as being and non-being is equivalent to saying he is God of life and death, of creation and what was before creation, of all perfection and what was before and will be after the visible perfections seen in the world.

14 Eloi Messi Metogo, "Dialogue Between Christianity and African Traditional Religions" in G Patrick and S Fiorenza, (eds.), *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2008, pp. 412-13.

15 *Ibid.*

“the phenomena of trance and possessions have a sense of immediacy of everyday importance, but a part of their fascination for the observer is the knowledge of how central they have always been in human experience. The central feature, a belief that we can enter into a direct and very personal communication with another world – was probably born with self-consciousness and the ability to talk.”¹⁶

In looking into ways in which possession has been understood two orientations can be noted: one, 'a movement of the soul outward and upward to immerse itself in what lay beyond'; the other, 'when what lay beyond came inward and penetrated the soul.'¹⁷ Flight as a symbol of mystical experience, feather as a symbol of the flight that takes to connection with the world beyond is central to many communities. The mediators of this experience become significant persons in the community. Shamans are in control of the psychic world of the possessed as well as the community that want an interpretation of the possession. In this regard they resemble psychiatrists. Shaman is one whose personality resonates empathetically with the possessed and the family kith and kin. It is a process of curing.¹⁸

The connection between the various mountain communities and their attraction for Buddhist religious worldview, especially of the influence Tibetan lamas have had can be considered as resulting from their representation in the community as shamans. Proposing this thesis B. N. Aziz distinguishes among Lamas 'tulku' from 'rinponche' the former being the one particularly having the status of a reincarnated being. The possession by spirit of the shaman is what makes this individual revered and act as mediator, healer, and spiritual guide.¹⁹

The second reason for the Buddhist prevalence among the Himalayan communities could be the great stress Tantrism places on rituals, be it in Hevajra tantra or in Mahakala.²⁰ The impact of Shamanism in Tantric Buddhism and both among the primal peoples can be approached from three perspectives: first, as signifying the importance

16 John T. Hitchcock and Rex L. Jones (eds.), *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas*, Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1976, p.xiv.

17 *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

18 Cfr. Bhargavi V Davar and Madhura Lohokare, “Recovering from Psychosocial Traumas: The Place of Dargahs in Maharashtra” in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XLIV, (April 18, 2009), No. 16, 60-66. To quote: “The research indicates that psychosocial realities for many individuals do include a person-centric relationship with some notion of the transcendental. The transcendental concept with which a person relates psychosocially and spiritually may be god, a guru, sant, pir, or infact, a revolutionary notion of utopia. The healing at the dargahs suggests that *rather than any structured system of religion, theology or the primacy of (any kind of) word or scripture, a chaotic and spontaneous approach to an intensely personal embodied and multi-sensory experience of transcendence, including shamanic and primal practices and experiences may bring psycho-spiritual relief in everyday life to a vast number of people.*” (Emphasis added).

19 The karmapa of 16 generations or Dalai Lama of 14 generations indicates the continuity of a spirit over different bodies and across time. This ofcourse raises the question of understanding the nature of the 'person' – whether it is individuated as in traditional psychology or fragmented as in postmodern psychology. Cfr. Hitchcock and Rex, op.cit., p. 343 ff.

20 Tomy Augustine, *Metaphysics of Yoga Tantra: Theory and Praxis in the Hevajra Tantra - A Metaphysical Perspective*, New Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications, 2008.

of ritual, 'a kind of cauldron that contains the totality of culture's symbols' usable for religious recreational and healing purposes. It is not only to be ethnographically analysed but also to be experienced as to have a fuller, scientific understanding of the proposition. Second, the tantric or vajrayanic framework can be seen as a cultural system: especially a medical-cultural system providing well being and meaning to a variety of expressions within the community. Third, as a cross-cultural dimension revealing more than comparison and contrasts a social adaptation over the centuries wherein the traditional and the modern, the cosmic and meta-cosmic have merged.

In the above sense 'certain myths and symbols, rather than arising out of a particular community, have in fact given rise to societies and cultures.' Thus for example, when we note that there are very distinctive creation myths to be found in different tribal societies, one could suggest that the 'tribe came into being as a distinct entity only at the moment it had a myth to live by and which gave a whole community a sense of corporal identity.'²¹ It goes to state that the creation myth itself creates a culture. This is very poignant in terms of what we could delineate of the vision of people and their cultural expression. Visions are linked to myths. It is reminiscent of what Hannah Arendt is to have said: 'Thinking does not lead to Truth. Truth is the beginning of Thought'. Raimon Panikkar refers similarly to this linkage when he affirms that mythos give rise to logos. Myth is not a collective fiction, rather the matrix in which thinking emerges. Myths point to an apprehension of truth at the preverbal, pre-logos level to which all thinking and thought aspires.

In other words, looking into the religious world of the primal/indigenous communities "what we are calling creative imagination in an individual or society is not something that exists in isolation from the outer world of creation, which we call Nature. Nature, so to say, is the ground of all human creativities."²² It is found most visibly in the manner in which indigenous peoples interact with land. Nature/land is what sustains their religious symbolism and philosophical intuitions. The primal vision of primal peoples reveals a distinctive attitude towards the land. 'The Land is not seen as something static or inert, into which a culture is implanted,' rather, Land is itself alive and organic. Human beings cannot possess land but can only belong to the land; can only share in its creative potential. This intrinsic linkage is basis of all values of tribal/primal life.²³ The preservation of nature and its ecological balance therefore is a manner in which the traditional and modern are brought together to redefine the future of life on earth.

The reason for the study of traditional worldviews, ways of living and especially of indigenous peoples is born of the conviction that 'no religion or culture as it exists

21 Jyoti Sahi, "Cosmos and Primal Permanence: An Artists' Perspective on Indian Symbol and Myth" in David C Scott and Israel Selvanayagam, (eds.), *Revisioning India's Religious Traditions: Essays in honour of Eric Lott*, Bangalore UTC & ISPCK, 1999, p. 170.

22 *Ibid.*, p.167.

23 *Ibid.*

historically can lay claim to fullness.¹²⁴ This premise leads to reinscribing prevailing notion of revelation in more than one major world religions. 'Revelation comes through the other. God comes to us as the stranger, as a person who reaches out to us as the other.'¹²⁵ The goal of such an enterprise, as envisaged by Jyoti Sahi is "to reinstate and reaffirm the importance of all those sources of spirituality, which are indigenous to the peoples, and to find ways in which once again a living relationship based on love and trust can be created."¹²⁶

In the final section we take a look at the papers being presented in this issue of the journal and within the overall outlining the orientation thus far.

Lama introduces the communities of Himalayan region, specifically Darjeeling-Sikkim as having served the cause of civilisational progress, through sustainable development and as actors of a cultural barricade against the onslaught of the foreigner across the borders. He also spells out the contours of further study and policy analysis educational institutions like Sikkim University needs to undertake in order to strengthen the Himalayan people's traditional wisdom and heritage. Lama overviews the possibilities and potential the region contains in terms of projecting its future engagement for protecting the borders, preserving sustainable development and promoting the diversity. He puts forward the proactive role educational institutions can play in recovering and showcasing the unique knowledge base of the indigenous communities for a wider appreciation and mutual benefit.

Plathottam approaches the issue of indigenous cultures as providing for the rich diversity and gives ample examples to impress the fact. However the main thrust seems to revolve around the precaution India needs to take as a people to preserve the rich heritage of diversity and therefore cautions the dangerous ideology of cultural nationalism as having to be demoted in order to positively promote Indian secularism.

Magotra in revisiting the traditional folk ballads of the Dogra people attempts to emphasize the perenniality of human values and the human conduit for the preservation of such values being idols and heroes of a later age. The paper also draws out the significance of poetry and ballad as popular expressions for dissemination of values and for knitting together a culture whether pre-modern or post-modern. Pathania unearths the traditional folk wisdom contained within the wisdom couplets of the folk tradition of Dogra people amassed over centuries of interaction with nature and as a

24 In India as elsewhere, a number of communities practice different forms of nature worship. One such significant tradition is that of providing protection to patches of forests dedicated to deities and or ancestral spirits. These patches of forests are known as sacred groves. It is a very ancient practice and once widespread in most parts of the world. It is estimated that in India there are over two lakhs such groves. Groves are rich heritage and play an important role in religion and socio-cultural life of local people. These ecosystems harbour many endangered and rare plant and animal species. Kailash C Malhotra, Yogesh Gokhale, Sudipto Chatterjee & Sanjiv Srivastava (eds.), *Sacred Groves in India*, Aryan Books International, 2009, (inner flap).

25 Jyoti Sahi, *op.cit*, p.163.

26 *Ibid.*, p.164.

process of nurturance of communities and significant persons within the communities. These folk sayings are literally interpreted and yet could offer even further avenues for unveiling the worldview of the people.

Lingdamo makes an argument that the traditional anthropological attempt at describing indigenous communities and their practices led to the false enumeration of the religious practices of the Lepchas as animism. Taking a critical look as an insider into the religious beliefs and worldviews of the Lepcha, Lingdamo negates the theory of animism and dares to claim full right as any religion would for the belief world of the Lepchas. Substantiating this above claim from phenomenological perspective, Pradhan makes an in depth assessment of the contemporary status of Lepchas as an indigenous community by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. She regards their fight for survival as hinging upon their success in preserving their language and promoting its script against odds of lessening population and apathetic neglect on the part of the government despite constitutional provision to preserve the linguistic minority's identity. Carrying it further Dennis attempts an insider's assessment of the present day situation of Lepchas and traces their arrival at the present juncture beginning with the worldview and philosophy that conditioned the thinking of a people and their life style. He identifies the close knit life with nature and the contrariety of the divine as characteristic features that still seep through the way of life despite Buddhist and Christian belief system trying to overlay. The claim for a unique position among the Himalayan communities by all of the above authors is further meticulously argued by Samuel by opening up the possibility of resurrecting an indigenous philosophy out of the wisdom saying of the Lepcha community and details out how a worldview arises out of the in depth life experiences of a people closely knit to one of the best and most beautiful human habitats the earth provides – the Himalayan valleys and mountainous terrain with its rich vegetation, flora and fauna. His philosophical enterprise of reading into the consciousness of a people and deriving the cosmic, human, divine dimensions of reality perception is flawless and much could be expected out of the project onto which he is set.

Francis attempts to gather from the influences of modern education, healthcare, agricultural technology and a religious faith the impact these had on the life style and worldview of the people of Pedong. The opening these mountainous communities received through the missionary intervention leading to the initiation into the modern world of communication and technology and better agriculture and industry is by and large perceived as a positive enhancement of the cultural transition the Himalayan communities have undergone. While Francis attempts a critical look at the impact the communities around Pedong have had due to Christian Missions, Terence attempts an assessment of the transition the Tamang community underwent in encountering Buddhism, and later, resisting Hinduisation. Religion and culture of a community, a tribe or a people coalesce. In search of identity, communities that have traversed the religious terrain of more than one culture or the cultural terrain of more than one

religion then have a problem of specifically defining themselves. The tribal communities seem to corroborate the helicopter theory, going by the story of Tamangs, that once a metacosmic affiliation is achieved its difficult for another metacosmic religion to make inroads, just like once a helicopter lands, there is no place for another on the narrow mountainous strips. The history of Tamangs as being traced by Terence shows how the Tibetan Bon religion has been superimposed by Buddhism and later the challenge of induction into Hinduism was resisted and had created devaluation of the community status. The Nepali language and the Buddhist culture get merged over the original tribal identity of the Tamangs and they are still in search of privileged status among the hill communities of Darjeeling.

Xavier P Mao attempts an articulation of the perils surrounding the emerging field of Tribal Philosophy in India with special reference to North East and the Naga tribal society in particular. The issue of worldview undergoing change as a result of massive transitions in religious affiliation over the past century and the role that a recovery of traditional worldview could play for an alternative future underlie his work. Tribal philosophies have been in vogue for long and contemporarily in more demand as growing number of universities are promoting new departments. The transition from an oral culture to literate tradition underlies the very attempt to codify a tribal philosophy. Mao shows that there are problems with reading into the tribal way of life without adequately knowing its culture which is dependent upon one's painstaking entry into the language and dialect of the community. The love for freedom of the tribal as found among Nagas in particular constitutes their moral and ethical consciousness. Vattoth surveys the indigenous communities spread across the length and breadth of Arunachal Pradesh from an anthropological perspective and highlights few characteristic features of each community having dealt with the specific and the historical development of the policies that marked out the state as a special status region. He ends by focusing on one of the more prominent tribes, the Wanchos whom he had the privilege of closely observing as he lived many years with them seeing them adjust to the changing modern times.

Jogendra Nath in his study of Tani group of tribes in Arunachal and Assam comes across the unique phenomenon of communities having a worldview that does not encompass the notion of a Supreme Being or a Higher God. He identifies their nature driven life and context as conditioning their thinking and their notion of afterlife and life of socially determined norms and customs as self-containing and self-explanatory without having recourse to an ultimate being even as in Confucian Philosophy.

This project of indigenous philosophies of the Himalayan communities has been initiated with a firm belief that mountain peoples and the indigenous population across the world deserve a respect and allegiance that has been taken away from them in the craze for modern ways and modern knowledge production. This disconnect is exposed when we look into the manner in which sustainable use of forests and

natural resources have been conducted by the tribal and indigenous communities over the millennia in comparison to modern depleting tendencies and craze for searching for the same in other planets as a matter of survival. This contrast between the desire to survive on earth and desire to survive beyond the earth by escaping into an unknown future demarcates the two attitudes to life. Pushpa has highlighted the former survival oriented philosophy of the indigenous peoples by relying on their medicinal, agricultural and community oriented holistic practices. Finally, Sujata Miri is vividly emphatic in her assertion that the alterity of the Tribal worldview be given its due place not only by letting them be to speak and carry forward their past but also in as much as the rest of the world be prepared to listen to their voices and rework the dominant perspectives so as to save the earth for posterity.

We are passing through a phase in our history as a nation wherein both the concept of indigeneity as well as the notion of Himalayan is undergoing fast change. (The Himalayan ranges have been recently redefined and the area relocated as to reduce the extent of reach of Himalayas). There is a shift in attention given to the Himalayan region firstly in the way the very definition of the region is undergoing change, and secondly in the shift from preservation through museumisation to the efforts to concentrate on the species of flora and fauna as well as sub-tribes and their artefacts that are on the verge of extinction being preserved and promoted as community assets.²⁷ The seminar invited scholars working on the indigenous communities of the Himalayan (East, Central and West) mountain ranges from Leh/Ladak to Arunachal Pradesh to contribute to this project. The Himalayan region can be divided into three groups: first the north eastern states from Sikkim to Arunachal and other states where the cultural traditions are relatively well preserved; the second the middle region consisting of Uttaranchal where the Himalayan eco-system has been severely damaged and third, the northern-western Himalayas consisting of Himachal Pradesh, Kashmir and Ladakh where both the Lama cultural traditions and the Hindu-Islamic traditions survive. As a result three sets of development and preservation related issues can be said to arise depending on the region being focused. Few mountain systems have influenced the psyche of people as have the Himalayas. There are certain similarities from north eastern to north western Himalayas. The major influence has been the Lamaism from North, the Christian worldview that came in the wake of colonialism and the influences of the plains. As of now, there is no institution to study the Himalayan region as a whole. The attempt is to provide indicators for taking the region at the policy planning level more seriously by highlighting one or the other factors in the papers selected for inclusion.

In its actualisation as a seminar publication this issue continues the celebration of how people are constantly reinventing their own culture, language, self identity, given

²⁷ I came to know of this redefining from the dialogue with Ashok Acharya, staff, NAI Annexe, Shashtri Bhawan, Ministry of Culture, New Delhi, on 30 March 2009. Some of the above information is from their website.

the inputs that come from across the world, in a fast globalising time, and yet, succeed in varying degrees to keep alive and re-knit tradition onto the shifting surfaces of modernity and post modernity. Our attempt has been to capture, with limited success inevitably, the contours of this transition in early twenty first century in the Himalayan Communities represented here in this volume.