

Bioregional Existence of the Indigenous Occupying the Sundarbans

Dr. Diana Joe
Assistant Professor
Department of Basic Science and Humanities
Rajagiri School of Engineering and Technology (Autonomous), Kochi-682 039, Kerala

Abstract

The majority of the world's indigenous population has always had a strong relationship with their land, which is reflected in their daily activities and through their reverence for the deity that they believe in. By bringing in the various bioregional features, this paper attempts to throw light upon the sustainable practices that are still practiced in the ever-evolving Sundarbans which is also the world's largest archipelago.

Keywords

Sundarbans; Indigenous; Sustainable living; Ecology

The term bioregion was first coined by the Canadian writer, Allen Van Newkirk, and was popularised by Peter Berg, who along with Raymond Dasmann, a renowned ecologist introduced it in an essay titled "Reinhabiting California." To Berg,

A bioregion is defined in terms of the unique overall pattern of natural characteristics that are found in a specific place. The main features are generally found throughout a continuous geographic terrain and include a particular climate, local aspects of seasons, landforms, watersheds, soils, native plants, and animals.

People are also counted as an integral aspect of a place's life as can be seen in the ecologically adaptive cultures of early inhabitants, and in the activities of present-day reinhabitants who attempt to harmonize in a sustainable way with the place where they live. (Bioregionalism)

While a biome is a biotic community having its own distinct fauna and flora, a bioregion includes human beings and their cultural activities in the region. The basic characteristics of a bioregion are naturalness, particularity, territoriality, decentralized governance, and self-sufficiency. The people occupying a particular space have numerous experiences with that space and ultimately it becomes a 'place'. "These experiences are something that people know through their senses and not just through their cerebral understanding". (Selvamony, *A Bioregional Reading of Some Australian Texts*) The bioregion ceases to be a mere backdrop for human survival. "It is a place where human beings dwell by "following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site". (Berg and Dasmann 217)

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest area is situated on the delta where the three rivers, Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna meet the sea. Covering an area of 10,000 square kilometers, it sprawls across India and Bangladesh. The name 'Sundarbans', meaning 'the beautiful forest', is believed to have been derived from a common species of mangrove – the "sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*" (*The Hungry Tide* 8). According to UNESCO, Sundarbans is situated in a unique bioclimatic zone within a typical geographical situation in the coastal region of the Bay of Bengal, forming the landmark of ancient heritage of mythological and historical events. The site supports exceptional biodiversity in its terrestrial, aquatic, and marine habitats; ranging from micro to macro flora and fauna. It supports a wealth of animal species including the single largest population of Bengal tiger and a number of other threatened aquatic mammals such as the Irrawaddy and Gangetic River dolphins. The Sajnakhali area, listed as an important Bird Sanctuary, contains a wealth of waterfowl holding high importance for migratory birds. The Sundarbans provides a significant example of ongoing ecological processes as it

represents the process of delta formation and the subsequent colonization of the newly formed deltaic islands and associated mangrove communities. These processes include monsoon rains, flooding, delta formation, tidal influence, and plant colonization. A terrain that keeps evolving once in a few years, Sundarbans is highly eco-sensitive and the inhabitants are aware of this fact and live their life accordingly.

The Sundarbans are been maintained by the inhabitants with a perfect bifurcation of the wild and the inhabited. The people who accept the harsh realities adhere to the division of the land of eighteen tides into two halves and this reveals the compulsion of the indigenous to give a rightful share to the non-human world as they have an equal need to exist as the humans do. This adherence occurs without questioning and the first tenet of ecopsychology which claims that “unconscious processes exist ... not only in relation to other people, but to the earth itself” (Hasbach 119) is evidenced here. For the inhabitants of Sundarbans, Bon Bibi, the guardian deity of the forests is the protector of the villagers. The relationship between the human settlers and the predators is nowhere more clearly verbalized than in the legend of Bon Bibi. This deity along with her twin brother Shah Jongoli becomes the cultural artifact that binds together culture and conservation. They protect the villagers from the demon king Dokkhin Rai who takes the form of a tiger devouring humans who venture into his territory.

Bon Bibi is portrayed as a deity who is well aware of the frictional relationship that exists between the human world and the natural world. Nature can be detrimental to humans, as men could be killed by wild animals, and in turn, man could be greedy by usurping more than what he needs from the forest. Hence the covenant of mutual respect is always expected. The legend insists that self-provisioning is legitimate, but profit is not because if every human who ventures into the forest is keen on profit-making, the forest would be plundered off its resources as it happens in various parts of the world. Frederick Turner posits, “the (human) species’ ancient wisdom (as it) is preserved in myths, rituals, fairy tales, and the traditions of the performing arts” (49). The Indigenous instincts reveal the fact that the protection of Nature is very much in the hands of the one who uses it. As

Vandana Shiva postulates, “In the indigenous setting, sacredness is a large part of conservation. Sacredness encompasses the intrinsic value of diversity; sacredness denotes a relationship of the part to the whole—a relationship that recognizes and preserves integrity” (*Ecofeminism* 169).

Despite these raging storms that affect the settlers’ life tremendously, people still continue to live in the storm-tossed islands. The indigenous have adjusted their lifestyle in such a way that they take in only the required quality of food for survival and any greed is considered to be against the wish of their ruling deity. Here “the sacred, natural, and human entities coexist in the same place nurturing an integrative relationship with each other” (Selvamony, *Oikopoetic method* 44) The main livelihood of the settlers are extraction of honey and catching of fish from rivers, lakes, and rivulets. There are quite a few sustainable conservation practices carried on by the indigenous people of the Sundarbans.

People who consider the wild as sacred allude to the ecological belief that, “Environment is not an ‘other’ to us but part of our being” (‘The Place of Place’ 55). Although their income is very meager, their biological adaptation, together with their spiritual beliefs, demand that they utilize the forest in a sustainable manner. To Annu Jalais, an environmental anthropologist, “... the forest is seen as the realm where all are welcome to partake in its ‘food’ as long as this does not act to the detriment of those who need it most—whether tigers, deer, or small fishers and crab collectors” (75). Since forest equalizes, the little shelters erected in Bon Bibi’s honour are rarely located in a person’s homestead but along tracks or pathways to protect, to ‘show the way’, to all who travel along those paths. The most important shrines though are located within the precinct of the forest, in small clearings along the banks of rivers. It is to be noted that humans belonging to Paleolithic and Neolithic period lacked the hierarchical order and they possessed an evolutionary history that was formed through, “coevolving with nature” (Hasbach 123).

The settlers are also very keen on keeping the forest in its pristine beauty by not leaving behind any trace of human intrusion. Annu Jalai’s interaction with the natives reveals that to have a ‘pure heart’ one has to respect some very specific rules such as:

keeping quite in the forest, not defecating, urinating or spitting directly on jungle land or in the river, nor throwing *bidi* butts or burnt pieces of wood either in the river or in the forest, nor washing the soot off utensils nor combing hair, nor dropping one's axe, nor inadvertently making any mark on a tree. The islanders also have to eat up any cooked food in the boat before alighting on the forest territory as a symbol of penury. Entering the forest on certain days such as on the new moon or the full moon, or before 7 a.m. or after 4 p.m. is seen as 'disturbing' animals. (84).

The inhabitants are seen to adhere to a very important tenet of ecopsychology which states that, "wildness in the natural world often involves what is big, untamed, unmanaged, not encompassed, self-organizing, and unencumbered and unmediated by technological artifice. We can love the wild. We can fear it. We are strengthened and nurtured by it" (Hasbach 124). They never try to tame the wildness of the Sundarbans but love it along with the fear that strengthens and nurtures them.

Although life in Sundarbans is too tedious and uncomfortable when compared to the plains of Bengal, the settlers prefer the flood-drenched landscape because they have a thorough knowledge of the riverine land and they are used to the humid climate that the plains rarely offer. The indigenous have always had a strong relationship with the natural elements around them, which is reflected in their social and religious life. These values have triggered the sustainable co-existence of people and Nature, which modern man, who is overtly exposed to industrialization, has failed to recognize and respect. As Nietschmann states,

The vast majority of the world's biological diversity is not in gene banks, zoos, national parks, or protected areas. Most biological diversity is in landscapes and seascapes inhabited and used by local peoples, mostly indigenous, whose great collective accomplishment is to have conserved great variety of remaining life forms, using culture, the most powerful and valuable human resource, to do so (7).

Indigenous communities are dependent upon Nature, and the wisdom of not depriving future generations is to be found only in the culture of those people who are

dependent upon earth's natural resources, the forests. Although the people of the farming community place their lives in accordance with the crops cultivated, they are forced by various factors to use pesticides, insecticides, and other harmful chemicals in order to reap profit. The constant usage of unnatural growth instigators leads to the depletion of the soil's fertility and the future generation is left to use the most unfertile and corrupted earth, thus making it unworthy to cultivate. The concept of 'now or never' is flourishing in the industrial and agricultural sectors that portray the self-obsession of the present generation. The thought of what would be left for the future, as our ancestors have left behind for us to benefit, rarely occurs in today's ever-greedy world.

The native settlers of Sundarbans emphasize that they never exploit the natural resources of the tidal country beyond their basic need and never dare to cross the line of control set by Bon Bibi, in the same way as the animals in Kipling's stories avoid killing for choice because they consider it demeaning as seen in the case of Sher Khan, the tiger. Though Sher Khan speaks of his right to kill for choice [he had killed a man], the Jungle is of an entirely different opinion and the other animals felt that Sher Khan, by this very act, had "tainted the good water" (18). The natives of the Sundarbans kill animals only out of necessity or defense and at other times they are quite aware to veer away from unlawful hunting. But the outside forces, fail to achieve harmony when they poach animals and slaughter trees for commercial needs in order to satisfy their gluttonous greed. The bioregional existence thus contributes to a sustainable living that is beneficial for healthy survival and the indigenous people are stewards of the world's highly threatened biodiversity.

References

- Berg Peter, *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology Of Northern California*. Planet Drum Foundation. First Edition, 1978. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2004.

Jalais, Annu. *Forests of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2010.

Kahn, Jr., Peter H and Patricia H. Hasbach. *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems, and the Technological Species*. Editors, Peter H. Kahn, Jr., and Patricia H Hasbach. Cambridge: The MIT P, 2012.

Kipling, Rudyard. *The Jungle Book*. London: Zed Books, 2007.

Nietschmann, Bernard. *The Interdependence of Biological and Cultural Diversity*. Kenmore, WA: Centre for Wild Indigenous Studies, Occasional Paper 21, 1992.

Selvamony, Nirmal. Introduction. "A Bioregional Reading of Dome Australian Texts." *Australia and India: Convergence and Divergences*. Third International Conference of the Indian Association For the Study Of Australia. U of Pune, Pune. 2006. (Reading)

Shiva Vandhana. *Staying Alive: Women Ecology and Development*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988.

Turner, Fredrick. "Cultivating The American Garden." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: U of Georgia P. 1990.