

# ECOLOGY AND MAN: TRIBAL INTERACTION WITH NATURE IN TELANGANA

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is an attempt to pursue on how the nature was used and abused by man in the first half of 20th century in the Telangana. All the tribes developed a culture that had respect towards the ecology in which they live. Till recent times, research on tribes was mostly confined to socio-religious and economical issues. Studying tribal culture in ecological paradigm is an attempt to go for constructing comprehensive history. The natural formations and environment undoubtedly influenced the history and in tune with this environment aboriginals of Telangana like elsewhere has evolved and developed their own way of lifestyle. The article is intended to examine the relationship between forest dwellers, forests and forest policies of the State in historical context along with geophysical-tribal-ecological background of Telangana. This paper of tribes and their culture in correlation with Ecology has become one of the emerging aspects of recent cultural and ecological investigations. Under present study, efforts were made to study on both tribal culture in correlation with nature and implementation of Nizam's forest policies in the first half of twentieth century from environmental point of view.

## INTRODUCTION:

J.R. Christy has presented this idea in an attempt to explain about the human activities and their way of looking towards various problems of life. Anthropologists, Sociologists, Environmentalists and recently historians are in the queue all around the world with intentions and attempts to explain the existing relationship between nature, human and human related activities. Being part of it, tribal communities evolved as one of the historical entities which are part of larger multi ethnic society with specific cultural traits. The present chapter is an attempt to locate material and non-material culture of tribes of from ecological point of view. The general perception regarding study of ecology means dealing something related to nature and human world has nothing to do with nature but this is a narrow concept. It has also something to do with those factors in natural environment that constantly work in shaping man and his culture. According to few eminent scholars, environmental history has something fishy in this regard but it too has certain parameters like study of human engagement over time with the physical environment, of

the environment as context, agent, and influence in human history. This does not mean that environmental history is bounded by strong and rigid boundary. Culture and continues with discussion on some of the economic, socio and religious aspects of tribes of Telangana and their ecological viability.

Here my area of observation lies i.e. how man responds to the conditioned circumstances of nature or ecology. It differs from society to society and each has its own hallmark of Uniqueness. It is acquired through struggles and sheer efforts of concerned society or tribe. But contradictory to this it is looked as something that man is not born with, but something man is born into. In the case of animals, their genes play a very important role and in the case of humans, learning, training and socialization play an important role than genes. The essence of Determinism school of thought says that human history, culture, life style and stage of socio-economic development of people re controlled by physical environment. Both human beings and animals adopt the environment some or other way. In the words of V. Gordon Childe, "Animals hereditary equipment is adapted to perform limited number of operations in a particular environment. Man's extra corporal equipment can be adjusted to an almost infinite number of operations in almost any environment" i.e., animals have to depend on their biological organs. However, in human beings culture helps in adaptations to the environment more efficiently. Every community has its own cultural identity; one can identify them through their practices, tradition, customs and spiritual applications. Similarly, tribes too have their own culture, which stands out from the rest, mostly shaped by their surroundings (ecology in present context).

The present area of discussion is obviously round the tribes of Telangana who too have developed their own culture in correlation with their environment and it has brought them an identity. This cultural diversity is a kind of natural heritage given to man by nature in this district. This diversity has come under siege owing to the domination or influence of a number of aspects. Intention behind arguing around this is an attempt to present that the tribes and their eco-friendly culture is one of the valuable knowledge acquired by man from the lessons taught b nature. Stress of external factors is making such ecofriendly culture vulnerable that caused it

to stand on the verge of extinction. To understand the above said lines more clearly the relationship of man and nature. There is much more to the relationship between man and environment, other than simple adaptation. To understand more clearly the cultural activities of man in relation to nature one has to understand how difficult it is for man than animal as he is born on this mother earth without any safety gadgets to protect himself. Human mind is more mature enough than of her animals and this is his sole and powerful weapon to survive. He is not only has to put his mind to create implements and tools but also for using them efficiently. Based upon this efficiency only man's prospect of being alive depends.

### **Socio-Religious Aspects of Tribes in Correlation with Ecology**

Geographical Background in 'Kalpasutras' makes it clear that how physical environments play an important role in shaping habits, customs and manners of people. i.e. The pattern of culture is largely determined by geographical conditions. Many peculiar things embodied in the sutras owe its origin to the geographical conditions of India. Inadequate knowledge of the geographical background is, therefore, a *sine qua non* for the proper understanding of any culture. Here the intention of pursuing tribal socio-religious aspects from ecological point of view is to situate culture within a concept of social production and specify the ways that cultural forms serve the concerned society in environments.

So as part of cultural studies we not only have to assert value of popular culture but also of minority. General aim of this type of study is to stress on cultural pluralism and egalitarianism that enables us to have broad outlook of multicultural societies. In the present age of globalization, cultural diversity is losing ground which is the real nature or character of cosmopolitan world. After all Culture is all that man learns and acquires as a member of society. In case of animals, their genes play important role and culture in the case of man. Man can transcend his biological needs to a certain extent for spiritual and religious reasons but animals can't as they are rooted in their organism needs. Thus, culture intervenes in the satisfaction of biological needs of every society that in turn is guided by its surrounding. However, Culture helps in adaptation to the environment. As said in the beginning that there is much more to the relationship between man and environment, other than adaptation. There are certain elements of non-material culture like knowledge, beliefs and values.

### **Religious Beliefs and Ecology**

Tribes traditionally and socially have attachment towards forest and land, for example, Baiga Tribes has mythological belief that the ancestors of their

community were born to forest and earth. They treat forest as father and earth as mother. Similarly, tribes in Telangana deify many plants and animals that are found in their natural surroundings. Huge trees like *Pipal (Ficus Religiosa)*, Banyan, tamarind, Sal and other trees and they even occupy central position in most of the tribal habitats that speak about man plant coexistence. Beliefs to say are Ideas and speculation or expressing an opinion based on incomplete evidence about the physical, social and supernatural reality though not as easily supported by facts.

They are cultural conventions that are concerned with true or false assumptions, specific descriptions of the nature and the place of human being in it. We notice that the tribal societies in this district are stratified into different clans. Prevalence of Phratries among Gonds is the best example. To each group one or more totem animals are associated. Such totemic animals should not be killed nor eaten by related men or phratry. For example, seven brother phratry of Gond tribe deify *Mahak manda* or (*Maredu* in Telugu) *Aegle Marmelos* and hooded Snake (*shrine in Keslapur*), for six brother phratry Mahua tree and Tiger has much importance in their social setup, likewise Sal tree, crocodile, tortoise and monkey for five brother phratry and Teak wood tree (*Tectona Grandis*) for four brother phratry. For five brother phratry monkey is revered as it has saved their mythical heroes. Animals related to clan are known as *Tado* by Gond tribes which means Grandfather. Each saga or clan has its own totemic symbols that are revered. Tribes have strong belief in this totemic culture that has been attributed with divinity.

The totemic symbols can be both animals and trees. Prof. Ratha even express that there is intimate relation between the forest and the forest dependent communities that can be seen through the institution of totemism. Tribes of Telangana like elsewhere have totemic culture and adhere totem animals like Tiger and Snake with reverence and sanctity. Eating, killing or destroying the clan totem is regarded equivalent to the killing of human beings. The construction of mythologies around serpent god i.e. Nagoba and organizing of religious fair (*jatara*) at Keslapur every year with splendor and grandeur is standing evidence of veneration of hooded snake (*Nagoba*). In the words of *Oika Manthu* their coming across or sighting of a snake is believed to be either an omen or as a warning about impending danger in near future. Their belief in totem animals is eco-friendly as tribes like Gonds rely more on agriculture. They have learnt to live along with various species whose presence is felt as important as theirs in their surrounding, not only materially but religiously. Here are few beliefs and

related practices of tribes of Telangana and their correlation with their ecology.

The ritual eating of new rice precedes Hindu festival of Dassera and in this entire village offers the new rice to *Akipen* and *Auwal* (Mother Goddess). After Diwali the harvest of rain fed crop ends and the tribes especially Gonds celebrate with *Dandari* dance, it is a feast for the dance gods initiated by the legendary heroes *Dandaria Raur* and *Sipiserma Raur*. After harvests and before the beginning of next season Pardhans spend their leisure by singing thanks giving songs dedicated to the dance gods in return of good harvest. Pardhans in order to appease the gods for next harvest offer food, sacrifice animals and liquor at a tree whose wood is used for making a variety of dance drums such as *para*, kettle, *dapna* and *Gumela* drums. Generally the wood of *kursi* (*Gmelina arborea*) is used in making kettle drums. All the tribal instruments like *Gumela*, *para*, *turbil*, *Dhol* and *dapna* are made with naturally available products. Thus ecology is not only revered for production of food but also for providing pleasurable and aesthetical life.

#### **Few Social Aspects of Tribes in Correlation with Ecology**

Based upon certain aspects we can assess that nature has become part of the cultural system and played instrumental role in shaping and determining behavior of concerned society. Here are few aspects that enable us to know something more about tribal culture in correlation with ecology. Gonds in the beginning practiced shifting cultivation on hill slopes using only the hoes to grow millets. They used to practice rituals like *Durari* rite before the initiation of agricultural activities. The *Durrai Auwal* (mother Goddess) is asked to visit their village and accept the offering in form of ritual food. By the month of March the Gonds abandoned their fields, clearing new land by clearing forest and leaving it to dry during the hot season before it could be burnt to enable them for sowing the seeds in the ashes after first showers. Symbolically this rite indicates the sequence of economic activities.

The axe was the most important agricultural implement for this method of cultivation and is hence included along with other ritual objects at the time of offerings to gods. While giving offerings chicken is thrown into the flames and community members stand in front of fire in reverence. Ashes produced from such flames are scared, so with the help of stick ashes are spread over the ground. Whoever participate in this rite will eat ritual food and they belong to that village community for that year and bring the harvest home. The fire ritual is symbolically important as the fire has to be used by the shifting cultivator in a controlled manner to burn the

felled logs in order to evenly fertilize the field. Tribes has rightfully learned about the important role of one of the element of nature i.e., fire.

During summer, tribes exclusively use forests for collection of food products. Collection of food items from forest is largely a female job, though men too contribute. The average individual intake of calories by tribes is highest in summer and lowest in winter. This is because of high ratio of exhaustion of energy due to more hot and dry seasons. So, one can assume that a forest dweller's lifestyle is strongly conditioned by the natural environment. Here are some more aspects that show how tribes relied on nature for survival and, that too, without disturbing the source. A Phenomenon peculiar to India is that older and more static cultures gave way to newer and more dynamic ones always either through a process of destruction or by integrating new things. In most of foreign lands like America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand the whites and primitives developed their culture independently to each other.

In India, cultures emerged by undergoing process of acculturation and mutual assimilation. But there are instances of tribal societies in India that developed relatively indigenous cultures in here and there isolated pockets of India. Let us come to the point. Anthropologists are of opinion that one aboriginal tribal culture appears isolated and without clearly recognizable affinities with other tribal group. This, is to some extent is only due to the gaps in our ethnological, sociological and anthropological knowledge regarding them. But question arises that can the so called civilized societies give guarantee of survival to their independently existing cultural and physical environment. Generally, it is conceived that terms like uncivilized can be used while referring tribes and their culture. So question is on issues that to what extent it is logic to use term like uncivilized and what should be the criteria. Though there are many writings on the diversity of cultures, based on ethnocentric attitudes. William Sumner who coined this term of 'Ethnocentrism', says it is the practice of judging another society by the values and standards of one's own society. This type of behavior has existed throughout history.

It develops because of the psychological, egoistic character in every individual. It is also the act of domination or power by which a person feels that he or she is superior. So, the judging parameters make the difference while studying a society or culture carefully. In order to deal with such problem, the concept of cultural relativism should be applied for proper understanding. If we wish to understand culture or sub-culture other than our own, we must examine it in terms

of its own values, norms, standards and patterns of living.

The ecology of Telangana, remote and relatively isolate. In such kind of region, medicine prescribed by tribal medicine men to his fellow men naturally earns more favor and reputation. This can be because of cultural Conditions and belief in their knowledge gained through experience and also by their consciousness towards their surrounding ecology, which they think can satisfy their needs.

The a above line does not mean to discard or support scientific city but is an attempt to see the antecedents of culture from ethnocentric point of view. It is possible that such beliefs suited the conditions and mental attitudes of people who were chased by necessity but sheltered by ecology. As time passed on man started weighing everything on the scales of reasoning, several of earlier beliefs seemed unsound and despite their golden past, the use of medicinal herbs declined. Today, the importance and utility of medicinal herbs is a subject more of argument and speech from scientific point of view rather than cultural. No practice can exist independently without the existence of society or social setup. On the other hand, we welcomed the increasing numbers of western molecular drugs with such enthusiasm that we gradually lost interest and importance in our indigenous and traditionally a acquired knowledge. This knowledge pool was based on forests that supported it. Because of commercializing of forests, tribes lost right over their habitat and exposed to outsiders resulting in loosing of their traditional knowledge due to process of acculturation. Therefore the presence of dense forests till recent times are becoming bygone myths. Most of us never attempt to know or never think regarding the type of medicinal plants that are in our ecology and whether any of these medicinal plants also have real useful properties. We really forget that if our surrounding habitat has not supported or protected us then how cultures have developed and how life has survived and sustained unabatedly. So there is need to brood over such questions. We must make every effort possible to see that the culture we are interested in, we should see as the members see it.

Telangana culture that developed in correlation with ecology can be termed as logic coordination between man and his physical environment. This coordination influences not only everyday behavior of man but also his policies of living. Thus every human group or society that is living in different environment develops its own culture that is marked by characteristics of social heritage and uniqueness. There the point of sense of pride lies in every culture though it may be of tribal or

nontribal origin. Even one may think that what is there to know specially about this interrelationship. When Alexander invaded India his soldiers became war weary and got irritated and became restless due to the prevailing tropical climate in India. Though they fought successfully many battles to defeat enemies but could not defeat the environment and they pressurized their leader for return journey. Baber in his autobiography "Tuzik-i-Babri" even described Indian environment as unbearable and unpleasant. Even British officials felt Indian environment as unpleasant one and to escape from harshness took shelter at hill stations. But on the her ha d, tribes adopted some nature and lived eco-friendly life. It is necessary to quote here the proceedings of the Chief Conservator of Forests of Upper Godavari division, Walt air circle, 1937. It has been noted in this inspection notes that many subordinate officials died due to una adaptability of forest environment. In the year of 193 6-1937 Forest department of Madras Presidency in Upper Godavari division lost nearly half dozen personals aged between 35 and 40 years. Most of them either scumbed to fever or died because of developing abscess of liver.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The same report described nature a s unhealthy and notorious. Similar kind of references can be seen in Forest administration reports of 1937 A D. The same report points out that "the tribes in Godavari valley are ignorant of number of plants of medicinal value and suitable for minor forest produce collection but the local people know not hing about them and nobody collects anything out of hem". There is need to think over the not ion developed by non tribals in regard to tribal way of living. How far it stands to logic of rationality? Above argument is an attempt to give explanation if not answer. Thus ecology became an integral part of tribal culture rather than an impersonal habitat of plants and animals. It is that harmony in man, plant and animal interaction that is universal phenomenon and the relationship is largely symbiotic. Each community of tribe inhabiting in a particular geographical area seem to have consciously applied this universal principle to on structure a cultural device to ensure reasonable safety not only to their life but also to ecology (flora and fauna) in which they live. This significant element of bond between man and nature should be adhered.

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