

Sustainability as a Cultural Construct in the context of India - the symbolisms of the 'sacred grove' as a basis for best practices

(I) Introduction - sustainability worldviews across cultures:

(a) Two worldviews: There is a tendency to separate out our understanding of Nature's ways and man's adaptations to its ways into two broad categories:

(i) a mechanistic-materialist one, that seeks to find comfort in quantitative, structurally-defined explanations, where a basic predicator is the 'atom' - a material unit considered innate and incapable of anything beyond its physical properties.

In this scheme of affairs, man intervenes to become the center-point of creation by orchestrating the various atoms around him to create as he deems fit. In the process, he converts or reshapes this innateness into a force, imbuing the inanimate with life.

This condition could perhaps best be described as an *atomistic* worldview.

(ii) the other one belongs to an organic-mythic worldview that is predicated on 'animism,' which says "everything in creation is alive in some sense."

With its roots in the belief that the earth is a living being that nourishes all animate objects, Nature occupies central position in the *animistic* worldview and can neither be subordinated nor harnessed by Man.

As old as civilization itself going back to beyond 4000 years, this belief system often translates into nature worship for such societies. In India, e.g., the earth is sacrosanct and worshipped as Mother ('Prakriti') or Goddess ('Devi').

(b) The schism: As it happens, there is a tendency to associate the two worldviews with the ways of the 'modern' and the 'traditional' respectively, our present notions of modernism being mediated by the advent of the machine and the atomistic worldview. This had also effectively partitioned civilization off into 'pre-industrial' and 'industrial' societies. By the power of this divide alone and its attendant schism, this development grants the machine an implicit edge in man's interventions with nature.

(c) The co-existences: The sharply defining lines between atomism and animism, however, begin to blur in a country like India where the traditional and the modern live concurrently, cohabiting entirely common spaces.

(i) For one, it has often vexed the West, and increasingly now in the context of its interfacing with the emerging markets, to see how India deals with the strong presence of its rites of passages - usually associated only with pre-industrial societies - in its otherwise vibrant industrial spaces, such as in its ceremonial veneration of industrial artifacts, such as automobiles and computers.

(ii) But additionally, a search for models outside of their own ones to understand how the rapid resource depletion of the recent years can be countered with models from situations elsewhere that somehow seem to comprehend how to preserve and sustainably use their resources across much longer time periods of time - obviously as a system of belief or at least as a charter of faith.

(II) The Areas of Inquiry:

So, this leads us to asking the following questions:

(1) Is it the consonance between Man (animate) and Nature (inanimate) that holds the key to how Eastern/pre-industrial societies have dealt with Nature - surviving the ravages of Nature - without actually 'fighting' Nature?

(2) Could animism as a worldview give us a window into the mystical and yet sustaining quality of lifestyles - in the way in which these societies had evolved their long-standing, living traditions of practices that were not even consciously considered to be sustainable practices, but for the most part, simply practiced as rites of passages in their everyday lives?

And, in this, what can animism mean for sustainability in its evolution of best practices in daily life, especially for those who do not uphold such a worldview? And,

(3) How does such a worldview impact design decisions, translating from being a construct/abstraction into tangible models for emerging practices? In other words, how does a 'construct' translate into practices in the real world?

(III) Tracing the birth of an ecosystem through a conceptual model and the trajectory from a construct to actual practice - the case of the 'Sacred Grove':

One of the ways to decrypt the mystical ways of animism would be to use a tool of analysis - a conceptual model - to help trace the journey of a natural resource from being a mere physical entity to becoming a part of its people's consciousness.

The attempt here will be to project the proposed conceptual model of sustainability on to a resource category - in this case, the 'Sacred Grove.'

(IIIA) The Sacred Grove:

(a) Why the 'sacred grove'?

The case for taking up sacred groves can be compelling. In echoing the anguish of those severed from their forest lands, Mexican poet Octavio Paz had said rather eloquently:

"We have been expelled from the center of the world and are condemned to search for it through jungles and deserts or in the underground mazes of the labyrinth"

So, what is it about a clump of vegetation that could make its people express such heart-rending thoughts?

(b) What are 'sacred groves'?

Sacred groves are sanctified forestlands and vegetation set aside to propitiate the tree spirits - the 'Vanadevatas' (gods of the forests), along with all the other elements of nature located within the

designated area and interacting with it (include the rains, the clouds, the wind and the sun). This practice of conservation through veneration follows from principles of nature worship that believed that all forms of life were sacred, and by venerating them one ensured their protection.

Although sacred groves were predicated on the very early belief that “god resides in places of natural beauty,” in practical terms they translated into an ecological construct meant to conserve flora and fauna. Sacred groves continue to persist to this day in India as “cradles of ancient rural civilization” in varying sizes and at various levels of life - the economic, the political, socio-cultural, religious. Some of the conservation properties associated with sacred groves are their:

- (i) bio diversity, medicinal/herbal nurseries, etc.,
- (ii) micro-watersheds, leading to ground and surface water recharge, and the water needs for local communities and irrigation
- (iii) energy needs through deadwood collection
- (iv) wildlife shelter for major mammalian and other wildlife species
- (v) humanely defined relationships with domesticated animals - not just as an instrumentality but as a relation. E.g., the cow
- (vi) soil management and sustainable practices for growing to ensure non-depletion of soil nutrients
- (vii) community ownership and custody norms custody norms and management practices through local community participation
- (viii) socio-cultural developments - iconographies, artifacts, architecture, other spaces, literary and performance arts, etc.,
- (ix) taboos reinforcing collective consciousness about conservation (such as taboos on dead wood collection, biomass gathering, lopping of tender branches and green leaves for cattle and goats, cattle grazing, mining of sand and clay, brick-making, collection of wild fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants, quarantining the sacred grove from the human to ensure non interference, etc.,)

(IIIB) A conceptual model retracing the path of sustainability across time:

Starting with the basic premise, viz., ***sustainability across time impacting lifestyles***, seven elements have been identified as part of an ecosystem, where these, as intervening variables, are seen to have been working as footprints across time, in the evolution of sustainability into practice.

We need to ask: what is the path of this trajectory where the journey starts with the ‘sacred grove’ - something borne out of a ***contingent material reality***, viz., forests (and its flora and fauna) - ***to ultimately become a cultural mindset via the imagination of its people?***

Stage One: Storytelling to Myth

In this conceptual model, the journey needs to begin with the earliest possible rite of passage outside of birth and death known to mankind, viz., ***storytelling***.

On my recent visit to the tropical rainforests atop the hills of the Western Ghats, I was told of the story of sibling gods disguised as ordinary destitute work-seeking laborers traversing this part of the land, and upon being perceived as destitute were offered shelter

and sustenance by its people amidst the land's lush and verdant surroundings. What the community gets as blessing for this abject act of kindness is
The location, called Deva.....is now considered a sacred grove.



When storytelling as narratives has been repeated, relived and reinforced across time using our oral faculties, we end up creating *myths*.

In India, we have our mythologies such as the 'Panchatantra,' which talk about animals as wisdom-bearing creatures. And, of course, our epic - the 'Ramayana' itself - where its protagonists, Ram, Laxman and Sita, spend the better part of their lives in exile in the forests, including the time when Sita is forced to spend in desolate isolation in the forests of Ashoka trees in the present-day Sri Lanka after being abducted by Ravana, its demon king.

The role of the 'lesser beings', viz., animals and plants, have been suitably uplifted to make them seem life-giving and wisdom-giving, and at par with humans.

Stage Two: Myth to Iconography:

By appealing to human emotions, myths tend to tap into our collective imagination to create mental pictures of the narratives contained in the storytelling, resulting in *iconography* - which in this case has been created *as an ode to the forest life* - and simultaneously imprinting the culture's local aesthetic sensibilities, as well as scripting its aesthetic idiom.

Appealing to the human's fascination for pictures - and ever again proving the age-old adage that a picture speaks for a thousand words - iconography can assume different forms of visualization and depictions, such as cave and wall paintings, floor decorations, tapestries, and such.

The visualization of *the tree of life* across the different cultures would be a universal example of the importance of forests across cultures.

Stage Three: Iconography to Symbols

As an emergent, dynamic system of life, story-telling and myths progressively move into more entrenched, subterranean levels of the consciousness, getting articulated as the three-dimensional world of the crafts and artifacts meant for daily use, or for worship, or as

props for the performing arts such as puppetry, or those for festivals and celebratory rituals, such as baby cradles tied to trees or kites flown during the winter equinox, or other products such as bangles, toys, totems, fabric, stone crafts, jewellery, costumes....

Essentially, keeping their layered meanings and nuances intact, symbols move on to become the tangible elements of an already evolved human consciousness by being projected onto the realms of daily life. So, while the banyan, the peepal, the neem and tamarind tree are considered the abode of spirits, this is simply by way of an ode to the role played by them in providing succour and therapy to the common man.

There are the totems, such as terracotta horses lined up near a sacred grove to bring in a good harvest, or the green colored bangles worn at weddings as a sign of fertility, or the black cloth filled with salt or red and ochre threads tied to a tree to ward off the evil eye - providing instances of the symbols that have emerged from man's deep connection to the forests.

Stage Four: Symbol (ism) to Ritualized Behavior:

The transformation of an existential reality into its symbolic aspect is essentially accomplished through elaborate rites of passage, viz., through coded behaviors in collective spheres bound by entrenched protocols.

E.g., the 'tulsi', which in India is wild basil and known for its innumerable medicinal properties - is no ordinary plant, and although grown ubiquitously in one's backyard, is never treated as ordinary.

At the end of the monsoons every year, the 'Tulsi Vivaha' (marriage of the Tulsi) ceremony is carried out to propitiate the powers of this humble but therapeutic plant, and urban India is no exception to these rites. Even today, a household wakes up to the ritual watering of the tulsi, only after which all other household activities may be undertaken. At dusk, an oil lamp is placed near the plant as a mark of respect for the powers of the herb.

There is also the 'nagpanchami,' a festival during the monsoons when the snake is propitiated for the role it plays in upholding the ecosystem (through eradicating rodents and pests). On a full moon monsoon night, plates of milk and bananas are left out near the burrows of snakes for them to come out and consume these. It is believed that once the snake is satiated, it will do no harm. It is also believed that since snakes move about as partners, killing a snake can be unproductive since the partner will invariably come back 'to seek revenge'.

Ritualized behavior, through its rites of passages and leveraging of the symbols already built into the culture, takes the argument of sustainability from the level of its obvious ecological principles, to a subconscious level of habit and taboos, in the process, embedding sustainability into intuition rather than leaving it at the level of the common sense.

Rituals are the first crucial step in the direction of a construct becoming a practice without it appearing to be so. By making people a creature of these habits, sustainability becomes endemic to the system.

Stage Five: Rituals to Sacred Spaces

Across time, symbols get physically located in geographically designated areas through these rites of passages, delineating these areas from the rest through a protocol of behavior that seeks to mark off the sacred space from its surroundings.

In India, areas so designated remain off limits to humans - in some cases perennially; in some, seasonally, as in the four months of the monsoons. The quarantining helps to recharge the bio-resources of these locations.

Usually, one may never enter a sacred space with one's shoes on as that signifies disrespect.

The classic case of a sacred space in India would be the Vindhya mountains in Central India, home to living examples of the earliest man on earth. It was the medicinal herbs from the Vindhyas that were used to heal an ailing Ram in 'Ramayana.'

There is also Rameshwaram, the gateway town into Sri Lanka from where Ram had built a bridge into Sri Lanka with an army of monkeys in his attempt to rescue Sita from its demon king. The bridge called 'Ram Sethu' (Ram's Bridge), known to be a sand flat, is sacred space and ceremonially venerated. In the recent times, an attempt to dredge the sand flats to allow large ships to dock here has been strenuously rejected both by believers of the faith as well as by environmentalists. Turns out that, any dredging of the sands would also be geologically and ecologically unsustainable. Then there are the mangrove forests of the Chidambaram temple near the Bay of Bengal in South India. It is believed that but for the mangroves, the temple might have been ravaged by rising sea-levels. Today, it is not just the temple of Shiva that is worshipped, one venerates the mangroves as well.

Stage Six: Sacred Spaces to Belief Systems

Values attributed to sacred spaces and practiced in deference to what these sacred spaces have come to symbolize abound in India. There is the banyan tree, known also as the tree of wisdom, which remains the site of myriad activities of community life. In deference to its sacredness, it is usually the acts of amity and conviviality, not of dissonance and malevolence that are carried out under the tree. It is where the village elders counsel the young, where wedding intents are solemnized, where friends meet friends, where the local deity is worshipped, where the thirsty traveler is offered water to quench his thirst, and which itself gets ceremonially celebrated during the monsoons on 'vatpurnima' - which means, the banyan tree on a full moon.

Stage Seven: Belief systems to self-organizing principles of Conservation

It is when one reaches the stage of locating nature and its attributes in the psyche of a people that Nature - which in this case is the forest and its living beings - goes beyond being interpreted merely as physical entities that require protection, to become something of one's manifest spirits and necessarily requiring custodial care. For, losing nature could mean losing one's sanity, even one's soul.

In the process of this evolution of a mere forest into something that needs to be venerated because of its life-giving properties, and destroying of which could mean wiping oneself out, one has almost

unwittingly built in the principles of conservation into the given resource through taboos and symbols and myths and stories, with everyday practices translating into a charter of faith and becoming a normative affair.

And because the everyday practices come from a charter of faith and not by a direct set of prescriptions outlining the do's and don'ts about nature and the perils of destroying it, the practices of daily living become self-organizing and hence sustainable, not prescriptive and labored.

In this deconstruction of the sacred grove from its myth as a spirit of God and articulated in all its visceral/sensory attributes as stories, myths, symbols, sacred spaces and beliefs, to it being a forest with pragmatic, ecological qualities and articulated cerebrally as being beneficial - sustainability does not appear to be task- and action-oriented with deadlines and compliances.

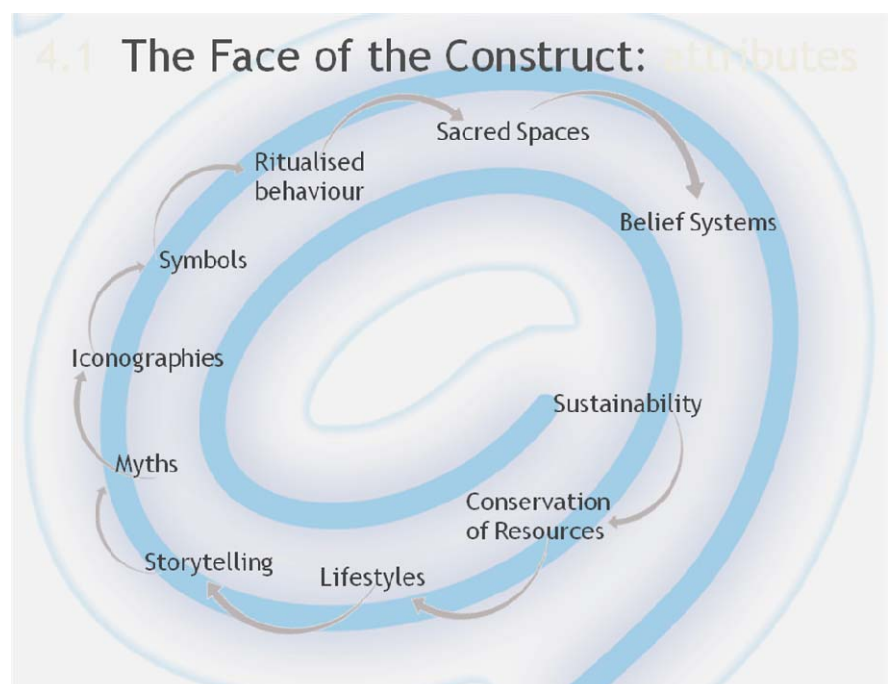
Instead, sustainability appears to its people something akin to a value system, to be nurtured and passed on to the generations ahead.

Using story telling and rituals become a mere ruse to weave in the material along with the interpretive into the value system.

In this, logic and analysis and the cerebral take back seat to the organic, synthesis and the intuitive-visceral.

(IV) The Face of the Construct - constraints and opportunities, and lessons for other systems:

The proposed conceptual model shows that time is cyclic and linear, not causal. And the lack of a credible cause-and-effect demonstration can be a deterrent to establishing compliance systems or policy, in the way that these systems work extremely well in the West.



Under this system, sustainability as action can be difficult to detect as it remains embedded and hidden inside the time cycles and belief systems, devoid of an external system of argument and logic.

Given the huge order of magnitude of time - spread across the centuries - such an organic system probably remains quite durable and endearing and not that easy to destroy. But it also means that any response to change from outside could be rigid and entrenched, and encountered with resistance. The self-organizing nature of such systems could also make it difficult for institutional interventions, being wholly driven by its own people - in that sense, making these systems endogamous and almost impenetrable, operating as these do, like a secret world of their own. Which is precisely what vexes people from the industrialized West - the cracking of the code!

(V) In Conclusion - Re-knitting the torn seams with Myths from the West, Logic from the East:

Now, if one were to ask: wither our stories? Then the answer could lie perhaps in the realization of a culture's shortcomings that have ailed sustainability. And using these lapses as the basis of the next generation of storytelling, that is so needed to build a whole cycle of myths and iconographies and sacred spaces and belief systems. Until then, those unconvinced about human fallibility and the perils of hurting Nature might simply echo, in their moments of exasperation with regards to matters of saving and conserving, the words of David Hume who had said jocularly: "Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of my finger." Except, that Hume had no idea that in some parts of the world, the earth had a soul! The very thought of destroying her could mean having to undertake penance and indignity!

On a sobering note and one of great optimism, I'd like to end with the renaissance thinking of a luminous Nobel laureate physicist from Austria on his discovery of the potential life-giving properties of the cosmos, so far believed by him and others to be inert. Ernest Schrodinger of the second law of thermodynamics, that gave us the notion of entropy as a way of quantifying the disorder that sets into matter in its natural course, was convinced until the mid fifties that matter was inert. Shrodinger changed his views drastically when he realized that in deriving energy from the sun, it is us humans who were amassing something from the cosmos, not the reverse notion that the sun alone scorches us with its blighting powers. What humans have taken away from the sun is five billion years worth of 'order' by amassing energy (from the sun). And by doing so, strange as this might sound, we have, in fact, been robbing the sun of its own storehouse of order, and worse, releasing disorder into its system.

This was the first time that a scientist from the West had come anywhere close to associating inert matter with some properties of life.

The note of wonder expressed by Schrodinger at the discovery of this thought had far-reaching implications for the Western world. It was soon after, that James Lovelock was to propose 'Gaia' in the sixties, as an interlocking system of relationships between living organisms and their inorganic environment. With the Club of Rome

proposing in the seventies, that sustainability could only be achieved by viewing the world in perspective as a dynamic system, not in the conventional close-up, one off view, as an inert entity.

Perhaps, the storytelling of the West is already encrypted in the 'chromlechs', which are "ancient stone structures on the treeless moors" of Cornwall. Or in its 'mordros,' which are the giant rocks along the sea that serve as seats. Few know, however, that 'mordros' is a word for "the sound of the sea!"

So, it is not just the Indian culture or the Native Americans who have detected emotions in the inert. Welsh folk narratives have words like 'pleroma' for fulfillment and 'deisdaimonia' for 'the fear of the unknown'. And it has its Loch Ness and the bell in King Arthur's cave.

So does Devonshire, its stonehenges.

Someday, suddenly, these could serve as key to hidden dimensions - a secret path into nature's ways, perhaps? Until then, the West still has Wordsworth and his magical elegy to Nature - the burst of life in the yellow daffodils or the sad, languid flow of clouds on a sunny day. To Wordsworth, these certainly had life!

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Credits:

The art of the Warli Folk Artist, Photo by Prashant Bhandare, VC 2005-2007, IDC IIT Bombay