

## Primacy of Animism & Panentheism in Himalayas: An Instinctive System of Ecological Restoration

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### Abstract

*Animism refers to a way of life that revolves around the existence of 'spiritual' having no separation between physical and metaphysical world. While panentheism, is based on the principal that nature and God are like. Thus, the two indicate the thought that 'God' is best perceived as a process of relating to universe and all its viewpoints revolve around it as an inclusive unanimity and veneration for sacredness of universe and nature. Based on Animistic and Panentheistic conjecture, nature worship in the Himalayan region describes a variety of religious, spiritual and devotional rituals that focus on natural phenomenon. The paper traces the predominance of animistic & panentheistic beliefs prevalent in Himachal Himalayas for which the field visits was carried out to gather the impressions of indigenous communities. From times of yore, these values have not only nurtured civilizations and remained as essential component of life, but have played a pivotal role in ecological restoration. For the sustainable management of environment, these thoughts and belief systems must be revitalized and acknowledged.*

*Key words: Animism, Panentheism, Nature Worship, Environmental Conservation, Ecology, Ethnicity*

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“...Our sense of nature’s overwhelming beauty, the variety, complexity and interwovenness of its beauty is perhaps what gives us the deepest feeling of awe and wonder at the universe...”

Paul Harrison

### Introduction

Animism derived from Latin word ‘*anima*’ or ‘soul life’ refers to a set of beliefs that revolve around the existence of non-human ‘spiritual beings’ or similar kinds of embodied principles [1]. The core beliefs of animism are held in common by a diverse group of people, primarily the world’s ‘primitive’ tribal or rural communities. It encompasses the way of life where there is no separation between metaphysical and physical world, with a strong conviction that souls or spirits exist, not only in humans, but also in animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as mountains, rivers and other entities of natural environment [2]. Similarly, Panentheism, derived from the Greek word ‘*pan*’ meaning ‘all’ and the Greek word ‘*theos*’ meaning ‘God’, is the view where, universe or nature and God or divinity are considered identical [3]. Thus, it denotes the idea that ‘God’ is best seen as a process of relating to the universe and all its beliefs revolve around the universe as an all-encompassing unity and reverence for sacredness of universe and nature [4]. Based on Animistic and Panentheistic speculation, nature worship in Himalayan region describes a variety of religious, spiritual and devotional practices that focus on natural phenomenon. Of the various forms of nature worship, the most common are dendrolatry, zoolatry, pyrolatry, star worship, adoration of sacred mountains, sacred groves, herbs, water sources, megalith, totem, sky, etc.

Ecology remained an important component of India’s cultural legacy and all living entities are considered sacred. In Indian thought, the entire system of conservation was duty-based. The idea of protecting ecology as a part of one’s duty still exists among indigenous communities across the world. The *Vedas*<sup>‡</sup>, *Puranas*<sup>§</sup>, *Upanishads*<sup>¶</sup> and other ancient scriptures contain details of trees, plants, wildlife and their significance in the life of people. In *Yajnavalkya Smriti*<sup>†</sup> cutting of trees was

considered as an offence and it has fixed a specific penalty for it [5]. *Kautilya's Arthashastra* describes the need of forest management and Ashoka's fifth pillar statement expresses the concern for all living creatures [6]. Evidences from ancient civilizations have exemplified that communities use to live in harmony with nature and environment. Thus, primitive societies were conscious about the consequences of upsetting ecological balance. Two Indian ideologies namely Hinduism and Buddhism evolved the concept of conservation and are deeply linked with ecology and its management. Hindu mythology believes in the presence of Supreme Being in nature's minutest particle which is accountable for the sustenance of all living and non-living creatures including earth, rivers, forests, sun and air. These beliefs evolved over the years, are still followed by rural communities inhabiting Himalayan region [7].

Even today, in a traditional Indian society, insulting nature is considered disrespectful and to instil the thought of sacredness among people, the animals, plants and other elements of nature are given the status of Gods and Goddesses. Not only this, Hindu mythology states that God himself incarnates in different forms. The concept of *Dashavatara*<sup>i</sup> of Lord *Vishnu*, in a way symbolizes the theory of organic evolution. To signify the aquatic origin of animals, the Lord incarnates in the form of *Mathsya*<sup>ii</sup>, a fish, followed by an amphibious animal *Kurma*<sup>iii</sup>, a turtle, after that *Varaha*<sup>iv</sup>, a boar which represents terrestrial life [8]. After deriving inspiration from mythology, rulers selected animals and plants as the insignias of their dynasties and gave them importance in art and architecture. Indian mythology has deep influence of Hindu-Buddhist theory of transmigration which states that soul passes through different stages or modes of existence i.e. animals, human and superhuman. The place of plants & trees in ecology has been well understood by Indians which is evident from great epics and mythological literature. People celebrate festivals linked with culture & ecology to honor them. Even today, one can analyze the knowledge hidden in the folktales and folk songs imbibing a feeling of concern for nature. Epics like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharata* are full of incidences describing God's relationship with nature. During his fourteen years exile, Lord *Rama* developed special affinity for nature and its components, while Lord *Krishna* out of his love for animals and humanity protected them from torrential rains and thunderstorm by lifting huge mountain on one finger. Narratives of plants and animals are found in *Panchatantra*, the oldest collections of moral stories and even today, these are read with pleasure. Also the poets have penned down volumes describing ecology in the minutest of details.

### **Land and the People**

Indian Himalayan region from Arunachal in the east, to Jammu and Kashmir in the west, holds a unique place in the mountain ecosystems around the world. Himalayas divide Indian Peninsula from Central Asia and owing to its varied flora, fauna, geography, ecology, socio-cultural and aesthetic values, has great sacred, ecological and environmental importance. The region is imbedded with precious stones, covered with green bushes and countless herbs, whose worth is beyond measure. Himalayan region is rich both in biological resources as well as the traditional knowledge. In earlier times, and even today, the conventional knowledge and practices provided the basis for the wellbeing and livelihoods of mountain communities, replenishing its natural setting. For mountain communities living in Himalayan province, the Himalayas continue to be the predominant factor in their lives. Rich and undisturbed natural resources, which are found in its environs, have not only nurtured innumerable civilizations but are crucial for the sustenance of future generations. The region with diverse elevation, climate, rainfall and soil conditions has influenced human resources, i.e., population, settlement, and economic patterns. Having acted as a natural and political barrier for centuries, mountains have fostered numerous age-old indigenous

systems of knowledge, customs and communities who in spite of living in inaccessible valleys have preserved their cultural individuality.

Himalayas, the proverbial '*Third Pole*', have always attracted and inspired people and are supposed to be the cradle of civilization in the sub-continent. Researchers and scientists have advocated that the distinctive ecology of region, which has a wide and pervasive impact on the life of people, needs to be conserved and qualitatively upgraded. Himachal, an ecologically sensitive Himalayan state in north-western Himalayas, with altitudes ranging from 350 meters to 6,975 meters above the mean sea level, is well-known for its forests, rivers, rugged valleys and rich cultural heritage. The region has a tough topography, complex geological structure with rich floral and faunal wealth. Climatically, the region is divided into three zones-the outer Himalayas, the inner Himalayas and Alpine zone. The high mountain region within the Alpine zone includes the districts of *Kinnaur*, *Lahaul & Spiti* and *Pangi* subdivision of *Chamba*. The region has altitude ranging from more than 2000 to 4000 meters above mean sea level and consists of steep, rugged and difficult mountain terrain. Five perennial rivers namely *Sutlej*, *Beas*, *Ravi*, *Chenab* and *Yamuna* flow through the territories of the region. Himachal is the realm of *Vedic* saints, Gods & Goddesses, God-Fearing and honest people having reverence for all religions. Himachal has a rich tradition of folk music and dances that marks the beginning and ending of all festive occasions. The folklore is full of themes of valour and legendary stories, which not only talks about the rich cultural legacy of the state but also enlightens one with the ethics & principles of conservation.

Study was carried out in the state of Himachal Himalayas, to gather information that can explain the relationship between mountain communities and followers of nature worship, to offer the readership with a clear picture of issues pertinent to animistic viewpoint and its role in environmental conservation, and to broaden the scope of the body of knowledge pertaining to indigenous systems of ecological reverence.

#### **Worshipping unseen souls and spirits**

Herbert Spencer (1850s) coined a term *Manism*, wherein communities believe that dead people actually live in another world in different form and these spirits can indwell inanimate objects [9]. Edward Burnett Tylor proposed that souls are found not only in human beings but in whole of nature and even the air can be seen as being alive with spirits of all kinds [10]. According to Tylor, spirits could be useful or injurious to humans hence the 'primitive' societies use to appease these spirits, and keep them away through prayer, rituals, and sacrifice. R. H. Codrington in 1891 stated that religion arises from a belief in supernatural power that belongs to the region of unseen. Although the existence of supernatural and spirit is important in context of Himalayan region, the belief system and practices are central to all aspects of life. The religious beliefs impact the way people live, their daily lives, what they consume, the way they produce food, perform everyday duties, arrange themselves in families, and so on. In indigenous Himalayan culture, religious beliefs and practices are not confined to a day or two, but range from routine activities to exceptional ritualistic performances. Like all world religions, beliefs and customs are integral part of Himalayan culture. On one hand, the belief systems enrich religious ceremonies, which commemorate specific events with deep religious connotation and on the other, they reinforce sacred beliefs which console and support the unity of its followers. The supernatural realm between supreme Almighty and human is a pantheon of spirits, which not only have direct impact on the life of people but act as mediation between divinity and human soul. The world of spirits is central where good spirits provide protection against damage, bad luck, and sickness, cure illness, give rain for crops, and safeguard cattle. Failure to follow the behavioural procedures often results in the

wrath of spirits, which manifests in form of disease, sudden death, draught, and other calamities. Good spirits include human spirits, often referred to as ancestral spirits, who have interest in happenings of families. The ancestral spirits are most worried about the well-being and safety of their families. They are believed to intervene with God on behalf of their family, but inappropriate behaviour of family at times withdraws their protection and blessings.

In Himalayan societies, the ancestors, though not regarded as Gods, but are given reverence like living elders. Just as there are good spirits, there are also horrific or devil spirits, responsible for misfortune. Moreover, the indigenous communities living in Himachal believe in spirits that reside in nature [11]. For instance, several communities promulgate that there are spirits that live in forests, near water sources, deserted places, caves and trees. Besides offering protection to people and endowing them with food and water, these spirits have control over the nature's phenomenon, agriculture and livestock. In order to propitiate them and get their assurance, religious practices, rituals and ceremonies are performed. The ancestral wrath is usually diagnosed by *Shamans* or *Conjurer*, who communicates with the spirit of deceased and gets ways to overcome the curse. *Conjurer* is capable of establishing a link with departed soul and once the conversation is made, the cause and cure of wrath is evolved. To propitiate the ancestral spirits, ritualistic performances are done. For getting relief from ancestral wrath and to fulfil the wishes of departed soul, special feasts are organized. People have erected stone slabs, shrines and water sources in the memory of their forefathers. Construction of drinking water sources in the name of ancestors remained a general practice among the people living in remote areas of district *Sirmour* and *Shimla*. Erection of water sources in natural premises indicates the reverence to both nature and ancestral spirit. On one hand it propagates the idea of conservation and on the other ancestral worship. Even today, one can notice the remains of such water sources which are quenching the thirst of this world and the other world (Fig.1.).

In some parts of district *Solan*, *Shimla* and *Sirmour*, people believe that if a person dies an unnatural death or killed cruelly, his spirit keeps on wandering and in order to appease the spirit, people pay homage. The ancestral spirit in district *Solan* is known as *Nehua*, while in village *Rewalsar*, of district *Mandi* it is known as *Hatya*. Each ancestral spirit has a story linked with it. One such story is that of *Hatya*, it goes as:

“...There was a mother and daughter, who after a family dispute, decided to end their life by jumping into *Rewalsar* Lake. While they were progressing towards Lake, nobody stopped them from dying. They ended their life and those who met them on their way to lake, suffered from their fury. To avert the effects of their wrath, people later started worshipping them. Veneration to the ancestral stone statue of *Hatya* is often done with milk and *babru*<sup>xv</sup>. Villagers and relatives are invited for a special feast, organized to pacify the spirit of *Hatya*. The adoration is believed to bring prosperity in family and also symbolizes their gratitude to the departed soul...”

In addition to this, there are *bhoot devtas*<sup>xi</sup>, *dano*<sup>xii</sup>, *asurs*<sup>xiii</sup>, *nags*<sup>xiv</sup>, saints, whistling spirits and other mystic & sacred benign forms, revered for their supreme powers. People have faith that these supreme unseen powers meditate on Himalayan Mountains and legendary *Indrapuri*<sup>v</sup>, *Swarag*<sup>vi</sup>, *Pitri Lok*<sup>vii</sup> and *Yampur*<sup>viii</sup> are located in the midst of Himalayas. In some areas, certain week days or months of year and few sacred sites are spotted for making special offerings, for instance, the month of *bhadrapad*<sup>ix</sup>, locally called *nehara mahina*<sup>x</sup>. This month is considered inauspicious and no religious celebrations are made, because of the popular belief that all Godly powers undergo sleep or disappear from earth, for a meeting in heaven and in their absence, the evil-spirits activate themselves. Hence, for the whole month, the folk musicians move from one village to another, beat

drums to awaken the good spirits, seeking their protection. Linked with this belief, is one festival, locally known as *Dagvanshi*<sup>ssi</sup>, which comes on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of no moon night. The day is believed to be of witches who gather and practice witchcraft. In order to get protection from witches, every household prepare *chausari*<sup>ssi</sup>, cut it on entrance of house, and throw its pieces in all the directions. Also people place a twig of *Zanthoxylum armatum* at the entrance of house, being thorny; the plant is believe to restrict the entrance of evil-spirits and offers protection.

Worshipping *Jogini*, the unseen feminine powers, is another custom linked with nature worship. The *joginis* are associated with ten directions of nature, planets and human body. These powers are thought to reside in rocks and caves (Fig.2.) *Shikari Devi* and *Murari Devi* of district *Mandi* exemplify such powers. A site dedicated to *jogini* can be witnessed at *Sar ki Dhar* in *Rewalsar* village. Saturday is considered auspicious for their worship and is mainly done by women with ribbons, bangles and *kichari*<sup>ssm</sup> cooked in mustard oil. According to village elders, there are sixty-four *joginis*, out of which eight are most effective and are worshipped to avert negative planetary influences, resulting in ill-health and misfortune. *Sidhha*, revered for accomplishment of work with blue and red ribbons; *Sankata*, respected for mental tension & depression with green and black ribbons; *Bhadrika*, honored for good, with yellow and red ribbons; *Bhramari* worshipped for averting devastation using blue and black ribbons; *Ulka* responsible for instantaneous problems and worshipped with red ribbons; *Mangla* for prosperity, with red ribbons; *Pingla* for jaundice & mental diseases, using yellow ribbons and *Dhanya* for wealth with any two colored ribbons. *Jongandhar*, a hillock, near *Pandoh* in district *Mandi* is the main site of *jogini*. People belief that there is a war between Gods and these feminine powers in the month of *bhadrapad* and it is a common notion that if Gods win, then there are increased incidence of diseases in animals, livestock and crops, less agriculture production, while the triumph of *jogini* is considered favorable in all respects.

In upper Kinnaur, people have strong faith in the existence of fairies, locally named as *Vandevi* or *Saauri*, who are supposed to reside in the forests and lonely places especially at a very high altitude. Fairies are unseen powers, who are believed to control the life of tribal communities. In order to propitiate these fairies, people celebrate *Lamoth*, a festival which comes in the month of February. Local wine, *chiltu* (an ethnic food) and curd are offered to please them. It is thought that during this festival, the *Vandevi* or *Saauri* take a trip to entire district, which lasts for five days. Hence, the worship is made for two days each at the beginning and ending of their voyage. The starting of the tour is considered auspicious while the return is considered ominous. People consider that on their way back, they take away the living beings with them; hence to stay away from such circumstances, people remain inside their houses and also keep the livestock in the sheds. To put in the picture the existence of fairies, people have narratives. There are stories elucidating the role played by them in the tribal life:

“...Once a shepherd was moving with the flock of sheep. On his way he noticed that some of the sheep were missing. He was worried so he prayed to the fairy for helping him out in the situation. In the night, he got a dream, in which he was directed to move in a particular direction, which he did the next day and successfully located his sheep...”

Another similar incidence narrates:

“...A Shepherd use to take his sheep for grazing to a grazing land, and after leaving them in the grazing land, he use to take a nap. The fairies of that area use to take him to the fairyland, where he was fed with sumptuous food. The awesome beauty and delicious food captivated him and he

decided that he will take away with him, the food and serve it to his family. He did as desired and packed the food in a cloth bag. When he woke-up he found that his bag was full of cow-dung...”

Such stories not only talk of the existence of unseen spirits but also of the divine powers, which they possess and use for the benefit of tribal societies. Even today, people in trouble, seek their help and in case of their wrath, people adore them. Thus, people believe that there exists a divine law, which is supreme and will persist.

When man gives himself a chance to contemplate on his own survival, his knowledge of the supreme power helps him to understand that he is created for a purpose. However, the indigenous communities believe in and experience the existence of the unseen and unknown, and moreover, they trust and follow the divine Law of nature.

### **Ecology and Ethnicity: A Himalayan Perspective**

The dependence of communities on natural environment as a resource is as old as human life in the Himalaya. As in case of most mountains of the world, population of Himalayan region is the result of a long and complex process of migration from surrounding areas, setting-up the situation for a high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity. The isolation of human habitats and general inaccessibility provided conditions favorable for flourishing of diversity. Through their power of observation and innovative capacities, Himalayan communities evolved their own way of life and sustenance strategies to suit the natural environment. The knowledge that grew out of hundreds of years of experience is exemplified in the practice of agriculture, use of plants for medicinal purpose, forest management, pastoralism and management of water resources. Himalayas with diverse cultural and ecological landscapes have survived in the harsh climatic conditions using traditional ecological knowledge. The ecological ethics laid emphasis on interconnectedness of people and nature, which is reflected in various forms of nature worship that permeates across entire range and gave rise to the concept of sacredness.

Sacred mountains significant to many religions are linked with countless legends. For Himalayan communities, the most symbolic aspect of mountain is its peak which is considered next to heaven or other celestial bodies. Pilgrimage to *Kinner Kailash* in *Kinnaur*, *Srikhand Mahadev* near *Rampur* and *Bijli Mahadev* in *Kullu* are few sacred mountains linked with Lord *Shiva*. The sacred site of *Bijli Mahadev* is located at hilltop and renowned for its sixty feet high flagpole that sparkles like a silver spike while basking in the sunlight. It is believed that pole draws blessing in form of lightening. A legend says:

“...Each time lightening occurs, *Shiva lingam* gets shattered into pieces. To avoid the phenomenon, *lingam*, it is kept covered with butter and *sattu*<sup>sm</sup>. Another myth propounds that sage *Vashishta* prayed to Lord *Shiva* for safeguarding earth from lightening. Lord answered his prayers and the miracle occurs at the confluence of *Parvati* and *Beas River*...”

There is a myth associated with *Srikhand Mahadev*:

“...Demon *Bhasamasur* did a hard penance and contemplation to please Lord *Shiva*, who gave him the boon of invisible power. The demon tried to use the power on Lord *Shiva* who vanished into a cave and afterward appeared on a hill top presently known as *Srikhand Mahadev* peak and the cave where *Shiva* disappeared is known as *Dev-Dhank*, located near *Nirmand* both of which are revered by pilgrims from all over the world...”

The myths and fables linked with mountain peaks not only fascinated the communities but evoked the feelings of sacredness among them. Likewise, there are natural caves, *stalactites* and

rocks which besides being nature's vital element, are revered for their inviolability by Himalayan communities. Located near village *Dhami* in district Shimla, the sacred *stalactites* are thronged by women folk for begetting prosperity and protection of family from all crises. The *stalactites* are considered as the benign form of Goddess *Gaisee* whose worship is performed after crop harvest. It is a common belief that if a family starts visiting Goddess *Gaisee*, it has to maintain the tradition lifelong. Visitors offer newly harvested crop to the Goddess, tie holy threads and apply vermilion on *stalactites*. The offerings are distributed among children and not brought back. In Kinnaur, people have strong faith that the natural calamities can be averted by placing, *Manay*, the sacred stone slabs (Fig. 3.), with prayers written on them, in the vicinity of villages. Such stone slabs not only have religious connotations but are the source of spiritual inspiration to the people walking by. These are regularly visited and paid homage by villagers. In some ancient temples, for instance the Sun temple at *Nirath* near *Rampur*, certain sacred stones are piled up in the temple courtyard, which are meant for ritualistic performances (Fig. 4.). Hence, though non-living entities, their existence finds a place in the life of people.

Sacred groves, characterizing Himalayan villages and its environs are patches of natural vegetation ranging from a few trees to several acres of forest land and water sources dedicated to local deities. Local communities have framed certain rules which provide protection to these cultural landscapes. Himachal is blessed with number of sacred grooves, which not only preserve the sanctity of area but also safeguards its resources. In some sacred grooves even the dry foliage and fallen fruits are forbidden to touch and people believe that any sort of disturbance in the site, often offends the presiding deity, whose wrath manifests in the form of natural calamities and diseases. Also, the area around the temples is considered sacred where activities such as, cutting of trees, entry of lower caste people and women in menstrual cycle is prohibited. Let's consider the sacred sites of village *Shakrori* and *Rewalsar*:

“...There are seven sacred sites lying in the natural premises of village *Shakrori*, which are linked with the folk deities. Among these is a *Ficus religiosa* tree and water source. For the welfare of village community, these sites are thronged by villagers and sacrifices are made at each site in a sequential manner...”

“...In *Rewalsar*, sacred site, locally called *Thaan*, (Fig. 5.) is worshipped by village males. There is one sacred stone at the site, where sacrifice is made every year to please the deity and for the benefit of entire village community...”

*Daachumpa* yet another sacred site located at a distance of seven kilometers from village *Lippa* in Kinnaur, is not only revered by the nearby villagers but also thronged by people from far off places (Fig.6.). The site is considered sacred and linked with the visit of *Guru Padamsambava*<sup>xvii</sup>. Impressions on rocks symbolize his visit and legend behind the impression is:

“...Once, *Guru Padamsambava*, who was riding on a horse, happens to come across the valley near village *Lippa*. While he was at the edge of a mountain cliff some birds suddenly appeared before his horse and started fluttering their wings which horrified the horse. The horse turned back and trembled as if it was about to fall. In order to avoid fall, *Guru Padamsambava* fled over from one side of the valley to the opposite. As soon as he reached the other side of valley his body strikes the rock creating an impression on it. This impression is worshipped by the people as an insignia of his presence. A few years back, some laborers, while working at a distance from this site, noticed a shining light which left them in suspense and their inquisitiveness made them reach this point where they find burning lamps. Since the site is quite far away from the inhabited area, there

was no question of anyone responsible for lighting of the lamp. At the same time an old woman in *Lippa* village had a vision in which she was instructed to visit the site and develop it into a pilgrim. Her sincere efforts and divine will made her develop the site to a pilgrim centre...”

It is the faith which turns a simple site into a sacred one and once such site is developed people’s conviction takes the form of adoration.

Himalayan culture has special reverence for Mother Nature, which is exemplified by worship of natural water resources by newlyweds. The water being the life supporting system, sustains life on the earth and its worship by newlyweds indicate yearning for prosperity. Cleaning and worshipping of village paths by newlywed brides in district *Kangra*, suggests the preservation of nature and concern for its spotless beauty. Another festival when women pay regards to water sources is *Sair*, which is celebrated in the month of September on the *Sakranti*<sup>xviii</sup> day. Women got up early in the morning and go to *panihaar* (natural water spring) where they fill their pitcher with water and worship it. *Sia*, a folk song in praise of Goddess *Sita*, is sung and offerings including, citrus fruit, maize cob, paddy seedling and walnut are placed near water source.

The sacred lake of *Rewalsar* in district *Mandi*, on one hand is an instance of a sacred landscape and on the other stands as an insignia of unity of three major religions of India, i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. There is a famous Buddhist legend behind this lake dedicated to guru *Padmasambhava*. According to the legend [12]:

“...the daughter of the King of *Mandi* wanted to become a disciple of *guru Padmasambhava*. The ruler didn’t like it and he ordered the burning of *guru Padmasambhava* on a burning pyre. With blessing of Almighty, the pyre changed into a lake and *guru Padmasambhava* was transformed into a lotus. It is a common belief that the floating islands of reeds have the spirit of *guru Padmasambhava*, which are worshipped and paid due reverence by people of all religions...”

On the eve of *bishu* festival, pilgrims visit this lake and pay obeisance to sage *Lomash*. The celebration is commemoration of religious sentiments and preservation of nature. A temple of Lord *Shiva*, located near the lake having a cultural and ecological connotation, is known as *Garwajal*. When there is no rain for a long time and agriculturists feel disheartened, they take the refuge of Lord *Shiva*. They queue up in rows, draw water from lake in vessels, pass it on from one to another and a holy bath of *Shiva* is performed. They continue pouring in water till the water flows down the lake. It is believed that if the water flows down and gets merged with lake water, the place certainly witness showers of blessings in the form of rain. Thousands of devotees visit the wish-fulfilling lake with their pleadings and prayers. Once they get satisfied, in order to mollify the lake, they throw valuable articles including gold and silver jewelry into the lake. The banks of lake are famous for performing religious rituals like *Tuladaan*<sup>xviii</sup> to propitiate the dreaded Saturn. *Sair*, a local *Sakranti* festival is mainly celebrated by women folk who gather near the lake a day before and place on a pumpkin leaf, a cucumber, walnuts, rice saplings, wheat breads and a lighted lamp, near it.

The sacred water bodies like *Manikaran*, *Tattapani* and *Markhand* are revered for their religio-cultural connotation. Legend of *Manikaran* speaks about its mysticism [13]:

“...According to legend, *Lord Shiva* and his consort *Parvati* were walking in the vale, when *Parvati* dropped her earring, which was seized by a serpent, who vanished into the earth. He agreed to handover the jewel only if the *Shiva* performs the cosmic dance. *Shiva* performed the dance and



serpent threw the jewel into the water. Later on the devotees continue to throw jewels in the waters...”

Thus, the mythological deities and nature's elements find link with water sources and their worship become a vital component of worship. The traditional sentiments linked with the water bodies have turned them into a sacred groove permitting species of flora and fauna to thrive & survive, even in the modern era of development. This demonstrates the link between ecology and culture. From the ecological perspective, the custom of sacred landscape can be viewed as a traditional means of biodiversity conservation which is equivalent to the modern concept of natural sanctuaries, where all forms of living creatures are guarded by folk deity. The sacred groves are standing proof that forests exist not only because of rules & regulations implemented by government but also because of culture and tradition. Worshipping nature as folk deities and relating folk-deities with nature epitomizes the bond between the two.

Plants found in the Himalayan region not only have multi-purpose use, but have ecological importance. Folklore, being the part of any culture, holds a number of beliefs which unite nature and ethnicity. There are folk proverbs and quotes which on the one hand show the zenith of weight-age given to natural environment while on the other, strengthens the principles of conservation. The ancient scriptures propound:

“...Ten wells are equal to one pond, ten ponds are equal to one lake, ten lakes are equal to one son and ten sons are equal to one tree...”

In tree worship, for instance, *Vatta puja*, women folk worship banyan tree, invoking the deity residing in it for the long life of their husbands. *Cedrus deodara*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Calotropis gigantea* and *Ocimum sanctum* are worshiped on certain sacred days for begetting their blessings. After each plant worship circumambulation is done with a meditative mood to pay homage to the presiding deity. An important event signifying the social and religious life of people of Kinnaur is *Phulech* fair, which is held in the months of August-September. The festival is organized for the souls of deceased ancestors. The name '*Phulech*' is supposed to be associated with the term *phul*, a flower. Flowers of the blue monkshood (*Aconitum heterophyllum*) in particular, play a major role in the entire procedure and the festival is organized once the monkshood blossoms. Sacrifice of a ram marks the beginning of the festival and each group of relatives provides a ram, which is covered with shawls and hung about with garlands. As a part of reverence, the relatives encircle it and mourn for their ancestors. *Rajputs* of each village go to high hills to pluck flowers and return back. On their return to the village, - the occasion is celebrated as *Phulech*. The *Lamas* recite prayers for the dead, for which they are paid food and alms. Hence, the festival not only pays respect to the departed souls but also celebrates the blossoming of *Aconitum heterophyllum*.

Another auspicious occasion, known as *Haryali teej*, rejoices the welfare of family. Women craft the clay idols of birds, animals and plants in miniatures along with *Shiva Lingam*, which are worshiped with green saplings of barley. Worshipping the barley seedlings signifies the adoration for new life and celebration of womanhood. Crafting of birds, plants, animal figures, etc. confirm people's sight & fondness for nature. Such merriments connote proximity of Himalayan women with nature, where the celebrations encompass the entire creation into a single thread. In addition to this, there are many plants which have magico-religious value and hence collected, preserved and utilized for the same.

Zoolatry or animal worship is the religious ritual linked with animals and veneration of animal deities. The festivals linked with agriculture and livestock are celebrated at community level in

Himalayan villages. The animal worship finds its basis in pastoral cults, where the species of animals receive special honor; hunting cults, where species is habitually killed but slaughtered animal receives divine honors and cult of animals associated with deities. *Maal pournima* festival, celebrated in the month of October, in district *Shimla* and *Mandi* is a kind of pastoral cult, which is celebrated to honor the cattle, especially the cows and bulls for their role in agriculture (Fig.7.). The festival begins seven-eight days before the final event, which is the day of full moon. For all eight days, the women gather at one place and sing *Mala*, a series of folk song sung in praise of cattle besides, tracing the origin and importance of festival. On the eve of final event, women assemble at one place and call their cattle by names. They prepare garlands using flowers & handmade rope. On the finale day, decorated animals are taken out of their sheds and worshipped with marigold flowers, *Cynodon dactylon* and *Juglans regia* followed by circumambulation. Thereafter, the cattle are served with festive food and released for grazing. Similar festival associated with cow worship is *baula-chauth*, which is celebrated in some areas of district *Shimla* and *Solan*. During the festival, women observe fast, worship cow and calf, commemorating the fertility and prosperity. In addition to this, feeding of crow and dog is linked with ancestral adoration, offering feed to fish and cow symbolizes averting of planetary influences and nourishing snakes with milk epitomizes the reverence paid to dreadful creature for safety.

A number of festivals are linked with fire worship, where to appease the fire God people propitiate it by making offerings. Kitchen hearth is often worshipped on festive occasions and revered for providing warmth in cold climatic conditions and heat for cooking food. *Baliraj*, *holika dehan* and *lohari* are the festivals which are extremely popular traditions and are celebrated with fervor across the state signifying the victory of good over evil. The focus of these festivals is on the bonfire. There are numerous legends associated with the ancient traditions, however, it is not easy to find as to when these tradition started. Symbolically, the fire signify the annihilation of evil and heat of fire represents that winter is at the rear and the summer is approaching. All these festivals, though having religious significance also holds a great social significance in context of mountain state like Himachal and are celebrated as days of conveying affection to one and all. These festivals relieve people from day to day routine, and make them peaceful, happy and bridging the social gap. Festivals like, *Baliraj* and *lohari* are also linked with harvest season. Thus, the fire worship and associated festivals are the events of social and cultural integration, bringing about unanimity, peace, harmony among all castes and communities.

The sun, moon and stars are regarded as the glorified souls of great sages who departed from life in flesh, hence worshipped, not only in daily routine but also on festive occasions. Every day veneration of Sun is the age-old custom of people residing in rural Himachal, which is believe to relieve the planetary influences and blesses one with good eye-sight. There is an ancient rock temple dedicated to Sun God, at *Nirath*, near Rampur, which is thronged by people from all over the state (Fig. 8.). It is the only temple dedicated to Sun God in the entire north India, second being the *Konark* in the state of *Orissa*. There are few small temples, located in the vicinity of some villages, dedicated to Lord *Varun*, the God of rain and thunderstorms. Similarly, reverence to moon on *Pournima*<sup>xxx</sup> and stars on *Ganesh chatuthiti*<sup>xxx</sup> is also observed among communities inhabiting Himachal Himalayas.

The worship of nature i.e. rocks, hills, trees, and animals got evolved up through veneration of its elements to the admiration of the sun, moon, and stars. However, the customs associated with it remained primitive which developed from individual experiences and links people who now live it and practice it with their descendants. The traditions of nature worship begin from within the

peoples' environment and on their own land. There are no written manuscripts like other religions which can speak of these traditions but their transmission from one generation to another has taken place through words of mouth, songs, folk proverbs, sayings, myths, and legends. This makes it prone to experience amplification, amendments and alterations yet the essence of beliefs and practices associated with nature worship remain intact.

### Analyzing Human-Nature Interface

What distinguishes human beings from other living organisms is the reality that they have always placed the ultimate objectives in life. The fundamental factor for Man's steady progression has always been the natural environment and his relationship with it. This relationship, though, has gone through numerous stages of rise and fall, but the idea behind has remained intact. The 'Stone-Age Man', was primordial and his only ambition was to satisfy the instinct to survive and remained under the control of nature. During the second stage of the man-nature relationship, i.e. during the 'Bronze-Age Man' man co-existed with nature and become equal to it. They didn't exploited nature and its components but simply used them in a 'friendly way' to improve their lifestyle. Living in harmony with the nature and its elements formed the basis of first forms of religious worship, i.e. nature worship. During ancient period, in India and Greece people use to worship nature itself and deities having power to control it. Today, human beings have escaped from all natural bonds which might have been conserved. Modernity is annihilating biological Gods of nature and wiping out the animist beliefs. Today, man-ecology relationship is under threat and man's attitude towards nature is intervening with the ecological balance. People have overcome nature with substantial and relatively hazardous penalties. In order to reinstate the man-ecology relationship, one has to make a probe into the matter. The different forms of nature worship which existed in past needs to be restudied and re-executed to restore the ecological balance.

People around the world prefer zoolatry and love to feed animals for the sheer joy of it. Feeding and worshipping of cow, monkey, elephant, bull, rat, variety of birds, fish, turtles, snakes and even ants, is the part and parcel of rural communities in India. Milk offered to the cobra is emblematic of time, death, fertility, rebirth and creative energy. The deadly cobra is generally held to be a guardian, providing divine protection under its spreading hood. In fact, during the annual festival of *Nagpanchami* the cobra is worshipped by the people. *Bishnoi* tribe in western Rajasthan feed the blackbuck that roams wild in the surrounding desert. In the hot summer months of May and June large herds of blackbuck flock to *Bishnoi* hamlets where feeding the animals is a community commitment. This beautiful antelope which is victimized for its meat by almost all other desert bound communities, had a special place in the belief system of the *Bishnoi* that preaches principles of conservation [14]. The crow is identified with the remembrance of ancestors and during *Shradha*- a period of time that comes each year for remembering the departed relatives, people feed this winged scavenger. Be it a temple water tank, a sacred lake or a holy river, one finds people feeding fish or turtles as a simple matter of piety. Whether it is matter of *dharma* (righteousness) or the idea of *daan* (charity) and *punya* (virtue) but the idea of conservation is the underlying principle of Indian culture [15]. Had not such conservational ethos and religio-cultural beliefs existed, the survival of living organisms would have been vulnerable. Classical author Diodorus explained the origin of animal worship by recalling the myth in which the gods, apparently threatened by giants, hid under the guise of animals and later people naturally began to worship animals [16]. Thus, primitive man worshipped animals that had inimitable traits [17]. The belief that an animal is sacred, barred their eating. Thus, when a God is respected or revered through a representative animal, an animal cult is formed [18]. Not only the animals, but also the

plants, find significant place in the life of ancient communities. The mythological beliefs which existed a long time back still prevail in the Indian society. According to Indian mythology, a person is honored in heaven for thousand years, if he resides in a house where the plant of *Ocimum sanctum* is grown. At the same time, plucking the leaves of *Ocimum sanctum* is prohibited on Sundays and Tuesdays, which supports the theory of preservation. Similarly, consumption of the *Zizyphus jujuba* fruit is prohibited in Bengal until the *Saraswati* festival is over on the full-moon day of late winters. The restriction is to ensure full ripening of fruits, which would, improves the chances of seed germination after consumption by humans. Another belief that persists in Indian society is that if one plants *Aegle marmelos* tree in his courtyard, the Goddess of wealth reside in his house [19]. The Coconut tree often known as the '*kalpavriksha*' (wish-fulfilling tree) is so embedded in Indian culture and tradition that the breaking of its fruit is an important part of most religious ceremonies but cutting of its tree is forbidden in ancient scriptures [20]. Vedic *Rishis* forewarned the need to protect environment and advocated the need of performing daily *Yajna* for protecting the ecology. *Dharmasastra*, an ancient treatise on righteous conduct, prohibits men from disturbing the biodiversity and ecosystem as it is against the tenets of religion and is considered a sinful activity [21]. Dendrolatry has remained significant in most of world's mythologies and religions, and have been given deep sacred denotations. The growth and death of trees, elasticity of its branches, sensitivity, yearly decomposition and renewal of its foliage, represents growth, decay and resurgence. The icon of the 'Tree of life' is preferred by numerous mythologies. 'Trees of life' appear in folklore, culture and fiction, linking to immortality or fruitfulness and hold cultural and religious significance for the people. Trees and plants were regarded sacred in the ancient world, throughout Europe and Asia. In folk belief and folklore, trees are considered as the homes of tree spirits. Thus, animals, trees and plants play an important role in Indian tradition and culture.

Fire being an important part of human culture since Lower Paleolithic, is known in various religions. The earliest known traces of Fire were found at *Gesher Benot Ya'aqov*, Israel and dated to an age of 790,000 years, and animist philosophy linked with fire dates back to as early as pre-*Homo sapiens* times [22]. Mythologies across the world have narratives of fire worship and its significance. According to *Narad Purana*, *Holika* is celebrated in the memory of *Prahlad's* victory and defeat of his mischievous aunt '*Holika*'. It is because of this event, a bonfire is burnt every year [23]. *Lohri* on the other hand, is representative of ripening of crops and bountiful harvest. It instills sensitivity among people towards their environment and culture, imbibing the sense of togetherness and ethnically rich inheritance of communities. Thus, the festivals of harvest and fertility have a special importance for an agrarian country like India.

The instinct of nature worship must have evolved naturally all at once in the intellect of primitive societies and this spirit continuously inspired the worship urge of human beings, no matter how primeval its first expressions might be. The spirit of worship gave specific origin to human impulse to worship, and its early practice became focused upon nature and its components. Stones first impressed early man because of their frequent similarity to animals and later caught the attention of civilized man which resembled animal and plant figures and even men. Hill worship followed stone worship, and the first hills to be venerated were large stone formations and later emerged as a belief that the Gods inhabits in these. With the passage of time, some of the mountains got linked with Gods and thus became holy. The indigenous aborigines believed that caves led to the underground world, with its spirits and demons, which later ended in the concept of good spirits and deities.

The process of development, though important for nation's growth, but done at the cost of environment leads to ecological degradation. The environmental problems have brought the concerns for its conservation and sustainable development. Unrestrained and unplanned development is upsetting the ecological balance of mountains, thereby creating environmental pollution. There is a critical call for restoring the ecology of eco-cultural landscapes, which can be achieved only when man goes back to nature and set up a genial and reverent relationship with it.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

## Endnotes

1. *Vedas*- Largest body of ancient oldest scriptures of Hinduism
2. *Puranas*- Genre of religious texts, consisting of narratives of universe from creation to destruction
3. *Upanishads*- Compilation of philosophical texts forming the theoretical basis for Hindu.
4. *Yajnavalkya Smriti*- Homogeneous text of *Dharmaśāstra* tradition written by sage *Yajnavalkya* during the Gupta dynasty.
5. *Kautilya's Arthashastra* - Ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy written by *Kautilya*, a scholar.
6. *Dashavtara* -Ten incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*
7. *Mathsya*- Fish
8. *Kurma* or the turtle, the second incarnation of *Vishnu*
9. *Varaha*-Wild boar
10. *Panchatantra*- An ancient compilation of animal fables in verse and prose, attributed to *Vishnu Sharma*.
11. *Bhoot devtas* - The demonic powers
12. *Dano*- The demonic God
13. *Asuras*- The devil
14. *Nags*- The serpent gods
15. *Indrapuri* - The kingdom of *Indra*, who is the King of Gods. He is considered as the God of war, storms, and rainfall
16. *Swarag*-The heaven
17. *Pitri lok*- The realm of ancestors
18. *Yampuri*- The kingdom of *Yama*, who controls the death
19. *Bhadrapad*- The sixth month of *Hindu* calendar which begins on 23 August and ends on 22 September
20. *Nehara Mahina*- The 6<sup>th</sup> month of *Hindu* calendar
21. *Dagvansh* - The day before the conjunction of the sun and the moon, i.e., the fifteenth day of the dark half of a lunar month
22. *Chausari* - Name of ethnic food
23. *Kichari*- Name of ethnic food
24. *Sattu* is a ethnic food, prepared after grinding parched grains of maize or barley
25. *Babru*-Name of ethnic food
26. *Guru Padmasambhava*- Name of Tibetan God
27. *Sakranti*s the moment when the sun leaves one zodiac sign and enters another and it takes its name from the zodiacal sign/name of the month it enters into
28. *Tuladaan* is a special ethical astral remedy performed by highly qualified professionals, recommended in cases where an individual suffers from incurable diseases.
29. *Pournima* is full moon night
30. *Ganesh chatuthiti* is the Hindu festival dedicated to Lord *Ganesh* celebrated for prosperity and good fortune.

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