

Biodiversity and Culture

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Nature conservation efforts in most countries have achieved only limited success, despite heavy investments. This suggests that some of the more commonly adopted and exclusively scientific, political, economic, or legislative strategies for nature conservation and environmental protection have not proved adequately effective. In this context, it was thought that, the usefulness of culture-based approaches in dealing with issues of environmental management deserves to be explored further. This line of argument may hold especially true for Sri Lanka - a country where people's traditional ways of interacting with and comprehending their natural environment had a long historical experience. Many other countries in the Asian region such as Japan, India, China, Thailand and Indonesia where ancient cultures have flourished and evolved over several millennia share similar experiences. Such countries harbor a vast body of traditional wisdom that underpins some aspects of local agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, and nature conservation.

The broad direction of this line of reasoning is threefold. It seeks to contribute to the fascinating and expanding field of ethnobotany and bio-cultural diversity for further investigation through a study of culture and biodiversity in the Sri Lankan context. It attempts to identify some of the main fields of traditional knowledge where ecological information is still preserved in some form (e.g. folklore, folk poetry, literature, place names, etc.) or applied (e.g. traditional medicine and traditional agricultural methods) in particularly in rural Sri Lanka. It also explores the possible policy implications and the potential usefulness of the link between culture and biodiversity for Sri Lankan decision makers involved in planning for biodiversity conservation. In this regard, some recent attempts to link biodiversity and some cultural traits are briefly examined. This includes the use of biodiversity related emblems, at national, and provincial levels in Sri Lanka.

As an example, if one looks at the scene of present-day agricultural development, it is increasingly evident that modern agriculture is in the throes of a host of fundamental crises. The urgent and imperative need to feed an increasing population, compelled the agricultural research scientists and policy makers to seek new paths of increasing yields rapidly since the 1950s, ultimately resulting in a surge of high yielding seed varieties. This development was named as 'Green Revolution' and the discoverers of new varieties then considered as 'seeds of change', were hailed and rewarded by the society and the governments. The traditional forms of agriculture that evolved over centuries began to be treated as antiques and was encouraged to fade away rapidly. However, the modern technologies brought in their wake, a host of other environmental as well as social problems that proved to defy any quick solutions. They certainly contributed to increasing yields significantly, but they also demanded higher chemical and other

inputs that not only generated unprecedented environmental stresses, but also serious problems of human health such as *leptospirosis* and kidney diseases of uncertain origins, often attributed to modern forms of agriculture. This in turn gave rise to movements of organic farming and the popularization of traditional varieties in recent times. The predicament of the present generation is that, on one hand they cannot proceed with modern agriculture as it is practiced, no can they turn back to traditional agriculture. Economics of production, marketing and employment added more insult to the injured, along with a degradation of a noble profession considered so supreme in a bygone era. There is now a need to understand some of the traditional features of agriculture and irrigation that provided long term sustainability over the centuries.

In passing, the more vexed philosophical issue of including human diversity within the ambit of the biodiversity debates, will be touched briefly. The diversity of human beings as designed by nature over long periods of evolution, had been rapidly diminishing globally due to intermixing and migration facilitated by improved transportation and economic progress. This had often been considered progressive from a political social science perspective. Enhanced concerns of protecting biodiversity in recent times, often do not encompass human diversity and tend to overlook its intrinsic value. The significance of genetic diversity is almost always confined to flora and fauna and not so much for human beings. However, genetic factor is occasionally surfacing in explaining even certain disease patterns as in the case of chronic kidney disease, where 'familial clustering' is attributed to as factor in explaining its patterns of incidence. In academic terms, an emerging issue is whether human diversity could be brought under the broad umbrella of biodiversity?

The policies, and programmes for protection of *aadivaasi* communities present an interesting field of some attempts at preserving human diversity internationally. From an economic perspective, this area may fall under the broad field of managing the social capital. However, it may be contended that, such an approach discounts the intrinsic value of preserving human diversity. It tacitly accepts the doctrine of their eventual extinction through a gradual process of assimilation to the mainstream of society. Compared with the commonly adopted biodiversity conservation modalities include the declaration of strict nature reserves, or forbidden forests where human activities are totally discouraged. However, dealing with human societies may have to be necessarily more complex since the discretion of people to choose their own life styles must be respected at all times.