Role of Socio-religious Beliefs in the Conservation of Natural Resources Viz a Viz Modern Education and Technology: A consideration from Poonch District of Jammu and Kashmir

Javed Manzoor
Department of Environmental Science, Government Degree College Mendhar, J&K India 185211
E-mail: javedevs@gmail.com

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Abstract:
Socio-religious and traditional beliefs play an imperative role in the management and conservation of the natural resources and the environment. Facts findings were made through the process of personal interviews with elders and elites of the different communities residing in all the 08 tehsils of Poonch District. Group discussions with colleagues, visits to socio-cultural and religious places, discussions with traditional priests and women folk were also taken into account. Additional information was collected from the existing literature. It was discovered that modern science and technology has succeeded in bringing the destruction of the earlier system of resources management and conservation. Through the alien’s moral and technological education, the cultural practices that sustained the environmental resources have got eroded. The resultant effect was the reckless destruction and unsustainable utilization of natural resource. Most of the resources have been destroyed to critical levels. Thus the socio-cultural and religious practices that has conserved and maintained the environmental resources in the past need to be revisited.

Keywords: Traditional beliefs, conservation and management, environmental resources, modern.

Introduction:
Environment can be defined as the sum total of all the external conditions and influences that affect the life and development of an organism. It is the space within which man performs his daily activities to improve his living standard. The physical environment is made up of tangible structures such as vegetation, soil, water, land, rocks interacting with each other and the animal kingdom. It is the environment that suffers extensive spoilage through human exploitation. It carries the natural resources which easily demonstrate man’s interference with nature and exhibit man’s abuse on it. Management of natural resources is the judicious use of resources by people. It is the management of valuable natural
resources such as timber, fish, topsoil, pastureland, minerals, forests, wildlife, parkland, wilderness and watershed areas. Usher (2000) defined conservation as the maintenance of genetic, species, and ecosystem diversity in the natural abundance in which they occur. In the past, people have developed a variety of resource management practices that continue to exist in all parts of the world. One of such approach was the use of traditional methods that have helped them to regulate interactions with their natural environment. The role of traditional and customary beliefs in the management of a large number of elements of local biodiversity, regardless of their use value, dates back to creation (Berkes et al., 2000; Turner et al., 2000; Shastri et al., 2002). Traditional conservation ethics were capable of protecting biodiversity in particular and the environment in general as long as the local communities have a stake in it. The traditional communities of the world have learnt to live in a harmonious relationship with the environment. The most interesting feature associated with these traditional communities has been found that, they lived in localities which were immensely rich in biodiversity. About 573 tribal communities belonging to 227 ethnic groups exist in different part of the India. These tribal and ethnic communities live in close vicinity of forests and have conserved the biodiversity of their localities since long time as they were conscious of the need for the conservation of natural resources. They consciously or unconsciously linked the natural resource base to the supreme God and his numerous divinities who were invisible intermediaries between God and his people. They believed that these gods dwell in the environment and abode in the structures therein. An abode of a god was deemed sacred. Anything sacred was highly feared, respected and restrained. The indigenous communities cultured themselves in this manner and were able to pass these norms from generation to generation. This has gone a long way in the management and rational use of the resources around them. Shastri et’al (2002) postulated that positive relationship exists between spirituality, human well-being and environment and that the ethics often help them regulate interactions with their natural environment. Human activities have exposed many parts of the natural resource base to considerable risks. Introduction of modern science and technology has helped in understanding and harnessing the world’s resources but at the same time has exposed the nature to wanton destruction. Thus there is a need for incorporating and re-inculcating traditional beliefs and value systems among the masses for the management and conservation of the natural resources.

Material and Methods:

Study Area:

Poonch District is one of the remotest districts of Jammu and Kashmir India. It is bounded by the actual line of control from three sides and lies within Longitudes 33.770 N Latitude and 74.10 E longitudes. Climate of area ranges from sub tropical to temperate with a temperature scope of 19-34 °C in summer to 6-17 °C in winter with an average elevation of 981meters above sea level. The area harbours rich biodiversity.People mostly depends on traditional and indigenous practitioners for the treatment of various ailments. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. Topography of the study area is hilly and mountainous with 70% of the population living in isolated villages. People have strong religious beliefs and customs. Poonch District comprised of 08 Tehsils.

Methodology:

During the study data was collected from the primary as well as the secondary sources. Primary source included questionnaire, interview and observation. The open-ended questionnaire was the major source of the primary information generated. A total of 36 isolated and far flung villages of the district which were mostly inhabited by the tribal’s and indigenous communities were selected for the study. For personal observation, an extensive and thorough survey was conducted in these villages of the study area from November 2016 to September 2017. Local indigenous communities heads, Gujjars, bakerwals, Paharis, Gaddis, village heads
and various religious leaders were interviewed for the administration of the questionnaire based on resources utilization in the study area, rules guiding the use of natural resources, and the extent to which the local belief influenced the behaviour of the people towards environmental protection. The interviews were instrumental in gathering information on the socio-religious behaviour of people. The secondary sources of data include textbooks and related materials such as journals. Moreover, various socio-cultural and religious places were also visited for observation and discussion.

**Result and Discussions:**

During observation and interaction with the people in the study area, it was found that the way of life, culture and belief of people found in Poonch District is interwoven around different religious values as religions have affected their life one way or the other. Various religions observed in the study area were Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Christians. The cultural orientation of the people in the area is embodied with the traditional customs, beliefs, norms, art, music, and literature which have an everlasting impact on their life and social setup. Cultural and religious practices encompass holistically their life as various types of flora, fauna, and other natural resources are considered sacred by people of Poonch District. The people worshipped several environmental structures such as mountains, trees, water bodies, and rocks. Because of these beliefs, various environmental structures are highly protected and greatly revered in the past which helped in enforcing rules and regulations for environmental protection because people were restrained from using resources carelessly especially when these were related to socio-religious practices. Some objects were being restrained from use and considered as sacred because of their role in existence. Findings have shown that the traditional resource management in the study area comprised of two categories one is the protection of particular habitats such as a forest, water body, mountain etc and another is the protection of a particular species of local flora and fauna.

Poonch District comprised of a large number of sacred or socio-religious places which are considered as sacred by different religious groups where any type of exploitation of flora and fauna is strictly restricted. There are natural beliefs and laws restraining people from utilizing the resource from these sacred areas. In some communities of the study area large and gigantic trees are regarded as abode of spirits and are always avoided to be cut for firewood. All forests and vegetation on graveyards are restrained from being used as firewood. Hunting, cutting, pruning, and cultivation in and around these sacred groves are not allowed as the whole area is considered as sacred. There is a strong restriction to cut down a tree under which people rest whether it is on the road side or in a hamlet or compound. Various ethnic communities of the area have played a vital role in preserving biodiversity in several patches of virgin forests and have conserved several species of flora and fauna. The interference of all kind of human activities is prohibited in these sacred areas and preservation plots maintained by the tribal’s. On discussion with some tribal leaders it was found that area under the occupation of various local and ethnic communities don’t use any synthetic fertilizers rather green manure and following of land was done to regenerate the fertility of soil. Several mountain dwelling communities of the area have developed their own means of conserving water and managing soil without harming the natural resources.

Various communities in the area are of the belief that plantation and soil around water bodies have godly interaction with man. So any tree standing on natural lakes, ponds, swamps or rivers is not tempered with because exploiting it in whichever manner may lead to provoking the divinities that may transfer or migrate, leading to drying up of the water body completely. People believed that the divinities will react by bringing calamity to the person’s family or communities. So this belief has latently conserved the flora and fauna around water bodies in the area. During discussion with some
tribal groups it was found that many communities don’t allow or cut green trees from the forests due to their belief that these are wild forests where the gods and their ancestors dwell. According to them forest is one of the important resource needed for the development of water and soil. Forests were regarded as divine and therefore must not be exploited. Hunting, cutting of fire wood as well as grazing is strictly prohibited thus latently promoting the conservation of both flora and fauna of the area. Many birds and animals are considered as sacred by some communities of the area due to the religious and social sanctity attached to them. However with the introduction of modern education, the traditional practices of environmental ethics and beliefs that form the basis of natural resource conservation and management have eroded a lot. The environmental psychology of the people has drastically altered with the introduction of modern education and culture. Sacred places that were hitherto observed and restrained from exploitation were no longer viewed in that perspective. The modern equipments introduced by science and technology to ease and hasten the exploitation of natural resource have added to the stupendous and unsustainable environmental resource exploitation. Large scale exploitation of forest, soil, rivers, wildlife and mountains has taken place in many parts of the area in order to meet the ever increasing demand of population for housing and infrastructural development. Large hilly area are now brought cultivation with modern agricultural tools, herbicides and other chemicals are now used to destroy both fauna and flora easily and faster thus leading to environmental degradation. Due to government polices tribal communities are now allowed to graze their cattle anywhere in the forest and cut down any tree. These factors have exposed the life of vegetal species to danger. The land has been over scavenged to the extent that grasses in the area do not even grow to maturity and trees have been drastically stunted beyond regeneration. Massive deforestation has taken place. Soils have been exposed to large scale erosion both wind and water. Rivers and streams have been filled with sediments. Wetlands, swamps and marshes of the area have now dried up. Only small patches of forests are now found in the area adjoining villages.

**Conclusion:**

Therefore there is a dire need for incorporating traditional beliefs and value systems in the conservation and management of natural resources. Public participation is must to ensure sustainable use of natural resource and its management. The modern education and science and technology should not under rate and devalue the socio-religious beliefs of traditional religion and their practices. Government should involve local communities for the conservation and management of natural resources. Religious teachings must be followed to conserve the valuable resources. There must be the ample sensitization of rural communities on environmental protection and the value attached.

**References:**


