

Deep Ecology and Indigenous Practices in the Central Himalayas

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Abstract

This study explores how the people of Uttarakhand have preserved their indigenous knowledge through folklore and customs. It also examines the links between the philosophy of Deep Ecology and these cultural components. It highlights the coexistence of cultural traditions and environmental conservation initiatives with potent instances. The study emphasises that deep empathy and appreciation for nature lead to a better natural environment.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Indigenous Practices, Cultural Diversity, Ecological Preservation, Uttarakhand.

The person is not above or outside of nature. The person is part of creation. The person cares for and about nature, shows reverence towards and respect for nonhuman nature, loves and lives with nonhuman nature, is a person in the "earth household", and "lets being be," lets nonhuman nature follow separate evolutionary destinies. (Devall, 1980: 303)

Humanity must reconsider its role on Earth in an era of escalating environmental crises. A significant respite can be achieved by moving away from the anthropocentric worldview, which places humans at the centre of existence, and instead embracing a perspective that sees humans as one among many beings sharing this planet. Chief Seattle, leader of Suquamish and Duwamish Native American tribes, once said in his famous speech (1854), "The Earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth...Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it." (Shiva, 2010: 19) Historically, humans maintained a healthy, symbiotic relationship with nature.

They revered Earth as 'Terra Mater' (Mother Earth) (Shiva, 2010: 41) and acquired only what was essential for sustenance. However, with the gradual development of societies and the scientific revolution, this bond weakened.

According to Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive*, "The shift from Prakriti to 'natural resources,' from 'Mater' to 'mater' was considered (and in many quarters is still considered) a progressive shift from superstition to rationality." (Shiva, 2010: 42) But this shift marked a turning point, transforming the Earth from a revered entity to an object of exploitation. Technology came to be seen as the sole means of improving human life, and the Western utilitarian approach began to dominate global perspectives. Under this influence, even Eastern traditions, once deeply intertwined with nature, succumbed to the view of nature as "a storehouse of resources which should be 'developed' to satisfy ever-increasing numbers of humans and ever-increasing demands of humans" (Devall, 1980: 300). The consequences of this materialistic mindset are devastating. Pollution has degraded the air, water, and land, while numerous diseases afflict humans and countless species face extinction. The current situation requires immediate intervention and the revival of indigenous narratives that provide essential knowledge about living peacefully with nature.

From the beginning, Indigenous wisdom (from any part of the world) anchored itself to a deep bond between human beings and nature. The areas in which these indigenous communities reside strongly influence their traditional customs, sacred ceremonies, and eating habits, along with cultural celebrations. The members of these communities view nature as a caring mother and believe their existence depends on their environment. They use their resources sustainably and only take what they need. Their balanced lifestyle has enabled them to maintain healthy relationships with their environment since ancient times. Their philosophical practices match

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the core principles of deep ecology, which Arne Naess first proposed during the twentieth century, because they intrinsically value all living organisms and natural systems.

In 1973, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess introduced the concept of "Deep Ecology" (Naess, 1973) in his article "The Shallow and the Deep". Motivated by Gandhi's ideas of simplicity and nonviolence, Naess compared "deep" and "shallow" environmentalism and urged people to deal with the underlying causes of ecological deterioration. Additionally, Deep Ecology was influenced by earlier ecological philosophers such as Rachel Carson, whose groundbreaking book *"Silent Spring"* (1962) revealed the ecological harm caused by human activity, and Aldo Leopold, whose "Land Ethic" (1949) highlighted the moral need for humanity to care for the environment. The framework of Deep Ecology gained widespread popularity over time because it provided solutions to worldwide environmental problems. This popularity shaped ethical debates about humankind's place in nature, in addition to ecological activism.

A strong regard for nature is encouraged by Deep Ecology, which also urges people to abandon human-centred viewpoints. This environmental philosophy illustrates that ecosystems and living things have intrinsic value rather than value generated from human usage. While shallow ecology focuses on natural issues that are advantageous to human needs, it encourages ecological thinking and acknowledges the interdependence and equal value of all life forms. The foundation of this ideology is ecocentrism, which emphasises the well-being of entire ecosystems. By supporting sustainability, cohabitation, and simplicity to create harmony with nature, deep ecology combats anthropocentrism.

The state, also known as '*Dev Bhoomi*' (land of Gods), has a rich culture that showcases numerous practices that assist in preserving the region's biodiversity. The peaceful relationship between nature and humanity becomes visible in this setting. The indigenous communities of both the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of the state showcase numerous instances of their spiritual connection with the environment, creating an understanding of the interconnectedness of both human and non-human life forms. Their oral traditions, together with rituals and folklore, express environmental understanding which honours natural sanctity. Their customs demonstrate natural coexistence, which delivers essential knowledge about sustainable practices. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the idea of deep ecology across three sectors within the state: forest conservation, health care, and agriculture, emphasising the relevance of these practices for sustainable development and the value of folk narratives in protecting life on the planet.

Deep Ecology and Forest Conservation

The indigenous communities of Uttarakhand present a glimpse of a positive relationship between humans and their natural surroundings. One such example is the ritual performance of '*Pandav Nritya*', known as '*Pandav Leela*', that relates narratives from the epic Mahabharata. After the war, the Pandavas begin a spiritual journey to heaven to receive forgiveness for their transgressions. The religious pilgrimage of the Pandavas started at Kedarnath after they crossed the Mandakini River shoreline. These sites where Pandava Leela is performed maintain stories about the Pandavas' activities up to the present day. A traditional cultural practice known as Pandava Leela remains organised to safeguard this legendary heritage for future generations in isolated parts of the state. The communities gather for this event to dance while singing and making prayers to their gods. Their religious ceremonies function as essential indications of their botanical expertise. The ritual practice of removing pine trees demonstrates their extensive botanical understanding because even though the act is symbolic, it indicates their profound botanical knowledge. Pine trees are native to the area, but their widespread invasion in the steep areas has become a significant issue for the local populace. Despite their reputation for generating resin, these trees are thought to be detrimental to the environment. The region experiences dryness because of their shallow root system, which prevents it from helping the earth retain water. However, broadleaf plants, such as oak and rhododendron, are known to be able to recharge groundwater.

The Indigenous populations' profound awareness of their ecology is further highlighted by the popular folklore that is common in this area. According to one of these folktales, Goddess Nanda became exhausted from her difficult journey and looked for a spot to rest on the way to her "mait," or family abode. She believed she might find some relief close to a tall pine tree. The pine tree, however, reacted rudely. As a result, Goddess Nanda cursed the tree, stating that animals would not seek cover beneath it, birds would cease building nests on it, and the surrounding area would lose its greenery and water sources. However, as Goddess Nanda approaches the oak tree, it extends a warm invitation for her to take a nap in its shade. Goddess Nanda blesses the oak tree, signifying its advantageous ecological qualities, as a token of appreciation for hospitality. In contrast to the pine tree, the oak tree maintains an abundance of water supplies while providing a habitat for a variety of vegetation, animals, and birds under its shadow.

The story's numerous benefits and curses align with the traits of oak and pine trees. This story demonstrates

the connection between cultural and environmental knowledge and shows how folklore relates to the ecological characteristics of specific tree species.

The pine tree, locally known as “Chir ka ped” is now among the predominant pine species in India and holds a significant presence. While the pine has a longstanding presence in the Himalayas, its expansion received a substantial boost during the colonial era, facilitated by the growth of Indian Railways and resin-tapping. The establishment of pine tree plantations gained momentum over time, involving the clearance of other indigenous forest vegetation.

In the 1940s, Mira Behn, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, during her travels in the hills, expressed dismay at the forest department’s initiative to transform ‘banj’ oak forests into monocultures of ‘Chir’ pine forests. In her 1952 essay titled “Something Wrong in the Himalayas,” she expressed her concern over the social injustice and ecological imprudence associated with the replacement of Oak forests with Pine. She urged the forest department to promote Oak instead of Pine and wrote that “The Banj forests are the very centres of nature’s economic cycle on the southern slopes of the Himalaya. To destroy them is to cut out the heart and thus bring death to the whole structure.” (Telegraph Online, 2013) In recent years, Pine trees have outgrown Oak and other plants in the region. Extremely flammable pine needle cover is the primary cause of the region’s ongoing forest fires, which significantly reduce plant and animal biodiversity. Hilly regions are experiencing drought-like conditions as a result of the land’s diminished ability to retain water. This condition forces hilly women to travel long distances to get water.

Tree species such as Peepul, Oak, Rhododendron, and Kaafal are considered good in high-mountain areas. They improve soil moisture and replenish natural springs and are, therefore, beneficial to the region. Due to the importance of these tree species, local communities declare areas where they are found to be sacred, and it is strictly prohibited to cut down trees in such locations. As a result, these protected regions are shielded from the adverse consequences of modernity. The native populations of Uttarakhand have had a mutually beneficial relationship with the natural world from ancient times. Forests are revered, and regulations are rigorously upheld to protect their sanctity. But modern man’s utilitarian tendency, which can be said to be the result of Western influence, has not left some of its places untouched.

Deep Ecology and Health Care

The vaidyas, or traditional healers, play a crucial role in disseminating information about herbal medicine,

which is intricately associated with the ecosystem of Uttarakhand. While they recognise the connection between humans and the environment, these practices align with the tenets of Deep Ecology. People carefully pick native herbs and plants, which are then prepared to treat a variety of ailments. To avoid overharvesting these resources, information about these medicinal plants is typically kept private. The only ways that people can learn about these plants are through apprenticeships and oral traditions. In this way, it enhances human health while maintaining the integrity of both ecological systems.

Brahm Kamal, the state flower of Uttarakhand, holds religious and ecological value since people recognize it as both sacred and medicinal. Hindu mythology identifies Brahma Kamal as the special flower that receives divine favour from Brahma, the god. The local population conducts rituals for maintaining this plant. The flower harvest occurs only on the Nandashtami festival through a delicate process of flower picking. Collectors use their left hand to pluck the flower since this technique prevents over-exploitation of the plant. This traditional procedure demonstrates a deep respect for nature because it maintains both the spiritual sanctity and ecological significance of the plant. Such an intentional method of Brahm Kamal’s collection through symbolism represents a responsible equilibrium between people’s needs and the preservation of nature that accounts for its valuable species status.

The celebration of the folk festival “Phool Dei” in the spring season in various parts of Uttarakhand is another instance that showcases the close-knit relationship between man and nature. Also known as ‘Ghogha,’ it is “named after the goddess Ghogha in Garhwal, who is revered as the deity of flowers and is exclusively worshipped by children”. (Pant, 2024: 6) Children play an essential role in this celebration, which aims to instil in them love and respect for Nature. This festival begins with the arrival of the spring season, and children offer Rhododendron flowers, also called ‘Buransh’ in the local dialect, on the doorsteps of their neighbours’ homes and pray for their prosperity and good health. For the natives, the blooming of the red-coloured Rhododendron flower symbolises fertility, good luck, and fortune. Beyond its beauty, this state tree of Uttarakhand is known as a panacea for many diseases. It is also used for making juice and wine, enhancing the local economy.

The flowering shrub Kilmora (*Berberis aristata*), which grows naturally in Uttarakhand, serves multiple medicinal purposes as Indian berberry or tree turmeric. The beneficial properties of Kilmora include anti-inflammatory effects, anticancer abilities, antidiabetic characteristics, antioxidant properties, and various other activities. The entire plant possesses high utility value and

indigenous local populations have maintained its usage as a medicinal plant to treat various ailments. Traditional recipes such as chutneys and jams use Kilmora as one of their main ingredients. This shrub occupies a significant position in the cultural heritage of the region since people recognize it through their folk traditions. The native population of the state uses Kilmora alongside another medicinal plant known as 'Thuner.' The local term 'Thuner' (*Taxus baccate*) describes this plant in the area, or when translated into English, it is known as the Himalayan yew. The plant's leaves, along with its bark and fruits, demonstrate significant healing properties and show potential anticancer activity.

Notwithstanding their cultural and ecological significance, numerous plants, such as Brahm Kamal, Buransh, Kilmora, and Thuner, encounter considerable dangers from climate change, overexploitation, and habitat degradation. The utilitarian approach leads to overharvesting and other forms of environmental degradation that jeopardise these species' survival. Deep Ecology advocates for the recognition of all species' intrinsic value, and the indigenous narratives offer significant insights into sustainable practices that honour and safeguard biodiversity. By amalgamating traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation initiatives, communities can preserve these species and ensure their accessibility for future generations.

Deep Ecology and Farming

Terrace farming, a method in which complex networks of terraces are shaped into hillsides to form level areas for growing crops, is a groundbreaking and eco-friendly agricultural practice. Designed for the difficult mountainous landscape of Uttarakhand, it serves as a significant illustration of local techniques to prevent soil erosion, retain water, and optimise cultivable land in the hilly region. Moreover, crop diversification and intercropping are prevalent methods that promote resilience against varying climatic conditions and boost biodiversity within agricultural systems.

"Sathon-Anthon," also known as "Biruda Panchami," is a local festival observed from mid-August to September in Kumaon. During this festival, five to seven types of grains grown in the hills are soaked in water and left to sprout. These sprouted seeds, referred to as "biruda," are considered highly auspicious and symbolise a bountiful harvest for the season. (Pant, 2024, p. 6) Upon the completion of the agricultural harvest, a segment of the yield is presented at the shrine dedicated to the 'kuldevta,' also referred to as 'gram devta.' This act exemplifies their expression of gratitude towards the divine for the bestowed blessings and overall prosperity.

Another prevalent practice in the hilly terrains is 'Barahanaja,' a traditional mixed farming system in Uttarakhand, India. The term translates to "12 grains," reflecting the practice of sowing 12 or more native seeds simultaneously (Joshi, 2020). This ingenious approach involves inter-cropping complementary grains, such as lentils, cereals, oilseeds, and vegetables, each tailored to the specific growth requirements of the plants. The primary protagonist in Barahanaja is Maduwa (Ragi/Millet), accompanied by various other edibles such as cholayi (amaranth), kuttu (buckwheat), and jowar (sorghum), among others. Additionally, oilseeds like til (sesame), jakhiya (wild mustard), and bhaang (hemp) are also cultivated in this diversified and indigenous farming system.

The variety of crops in this system enhances soil fertility by using legume vines for natural support, reducing soil erosion, and replenishing nutrients in the soil via nitrogen-fixing capabilities. It assists in tackling food shortages, guaranteeing a steady food supply. In response to climate change, where severe weather can harm certain crops, the variety in Barahanaja fields guarantees that some crops stay unharmed, ensuring food security. Barahanaja not only supports farmers but also provides feed for livestock, underscoring its importance in agriculture and as a means of promoting self-sustainability and dignity among rural communities.

These practices are gradually being discontinued to address the increasing demand for agricultural products resulting from population growth, changes in land use, deforestation, and urban expansion. Farmers are now concentrating on a limited number of commercially sought-after crops instead of managing varied crop fields. If the current situation is not taken seriously, the region may permanently lose its traditional knowledge regarding the cultivation and uses of these crops. Additionally, the region could lose the chance to become a varied and nourishing food-producing zone.

Conclusion

The concept of Deep Ecology, proposed by Arne Naess, strongly connects with the rituals, folklore, and native traditions of Uttarakhand, providing a persuasive viewpoint on the region's environmental values. This philosophy, which advocates for the inherent worth of every living entity, urges a transition from anthropocentric thinking to a more expansive ecological perspective. The folklore and rituals of the region elegantly showcase the interrelationship of all living beings. Traditional tales animate forests, rivers, and mountains, depicting them as aware beings deserving of regard and protection. For instance, the stories regarding the pine and oak trees

showcase a detailed comprehension of their ecological functions. This respect for holy groves and trees has safeguarded numerous natural zones, protecting them from irresponsible use. These practices demonstrate a profound cultural dedication to conservation that resonates with Deep Ecology's appeal to honour nature as an equal rather than a resource to exploit.

In healthcare, the native healing practices of Uttarakhand exemplify ecological awareness in action. Local communities for generations have depended on sustainable practices to gather medicinal plants, safeguarding the endurance of these essential resources. This approach embodies the idea of simplifying life to enable others, both humans and non-humans, to flourish. It emphasises a deep regard for nature's healing power, a belief central to both Deep Ecology and the area's traditions. Farming also illustrates this alignment. The agricultural techniques used in the middle Himalayan area, including organic approaches, crop rotation, and mixed cropping, depend on the belief that the land flourishes optimally with little human intervention. By cultivating various crops and fostering biodiversity, these practices strengthen the resilience of ecosystems and local food systems, guaranteeing sustainability for future generations. The collaboration between Naess's principles and Uttarakhand's cultural traditions reflects the lasting wisdom of its inhabitants. Long before contemporary environmental movements, these customs nurtured a harmonious connection with nature that continues to be significant today. By accepting the teachings found in these narratives, rituals, and traditions, we can outline a sustainable journey ahead, one that acknowledges the inherent worth of all existence and values the fragile

equilibrium of our common Earth. Uttarakhand serves as a striking example that environmental knowledge and cultural legacy are strong partners in creating a sustainable future.

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