

Culture And History Of Sustainability

M. H. Qureshi

Former Professor,
Centre for the Study of Regional Development,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
profmhqureshi@gmail.com

Culture and the question of sustainability, both have moved together within the space occupied by human beings living in a society. Culture is the composite achievement of human societies which has continuity as the traits are transferred from one generation to the other. One of the early definitions of culture was given by Edward Burnett Tylor in his book entitled "Primitive Culture" in 1871. He defined culture as, "*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man(human) as a member of society.*" Cultural attainments are the collective and composite attainments of the people of a society. The people in different ecological niches strove for their sustainability by identifying the means of sustenance over the terrestrial space which they occupied. Thus, the cultural development and the development of means of sustainability over the space became intertwined together. It is imperative for human society to select activities that are responsible for sustaining it. The question of whether the concerns for sustainability came first and culture later or vice versa is not relevant, as both, sustainability and culture, are the attributes of human societies. Both are related to space and time. Hence, both are bound to develop together. It is said that it is important to know what we produce, but it is still more important to know with what tools production takes place. These tools, however primitive they may be, represent the stage of our development of material culture. Material culture is the result of the creativity of the members of society and the utility of the materials in the

process of production. Human beings have been created with a lot of creativity provided by nature and use it for further creation.

Human beings, in the initial stages of their appearance on the surface of the earth, searched for the resources for their sustenance within their ecological niche. In the primitive stages of their economic history, they depended, for their food, on the resources available in their immediate environment. They survived on the collection, and gathering of roots, barks, and fruits of plants and on the hunting of animals. They used primitive tools such as stones, sticks, twigs, and bones, which formed their material culture, however, primitive or ordinary those might have been. The population was lower; hence the damage to the environment was not discernible. They depended on whatever was available within their ecological surroundings. It is also possible that they used to collect some grains from a few plants in the diverse surroundings and ate them. The main consideration was that these food items available from the environment provided energy and were not bitter in taste. They also depended on hunting the available animals, birds, and fish with the help of very ordinary tools. With the growth of the population and a resultant increase in its size, the capacity of the ecological niche to sustain the population became limited. It was important to know what materials they gathered but culturally it was more significant to know the tools and techniques used in obtaining these materials of subsistence. The productivity of labor was low, and cultural attainment was also at a low level.

These activities, such as gathering and hunting adopted by the people at that time were tiresome and productivity, generally, was low, which resulted in scarcity and hunger. The economic activities adopted at that time were destructive in nature, and the surrounding environment was progressively being eroded of its resource base, so it was feared that it would not be able to sustain the population for long. The growth of the population required a larger area to sustain itself and accommodate the increasing numbers of people. The spatial area of operation increased and their movements over the space also became more frequent. There was not only one center on the surface of the earth where human beings appeared. A situation might have arisen when two or more communities, once located apart, came face to face, and conflicts might have ensued. The space was, thus, contested between communities. The lack of carrying capacity of

the ecological surroundings and avoiding intergroup conflicts might have been the reasons that forced people to move away from the destructive economic activities of collection, gathering, and hunting to the economic activities of domestication. Destruction was replaced by domestication, the movement was abandoned, and sedentary settling was preferred. The process of villagization would have started with the clustering of houses, huts, and shanties. It was not only the grains that sustained the people but the domestication of animals also provided food in the form of milk and meat. They also provided hair, wool, and hides for making cloth, shelters and other usable materials.

The domestication of animals seems to have taken place first. "The dog was the first to be domesticated (Larson et al, 2012) and was established across Eurasia before the end of the Late Pleistocene era, well before the cultivation of crops and before the domestication of other animals." Herding, in the steppe lands, might have been adopted first, entailing the movement of people along with their herds of sheep and goats from one pasture land to the other.

The process of settling down at a place, started giving rise to small settlements and rural societies with agricultural activities and animal husbandry, ushered in the era of domestication of both plants and animals. There emerged a number of centers where agriculture was started in historical times.

Ancient knowledge about grains ensuring sustainability:

Edible grains were obtained from the bio-diverse ecological niche by selection and experimentation. Their selection was slow due to experimentations of the people. A number of grains have been mentioned in the *Yajurveda*- an ancient Indian text, which was written, perhaps, between 12,000 and 10,000 B.C.E. These different grains, which were known at that time, have been mentioned in Shloka No. 961 in the 18th chapter as under:-

"We perform Yajna so that we are blessed with Breeh (rice), Barley, Mash (Urad), Sesamum (Til), Moong, Gram (Chana), Kangni (Fox tail millet), Mandua (Finger

millet) Sawan /sama (Barnyard millet) Newar (Dinkal wheat), Wheat and Masur (lentil). (Translated by Bhagwati Devi Sharma),

Food as a source of sustenance has been emphasized in the following statement in *Taittiriya Upanishad*, "(He) learnt that food is Brahma (because) from food these creatures are born; Having been born by food and having departed into food again they enter." (Swami Sarvanand, 1921).

Almost all the food grains mentioned in *Yajurveda* are still cultivated in one part or another of the country. According to historians the domestication of wheat goes back to about 12,000 B.C.E from a plant known as "emmer" which is a surviving ancestor of wheat. Archaeologists also confirm that modern wheat was cultivated in the Karacada mountain region of Southeast Turkey. The findings of historians and archaeologists corroborate with the description of wheat (*godhoom* in Sanskrit) mentioned in the *Yajurveda*. The archaeologists, anthropologists, and plant scientists searched for the geographical spread of grains and other animal-based economic activities. The story of the emergence of cultural elements was also unfolding with the economic development.

Vavilov (1935) identified 8 core areas where agriculture was adopted as an occupation. These were:

I. The Chinese Centre - He recognizes 138 distinct species, of which probably the earliest and the most important were cereals, buckwheats and legumes.

II. The Indian Centre (including the entire subcontinent) - based originally on rice, millets, and legumes, with a total of 117 species.

Ila. The Indo-Malayan Centre (including Indonesia, Philippines, etc.) - with root and fruit crops, sugarcane, spices, etc., some 55 species.

III. The Inner Asiatic Centre (Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan, etc.) - with wheat, rye, and many herbaceous legumes, as well as seed-sown root crops and fruits, some 42 species.

IV. Asia Minor (including Transcaucasia, Iran, and Turkmenistan) - with more wheat, rye, oats, seed and forage legumes, fruits, etc., about 83 species.

V. The Mediterranean Centre – of more limited importance than the others to the east but including wheat, barley, forage plants, vegetables, and, fruits—especially spices and ethereal oil plants, some 84 species.

VI. The Abyssinian (now Ethiopian) Centre – of lesser importance, mostly a refuge of crops from other regions, especially wheat and barley, local grains (such as **teff**) and coffee, and spices such as onion, garlic, and chillies, etc., about 38 species.

VII. The South Mexican and Central American centre – important for maize, *Phaseolus* and Cucurbitaceous species, with spices, fruits, and fibre plants, with some 49 species.

VIII. South America: Andes region (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador) – important for potatoes, other root crops, grain crops of the Andes, vegetables, spices, and fruits, as well as drugs (cocaine, quinine, tobacco, etc.), some 45 species.

VIII a. The Chilean Centre— only four species – outside the main area of crop domestication, and one of these (*Solanum tuberosum*) derived from the Andean centre. This could hardly be compared with the eight main centres.

VIII b. Brazilian-Paraguayan Centre – again, outside the main centres with only 13 species, though cassava and peanut are of considerable importance; others, such as pineapple, rubber, cacao, were probably domesticated much later.

Culture and Sustainability:

We cannot think of the development of culture, independent of the livelihood, habitat, and daily chores of the human beings in their respective societies. It becomes clear when we identify the indicators of culture. The habitat, food, clothing, mediums of expression, faith, festivals, rituals, etc., decide the variations in cultural attributes over space. We know that language is an incomplete medium of expression. All the feelings, emotions, and expectations cannot be expressed through language. We require different other mediums besides language to express ourselves. Hence, other mediums of expression such as music, dance, drama, painting, and architecture. All these cultural forms vary over space depending upon the variations in different elements of nature and the ecological richness of the region. For example, the climatic conditions result in the variation in our clothing, food, house types, occupations and means of transportation. The

ecological parameters help in the adaptation and modification of the system of sustenance in a society.

The sustainability of human beings, thus, gets intertwined with the produce obtained from agricultural crops and animal life. It is said that human beings do not live by bread alone. They have to satisfy their basic needs along with their higher needs. Thus, along with their concerns for sustainability, they were also involved in creating material (tangible) as well as nonmaterial (nontangible) cultural elements. The cultural attainments of a society change with the level of technological - development. The interactive system of naturalized humans and humanized nature ensures livelihood and sustainability in society. Human beings have to attend to the higher needs of life. This fact led to the development of philosophy, language, and many other nontangible cultural elements. Banks & McGee (1989) opined that *"the essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviours in the same or in similar ways"*.

The non-tangible elements of culture have to be interpreted along with the tangible ones when we relate them to sustainability. "Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a group of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them" (Lederach, 1995). Historically, the era after the age of discovery witnessed the large-scale colonization of the world by the European powers. This resulted in the assimilation of different cultures, both tangible and nontangible, into the colonial realms. The trade, along with the missionary activities, brought diversification in faith, language, dress, and technology. The question of sustainability was addressed with technological innovations and research in agricultural sciences and animal husbandry. The problem of hunger and malnutrition became a worldwide phenomenon.

The United Nations started assessing the problem of hunger. The conservation of the environment and issues of development came to the fore. The General

Assembly of the United Nations, in order to set a global agenda, created the World Commission on Environment and Development under the Chairmanship of Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1982 to prepare a comprehensive report. The commission came out with a report entitled "Our Common Future" in 1987. This report introduced the concept of 'Sustainable Development'. The considerations which led to the recommendations of this commission were some of the environmental issues such as global warming, a threat to the ozone layer, desertification, and loss of agricultural land. There were tragedies such as the African famine, the Gas leak in Bhopal, the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. The concept states that "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Furthermore, it was stated that "Sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future and present needs."

The questions which arise in this context are: Is the world culturally homogenous and amorphous? Is the present generation aware of the culture of future generations? Is the food basket in the present time the same world over? Whether the energy needs will remain the same or alternative sources may emerge? These are some of the questions to be pondered upon while dealing with the question of sustainability.

The Experience of Sustainability and Cultural Pluralism in India:

India is a land of diversities that exist in her physical and natural realms; social structure; occupational patterns; and overall cultural realms. The process of living together produces and nurtures different discernible cultural traits through the interactive relationship of give and take. Indian Culture has long continuity of thousands of years along with diversity and heterogeneity. The cultural characteristics of India have been derived from her long sustaining history which has witnessed many ups and downs.

Indian society is multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and hence, multi-cultural. India received waves of migrants, over a long period, from West Asia, Central Asia, and the Tibeto- Mayanmar realms. The successive migrations brought Aryans, Mangoloids, Huns, Kushans, the Sakas, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Persians and the Turks. Some groups migrated from Gurjia and settled in the western part of India. Place names such as Gujrat and Gujranwala in Pakistan and Gujarat (Gurjar Pradesh) in India indicate towards that process.

India also had an extended cultural realm, particularly beyond her three empires, i.e., Majapahits, Srivijaya, and Yavadweep. Her cultural realm was much larger and included east and central Asia. Susan Gole (1983) identified three realms by describing the country as:

“India Intra Gangum—India within the Ganges—was the Latin name used by Europeans for many centuries when they were referring to what we now call the Indian Subcontinent or South Asia. There were many **Indias** since the term was used for known or unknown land beyond the river Indus, and even for some areas on the African continent. Hence, our India was known as India ‘on this side of Ganges’ to distinguish it from India beyond the Ganges which meant mainland South-east Asia, ‘India Superior’ which might extend to northern China, or the more general term ‘India Orientalis’, which included all the islands from Australia, Japan, and beyond.” (Gole, 1983).

This part was known to the world from earlier times and had attracted the attention of many travellers as well as traders. The richness of her resources was also well known which attracted migrants as well as invaders. The different waves of migrants brought people along with their cultural traits e.g., religion, philosophy, food, clothing, music, dance painting, sculpture, architecture, and above all languages.

Firaq Gorakhpuri, a renowned Urdu poet of India put the phenomena as under:

*“Sarzameene Hind per aqwame Aalam ke Firaq
Kafle baste gaye ,Hindostann banta gaya”.*

It means that successive streams of migrations of the people from different nationalities of the world came and settled on the land of India and thus, the culturally diverse nation was formed. The facts reveal that out of the total population of India, about 1.3 billion i.e., 78.80% are Hindus, 14.23% Muslims, 2.30% Christians, 1.72% Sikhs, 0.70% Buddhists, 0.37% Jains and others (Census, 2011). Thus, the followers of all the major religions and faiths of the world have settled here. Population diversity in India is both spatial as well as hierarchic. The caste system emerging from *Varna vyavastha* is socially hierarchic with clear identities and social and ritual norms.

The whole population is divided into about 4,635 communities, some educationally and technologically very developed and some are still in primitive stages. India also has a linguistic mosaic. There are 22 languages in the eighth schedule and 99 languages are outside the schedule. Thus, there are 121 languages and 1,369 dialects (Census, 2011). The states of India were reorganized in 1956 on the basis of major languages spoken in the states as a result of the recommendations of the States Reorganization Commission. Now new states have been carved out within the same linguistic region due to regional identity politics.

India has been an agricultural country and depended on agricultural and allied activities for sustenance. In modern times Indian agriculture has transformed from primitive subsistence farming to highly developed plantation agriculture to specialized protected farming but simultaneously, the primitive forms such as shifting agriculture (Jhuming) to subsistence grain farming are also continuing side by side. The importance of agriculture and animal husbandry can be judged from the fact that they had found a place in Article 48 of the *Constitution of India* under Directive Principles of State Policy. It provides, “*The state shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught animals.*”

Besides being a very important economic activity, agriculture and its allied activities have given rise to many cultural traits of the Indian population. The following proverb in Hindi emphasises this importance:

Uttam kheti madhyam baan,

Nikhidh chaakri bheekh nidaan

(The best profession is agriculture and the second best is trade; service is a very lowly profession and begging is undesirable.)

As a source of sustenance and livelihood, agriculture in India is as diverse as the terrain and landforms of the country. This occupation has transformed from subsistence to commercial cultivation. The importance of agriculture as sustaining occupation can be understood by the festivals related to harvesting. There are numerous such regional festivals celebrated during different seasons of harvesting the crops and the post-harvest period.

There are regional variations in these festivals though most of them are related to harvesting. These variations can be attributed to the size of the country, climatic conditions such as temperature and rainfall patterns, and seasonal variation in agricultural operations such as sowing, weeding, irrigation, time of maturity of crops, and then harvesting. These variations can clearly be perceived from Kashmir and Ladakh to Tamil Nadu and from Rajasthan to Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the time of festivals also varies on the basis of these variations. For example, *Baisakhi* is celebrated in North India on the first day of *Baisakh* (April-May) just before the harvesting of rabi crops begins. *Lohri* is celebrated on the eve of Sankranti in January in Punjab and neighbouring states by creating a bonfire, in which sweets (rewadi), peanuts, puffed rice and sugarcane are offered. *Nuakhai* is celebrated in Odisha to welcome the harvest of new rice. *Nabanna* (*Nav+anna* -New grain) is the harvest festival of West Bengal in which the newly matured rice is harvested. *Bhogali Bihu* signifies the beginning of the agricultural season in Assam in April. Bihu is also an elegant dance form in Assam. Different tribal groups in Meghalaya celebrate the harvesting festivals with different names. The Khasi tribe celebrates *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem* as a thanksgiving festival in October -November and the Garo tribe celebrates the *Wangala* festival to mark the end of agricultural year. The *Apatani* tribes in the *Ziro* valley of Arunachal Pradesh celebrate the *Dree festival*, in which they worship the Gods for a successful harvest.

A number of colourful festivals are celebrated in South and the west Indian States. Pongal is celebrated in Tamil Nadu. Rice is boiled in milk and jaggery in a pot till it

spills over. It is also a post-harvest festival and coincides with the sun entering the Tropic of Capricorn. The sweet, thus prepared is given to cows and consumed by people. *Onam* is celebrated as a harvest festival in Kerala in the month of August-September with great fanfare. *Gudi Padwa* is an important festival in Maharashtra and Goa celebrated in the month of Chaitra month (March-April), It signifies the onset of the New year as well as the beginning of the harvesting of the rabi crops. There are many other festivals on the occasion of New Year as well as temple festivals. In India, every day has some festivity enriching her culture. The common thread in these festivals is to show reverence and gratitude to mother nature and thanksgiving for the success of their main activity of sustenance, i.e., agriculture and allied activities.

The forms of these festivities may be different, but the spirit which runs across them is the same. These activities highlight the relationship between the means of sustenance and cultural attainment in India.

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