

1. National Seminar on “Society, Culture and the Making of Livelihood: The Symbiosis of Rivers and Nishads in Northern India” at IIAS (22-24 July, 2019)

Rationale:

1. Contexts of the Seminar

“In recent times, a compelling discourse has been generated at the global level over the increasing scarcity water and its socio-cultural implications. Water bodies and repositories such as ponds, rivers, seas and icecaps are now frequently and deservedly discussed in academic and popular arenas. The socio-cultural history of rivers, their flow, health and ecosystem, has lately found due attention among researchers resulting in numerous studies with water as their main focus. In the Athrvaveda, water is described as holy and purifying and is invoked to confer happiness.¹ Here, water is a ‘space’ where the ‘cultural’ takes form, and creates history as ‘the life of a community’ develops around it.

The life of one of the riverine communities, i.e. Nishads, is intimately tied to numerous rivers in India. A close look at the life of these communities will allow us to examine the broader question of human dependence on water and the consequent making of different life worlds. The proposed seminar is an effort in this direction. A close reading of history offers proof that the marginalized communities of India have played a vital role in shaping the contours of cultures, societies and religions of the country. Unfortunately, the writing of social history in India has failed to deal with this adequately. The role of social and cultural habitats in forming the cultures of different castes and communities is also often ignored in social science discourses. This seminar aims to examine and understand the socio-cultural environment and political economy resulting from the multi-layered relationship between rivers and their communities.

Discussions around the measurement and assessment of poverty in modern India, particularly since the 1990s, focus on material assets, education and access to public facilities. There has been a tendency to ignore the role of natural and cultural resources in the lives of communities. The nature of deprivation and poverty among different

¹ P. V. Kane(1953), History of Dhramashstra, Vol. IV, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, page 555

communities dependent on mountains, forests and rivers varies from habitat to habitat. When the Nishad's access to river is restricted, it adversely affects the entire community. At the same time, our recent experience in India suggests that modern technologies and state regulations have also adversely affected the livelihood opportunities of the Nishads and other marginalized communities. It has been observed that without understanding the adverse impact of technology on the artisan castes and communities, we will not be able to make a true enquiry into the life of the peoples of India. For centuries, more than a dozen castes such as Mallah, Kewat and Manjhi among others, have been earning their livelihood from rivers. This seminar wishes to focus on how development activities have affected this cultural and economic associations and how the colonial state had tried to increase its hold on rivers and thereby control the communities concerned.

Writing on the waters of South Asia, Sunil Amrith highlights the importance of rivers and climate. He tries to investigate the fabric of Indian social, economic and political thought in relation to rivers, and the taming and controlling of the rivers by the colonial and post-colonial states.² Over a given time and space, the riverscapes³ become public spaces where history, culture, religious belief and politics meet at different levels. Since it shapes society, the historian has started to look at the river as a text. Eminent historians like Fernand Braudel have emphasized the historical importance of geographical and natural factors like rivers, mountains, plateaus and seas. Along with this, Braudel had also considered the history of rivers in the 'longue duree'.⁴ It is important to rethink the historical relations between human societies and rivers. Research along these lines also lies within the purview of the seminar. A major focus of this seminar would be to discuss the role of the state in the river-human relationship in history.

For all the reasons mentioned earlier, Anupam Mishra once called rivers 'the liquid mirror of society'. By this, Mishra meant to convey the cultural

² Sunil Amrith(2018) *Unruly Water: How Mountains, Rivers and Monsoon have shaped South Asia's History*, Penguin Random House, India.

³ Assa Doron(2013), *Life on the Ganga: Boatmen and the Ritual Economy of Banras*, Cambridge University Press India, New Delhi.

⁴ Sunil Amrith(2018).

significance of rivers apart from their economic importance.⁵ The seminar intends to correlate different aspects of the relationship between rivers and their societies. For example, there is a clear relation between fairs, festivals and gatherings and the rivers whose banks they are held along.

Scholars have been observing that pilgrimage to prescribed sites on the Ganga and other rivers has always been a mass phenomenon. The fair of Kumbha in Prayaga(Uttar Pradesh), at the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, gives us a glimpse of the Indian subcontinent as an open society, where children, widows, wanderers, ascetics, priests, peasants, traders, soldiers, kings and landlords break rank for a moment and mingle with each other.⁶ These spaces of human confluence transformed an unknown, inaccessible terrain into a familiar religious site where disparate regions and communities could converge.⁷This heterogeneous reservoir of Indian culture(s) can be seen over small and big rivers of the country. The seminar is also interested in investigating such phenomena.

Despite and because of the significance of rivers in our lives, the Ganga and other prominent rivers of India are getting polluted almost beyond repair in recent times. The pollution in rivers has jeopardized not only the life of their flora and fauna but has also severely affected the ecological health of the rivers. The human life dependent on rivers is also at risk. The seminar will try to look into this problem of pollution alongside a focus on socio-cultural perspectives in the study of rivers."

2. Objectives of the Seminar

1. Document the life histories of marginalised communities who have been dependent on natural resources.
2. Develop a historical understanding of the contributions of riverine communities to Indian culture and history.
3. Theorise the question of culture and livelihood of riverine communities and the everyday socio-economic contestations they are engaged.

⁵Anupam Mishra(2019), Paryawaranke Path: Sakshatkar, RajkamalPrakashan, New Delhi.

⁶Sudipta Sen(2019), Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River, Penguin Random House, India, page 43.

⁷ B. D. Chattopadhyaya(2017), The Concept of Bhartavarsha and Other Essays, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, page 180; see also Ram Pratap Tripathi 'Shastri'(1952), Puranonmein Ganga, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayaga.

4. Trace the cultural, social and economic aspects of rivers in the lives of the peoples of northern India.
5. Investigate the cultural, social and economic contributions/effects of fairs held along the banks of the Ganga and other rivers of northern India.
6. Examine the role of state in the relationship between rivers and their communities.

3. Suggested sub-themes of the seminar

1. The relations of different communities with natural resources in pre-colonial India.
2. The role of river ecology in the making of lives, livelihood and culture of Nishads.
3. The role of rivers in the making of the world-view of the Nishads.
4. The Ganga and Nishads in popular culture.
5. The representations and semiotics of rivers in the art forms of north India.
6. The cultural and religious role of rivers in north Indian society.
7. Any other pertinent questions related to above themes.

4. sessions of the seminar

1. River and Humans: History Writing, Natural Resources and Communities of Early India.
2. River, Society and Representation: Presence of Nishads in pre-colonial north Indian social order.
3. Ecological Humanities, Nature and Society.
4. Symbols and Social Ecology of Nishad Communities.
5. Nishads and Rivers in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and literature of north India
6. Rivers in Architecture, Sculpture and Painting of India.
7. River in the Imagination of Folk and Oral Traditions and its Cultural Meanings
8. River and her peoples in movies

9. The World of Pilgrims: Rivers, Fairs and Festivals.
10. Community, State and Livelihood (with special reference to boating, fishing and sand mining in rivers)
11. Pollution in Rivers.

A National seminar on "*Society, Culture and the Making of Livelihood: The Symbiosis of Rivers and Nishads in Northern India*" was organized at IIAS from 22-24 July, 2019. Dr. Rama Shanker Singh, Fellow, IIAS was the Convener of this seminar. Dr. Rama Shanker Singh gave introductory remarks. The Keynote address was delivered by Professor Badri Narayan, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad on '*निषाद समुदाय का स्मृतिलोक और नदी*'.

Participants:

- Shri Jitendra Singh, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, U.P.
- Professor Ashish Tripathi, Department of Hindi, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi
- Dr. Balram Shukla, University of Delhi, New Delhi
- Shri Jagannath Dubey, Department of Hindi, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi
- Professor Shekhar Pathak, Editor, PAHAR, Village Pathqura (Nakud), P.O. Gangolihat, District Pithoragarh Via Almora, Uttarakhand
- Dr. Shubhneet Kaushik, Department of History, Satish Chandra College, Ballia
- Shri Dharendra Pratap Singh, Hindi Department, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj
- Dr. Khushboo Singh, JDVM College, Kanpur
- Dr. Ajay Kumar, Fellow, IIAS
- Dr. Debjani Halder, Fellow, IIAS
- Dr. Ashwin Parijat, Fellow, IIAS
- Dr. Sharmila Chandra, Fellow, IIAS

- Dr. Ruchi Shree, Department of Political Science, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, New Delhi
- Ms. Ragini Kapoor, Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi
- Ms. Kamlesh Bhatoya, Department of Performing Arts, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla
- Dr. Rakesh Tiwari, Retd. from Archaeological Survey of India
- Ms. Sima Yadav, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Paryagraj
- Ms. Gunjan Rajvanshi, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad
- Shri Govind Nishad, University of Allahabad, Pragaraj
- Ms. Neha Rai, S.S. Khanna Girls Degree College, Allahabad
- Professor Archana Singh, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad
- Professor Mahendra Pathak, K.S. Saket P.G. College, Ayodhya
- Shri Ankit Pathak, Department of Political Science, University of Allahabad, Allahabad
- Shri Loutan Ram, National Association of Fishermen, Shiv Gally, Mumbai
- Shri Harishandra Bind, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi
- Dr. Jyoti Sinha, Mahila P.G. College, Jaunpur
- Ms. Shruti Meemansa, Department of Sanskrit, H.N.B. Garhwal University, Uttrakhand
- Professor Suchendra Ghosh, Department of Ancient Indian History & Culture, University of Calcutta, Kolkata
- Professor Awadhendra Sharan, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi
- Shri Pushyamisra, 306, Tara Tower, Shastri Nagar, Patna
- Professor D.R. Purohit, National Fellow, IIAS
- Professor S.K. Chahal, Fellow, IIAS
- Professor Vijaya Ramaswamy, Tagore Fellow, IIAS

- Professor Sujata Patel, National Fellow
- Dr. Satendra Kumar, Fellow, IIAS
- Professor M.P. Singh, National Fellow, IIAS
- Professor Hitendra K. Patel, Fellow, IIAS