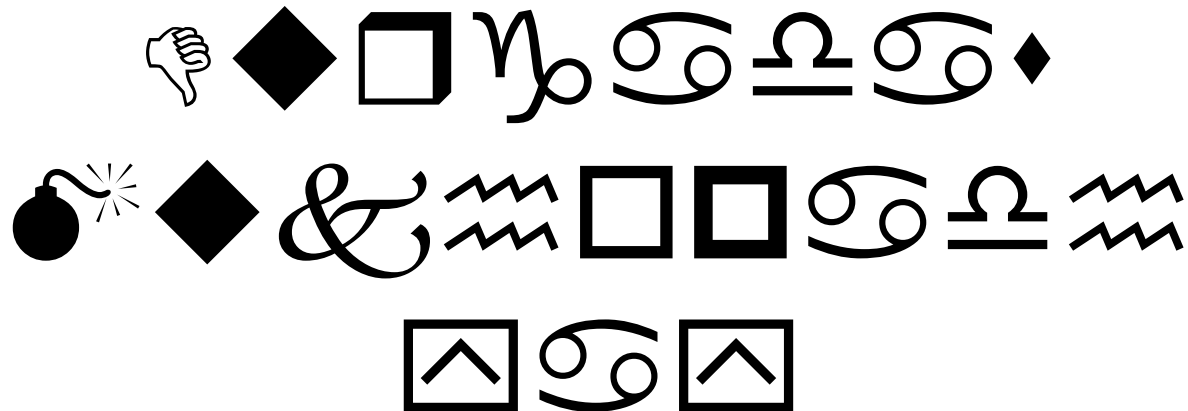


Culture of Fire in the Forest in India



Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance – is more than one of Hinduism's favored icons. It is near-perfect symbol of Indian fire history. The drum represents the rhythm of life; the torch, death, the wheel of flame, the mandala of birth, death, and rebirth that fire epitomizes and makes possible. In this confrontation of opposites the dance replaces the dialectic; Shiva holds, not reconciles, both drum and torch. Considered ecologically the Nataraja thus expresses in graphic language the great polarity of India, the annual alternation of wet and dry seasons by which the monsoon, with faint transition, imposes its opposing principles on the subcontinent. India's biota, like Shiva, dances to their peculiar rhythm while fire turns the timeless wheel of the world.

May be said to be the one object on which the society most of all depends for its well-being. It provides warmth on cold nights; it is the means whereby they prepare their food, for they eat nothing raw save a few fruits; it is a possession that has to be constantly guarded, for they have no means of producing it, and must therefore take care to keep it always alight; it is the first thing they think of carrying with them when they go on a journey by land or sea; it is the centre around which the social life moves, the family hearth being the centre of family life, while the communal cooking place is the centre round which the men often gather after the day's hunting is over.

To the mind of the Andaman Islander, therefore, the social life of which his own life is a fragment, the social well-being which is the source of his own happiness, depend upon the possession of fire, without which the society could not exist. In this way it comes about the his dependence on the society appears in his consciousness as a sense of dependence upon fire and a belief that it possesses power to protect him from dangers of all kinds. The belief in the protective power of fire is very strong. A man would never move even a few yards out of camp at night without a fire stick. More than any other object fire is believed to keep away the spirits that cause disease and death.

But more than aboriginal fire practices from India's "tribal" peoples shaped the land. Agriculture needed fire for clearing, converting, and fertilizing. In India, as throughout monsoonal Asia, slash-and-burn agriculture (jhum) became dominant outside of floodplains, ensuring that routine fire would visit even remote sites. Where insufficient forest fallow existed, alternatives were found in rab cultivation by carrying wood to the site for burning, or mixing it with other refuse and manure prior to conversion into ash. Some peoples fired the hills "with almost religious fervor," observed one disbelieving Briton, in the hope that the ash would wash down to waiting fields.

For India, the spiritual interacts with the practical and that what organizes society also organizes nature. The installment of Agni and the Vedic fire ceremony, and the way this acted on Hindu society, had its parallel in the way by which Aryan fire worked on the Indian environment. Fire ordered the landscape as caste did people. The sacrifice to Agni took the form of burning India's forests, or rather of reworking them in somewhat newer ways to support an economy dependent on livestock.

It was in fact the British who did not understand. It was their belief in fire's necessary destructiveness that was, within the context of India, incredible. The indigenous people knew how fire supported jhum cultivation, converted organic residues into fertilizer, kept woodlands and prairies in grass, assisted hunting, cleansed soil of pathogens and supported foraging for flowers, bees, tubers, and herbs. Fire sustained metallurgy. Fire kept tigers away from villages and opened sites that might otherwise hide cobras. Fire structured the intricate ensemble of biomes that was made by, and that in turn made possible, Indian society. Alone among the elements fire illuminated the complex choreography that bound life with death, the human with the natural.

Enthusiastic foresters- Sir David Hutchins reminded them that they were “soldiers of the State, and something more”- entered into the reconstruction of India, attempting to regulate timber harvesting, to control traditional forest uses by pastoralists and villagers, to regenerate felled or degraded woodlands, and to suppress fire.

Shifting agriculture of jhum is a major economic activity of the humid tropics in the north-eastern regions of India. This highly organized agro-ecosystem is based on empirical knowledge accumulated over the centuries. Jhum is in harmony with the environment as long as the jhum cycle is long enough to recover the forest and the soil fertility that is lost during the cropping phase. This land-use system of north-eastern India, involves slashing the vegetation, burning the dried slash before the onset of the monsoon, raising a mixture of crops on a temporarily nutrient enriched soil for a year or two, fallowing the plot for regrowth of natural vegetation.

A holistic approach to conservation and development based on ecological, economic and social considerations has to be worked out. Keeping in mind the spiritual belief and rational knowledge. With a variety of ecological situations, socio-economic conditions and socio-cultural variations in the humid tropics, development strategies necessarily have to be location specific.