

Research Questions

The following is a compilation of the research questions that was submitted by the participants prior to the workshop.

Elizabeth Allison:

An investigation into management and ownership regimes of sacred natural sites in the Himalayas would provide further insight into the maintenance of these sites and their prospects for continued existence, as well as their particular ecological role in sustaining or contributing to biodiversity. Scientific knowledge about the longevity of the beliefs that guide the observance of sacred natural sites, their degree of flexibility and persistence over time, and the resilience of their associated practices is limited.

Further empirical testing is needed to understand how beliefs and practices around sacred natural sites adapt to and incorporate new influences. Some assume that the beliefs and practices that protect and maintain sacred groves will persist into the future, maintaining their efficacy without external support from government policies or civil society encouragement. Others hypothesize that increasing industrialization, urbanization and market economies will destroy local systems of natural resource management (Shiva 1997; Malhotra 2002).

What is needed is an integrated approach to the biocultural ecology of agrarian environments that encompasses community forests and rural agriculture. Analysis of local institutions and power flows, together with ecological understandings of agrarian environments can provide greater insight into 1) local beliefs; 2) how these beliefs are manifest as practices affecting specific natural and cultural resources; and 3) the precise effect these beliefs and practices have on the resource in question, to support biodiversity conservation. To achieve this degree of knowledge, ecological studies of sacred groves and anthropological studies of landscape deities must come into conversation to share their insights about both users and resources.

Sanjay Chaturvedi:

One of the key questions before the project is: How one could possibly approach, analyze and bridge the persisting gap between earth climate science and cultural understandings of climate change, as informed and shaped by religion?

A corresponding question then becomes: Beyond the physicality of anthropogenic global warming and related climate science evidence, how do we capture and map the vast reservoir of diverse religion-informed ideas, imaginations, socio-cultural understandings, mythological and metaphorical representations, as well as normative-ethical readings of 'climate change'? Yet another pertinent question posed by Mike Hulme (2009: 151-52) is this: 'If the IPCC offers society its most convincing consensus from the scientific reading of climate change, do the world's religions offer us a comparable consensus from an ethical or spiritual perspectives? Or, less ambitiously, could they?'

In my view, for the purposes of the project at hand, a useful way forward could be through a systematic engagement with what Noel Castree (2003: 427) has called 'the geopolitics of nature' in reference to carefully chosen case studies of sacred groves in the Himalayas through a comparative method. According to Castree, 'there is a geopolitics to how environmental problems are represented.' The geopolitical as well as ethical-moral dimensions of this framing process, dictated and driven by knowledge-power, seem to have acquired a great deal of complexity in the case of sacred groves of the Himalayas.

Sacred groves, harboring rich biodiversity, imbued with transcendent religious-cultural-spiritual qualities and sustained by indigenous cultural and rituals practices, one the one hand, are being increasingly threatened by population growth, urbanization, tourism, commercial activities, celebration of rituals and ceremonies, over-grazing, etc. On the other hand, these ecologically and genetically important sites are now pronounced by earth climate science as among the most vulnerable to climate change. The implications of both climate change meta-narratives and the underlying homogenizing imagined geographies of profane spaces, that frame 'global' forests as the 'lungs of planet earth' and 'common heritage of mankind', and the government-official policies based on such representations, for the sacred groves are yet to be addressed systematically through inter-disciplinary research.

Since 'nothing is inherently sacred', sacred spaces, including sacred groves, are not simply founded or discovered or constructed. Nor is the meaning or understanding of 'sacred' fixed for all times to come. The factors that could make a 'sacred space' a 'contested place' include competing claims to 'scientific knowledge', interventions by neoliberalism, capitalism and industrialization, hierarchical power relations of domination, and competing visions of 'sacredness' based on the politics of inclusion/exclusion.

It is in the light of issues raised above that I propose a few concrete case studies of 'sacred groves' as complex and dynamic sites where conventional understandings of space, place and religion can be revisited and reworked. On the one hand, the ongoing research on how religion-informed indigenous ethnic-cultural traditions contribute to resource conservation and biological diversity will continue to generate new insights. On the other hand, there is a need to further investigate how sacred groves as multifaceted social institutions, based on traditions and local belief systems, and symbolizing the dynamic social forces linked with access and control over resources, might be overshadowed, marginalized or selectively co-opted by the abstract but dominant geopolitical discourses of global warming, and seductive religious myths and meta-narratives of climate change, some of which might even be driven by 'certain processes of religious revivalism in environmental politics' (Sharma, 2010). No less important is the question of whether, when and how such dominant framings and representations of climate change might be resisted at the grass-root levels by the functional roles and inter-community approaches that characterize various sacred groves.

Pankaj Jain

- How do ancient Indic traditions, such as the concept of Dharma, connect with contemporary ecological issues, particularly Indic traditions and ecological issues?

Nimmi Kurian

The project seeks to study how shared value systems help safeguard common resources that are seen as sacred in the collective imagination of communities. The worship of forestlands, revered as abodes of various deities has had deep cultural resonance with communities across the Himalayas. In particular, the study will examine the notion of the sacred as understood by communities in Northeast India and Western China. Across the region, ceremonies combining traditional values, taboos and religious beliefs have gone a long way in preserving biodiversity conservation. As no-go zones enjoying the sanction of traditions, these impose strictures on the cutting of trees and even the removal of wood litter. These are spaces where myths, legends and beliefs have interwoven seamlessly to form rich narratives with religious-cultural rituals passed down from generation to generation. The kind of specialist knowledge that mountain communities acquire in the course of their lives constitutes an oral knowledge base that is almost unique and without parallel.

Accordingly, the study sets itself three key research questions:

- How does the triumph of the written word over the vast corpus of oral history adversely affect the credibility, legitimacy and utility of ecosystem management?
- How do these histories from below transform our understanding of IR from meta history towards multiple histories?
- How can rethinking the region as an ecological unit help reimagine IR beyond territorial frames of reference and offer an innovative paradigm for transboundary resource governance?

Mark Larrimore:

- How might a study of religiously syncretic and ecologically calibrated Himalayan communities help correct dominant conceptions of religion based on monotheistic assumptions?
- What concepts/stories/rituals in Himalayan cultures are cognate with (or linkable to) ideas of sustainability or flourishing? How might these provide resources for local policy discussions, and for reflection and activism on environmental questions more generally?

L.H.M. Ling:

- How can we integrate local, daily practices in the Himalayas that stem from a religious worldview with scientific problem-solving to arrive at sustainable policies for climate change within a context of contentious global politics?

Anne Rademacher:

In my work, I address the ways that aspirations for environmental improvement often involve the construction of new affinities that are understood to foster social cohesion where other ways of marking sameness and difference (such as religious identity, ethnicity, class, etc) do not. Such environmental affinities may derive from complex combinations of indigeneity-like arguments, competing ideas about governance, and moral logics through which Nepal's urban future could be organized and ordered. It is those moral logics that organize, for me, a key intersection between religious and environmental studies. In my work, I note specific moments when environmental integrity, as both a moral and political cause, is said to transcend other lines of social difference or to create new ones; I do this by highlighting how ideas of environmental improvement also organize ideas of social belonging, collectivity, and moral social order. This suggests that environmental practices form an important arena for understanding how actors imagine social, and socionatural, coherence in their past and future. It also suggests a rich intersection between ideas of environmental vitality and the question of the good and moral society (that is, questions often addressed through religious studies).

Deepak Tamang:

- The environment - as natural resources such as forest; fossil fuels or other material and physical gifts of nature - is easily exploited by many to meet their basic needs. However, it is the powerful such as the politicians, forest officials; government ministers and multinational corporation who exploit the resources to the hilt - creating and unsustainable environment. The issue before us is how can we strengthen ethical cultures and behaviours in order to strengthen our Environment.
- How do we balance the earth's genuine needs vis-a-vis the avarice and greed of a few?
- Based on this premise, religion can play a powerful mediating and balancing role since Buddhism; Hinduism; Christianity; Islam; Judaism and Bon all advocate environment as sacred and thus calling for a wise use of our natural resources.

- The question to pose then is How do we leaf through the ideology of major religions including natural Bon and other nature worshipping religions and groups to further an ethical behaviour on our part as Human beings.

DONG Shikui

- What are the positive effects of daily religion activities of Tibetan Buddhism on alpine grassland ecosystem? For example, the effects of no-killing of all livings on the grassland biodiversity protection, the effects of holy mountain and holy water worship on the grassland water resource protection?
- What are the negative effects of daily religion activities of Tibetan Buddhism on alpine grassland ecosystem? For example, the effects of no-killing of all livings on pest and diseases outbreak on alpine grassland (such as “black soil” caused by rodent damage)? The effect of religion gathering (massive tread, massive wastes) on the grassland vegetation and water
- What are the strategies for promoting the positive effects of daily religion on alpine grassland ecosystem and mitigating the negative effects of daily religion on alpine grassland ecosystem?

Sara Winter:

- Are there local points points of conflict with regional authorities over use of local landmarks [sacred space] and [ritual] time that point to local popular religious practices. How do these points of conflict connect with teachings of the religious tradition if at all?
- Do we see local religious practices that suggest accommodation of usual practices (or doctrines) in connection with diversity of religions of the area. (For example, in New York Conservative Jews, who keep kosher, will go out to dinner at non kosher restaurants, some mainly to vegetarian restaurants, or order vegetarian; I would call this an accommodation to specifics of NYC region where it is a custom to eat out frequently and people interact socially and in work interregiously).