

NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN - INDIA

Biodiversity Festival Proposal

Much of the discourse around biodiversity in the mainstream is related to its *use* in an economic sense with a *sustainability* adjective attached to it. The discourse often hinges on the *economics* of biodiversity and its great use for scientific purposes. This utilitarian view of biodiversity stands at odds with the concept of biodiversity as cherished by sections of society all over the world as a part of their spiritual and cultural heritage. These sections of society depend on biodiversity for sheer survival, but their understanding of the concept is on a very different plane. This understanding, based on a cultural and religious ethos, is marked by celebrations and rituals surrounding biodiversity. It is suggested that a festival celebrating the spiritual and material/economic relationship of society with biodiversity be part of the NBSAP.

Why should it be done?

In the absence of a spiritual context to biodiversity, any amount of scientific and economic importance of the subject will never be able to bring a sense of inviolability to it. Both the scientific and economic understandings will always bring along with them an inevitable urge to see how many kinds of compromises can be made without a *significant loss* to the scientific and economic value of the biodiversity. This inherent danger always lurks behind the economic and scientific view of biodiversity. The biodiversity festival will be a step towards reinstating and revalidating this elemental conception of biodiversity (or of its components), Bringing this conception of biodiversity to the foreground once again to aid in the conservation efforts founded in these beliefs and carried out by these sections of society.

While the emotional connections between humankind and biodiversity will form the core of the festival, it is also important that the economic dimensions of biodiversity be included, as this is a vital part of the argument for conserving biodiversity. The appeal of the economic rationale might still be powerful.

What can be the elements of the Biodiversity Festival

The entire organisation and design must be celebratory, addressed to senses as well as to the intellect.

The thrust of the festival could be on :

- a) celebrating the spiritual conception of biodiversity
- b) raising awareness of the non-utilitarian concept of biodiversity, and displaying how this is reflected in lifestyles and customs of many sections of society.
- c) presenting a message for the conservation of biodiversity, through a display and explanation of the many ways in which human societies interact in a healthy manner with biodiversity.

d) Material connections are also important to focus on, e.g. the links between diversity and livelihoods, health etc.

Biodiversity can be found reflected in many practices of the Hindu religion. It would be appropriate to also include in the festival rituals and ceremonies belonging to other religions or to tribal faiths, or those that are independent of religious connotation. Songs, dances, festivals, rituals and crafts could also form a part of the festival.

How should the festival be run

Some possible ideas for the festival's format are listed below:

- A large, preferably open, space dedicated for the Festival, with spaces available for rituals, celebrations, dances and songs.
- People could cook their recipes of diversity and offer/sell them.
- There could be a schedule of the rituals followed, especially as some of them might be contingent on the time of day. Rituals followed specific to seasons could be explained if it is not possible to conduct them at the time of the festival.
- Guides at places who will lead the visitors through such celebrations and explain its significance to the communities and biodiversity.
- One or more poster exhibits, and depiction of biodiversity in arts/crafts.
- The forest goddesses or recreations of sacred groves from various parts of the country could find separate place in the festival.
- Video and audio cassettes could be playing at different parts of these enclosures so that people can have an understanding how the REAL THING looks like and can get into the context of what is being performed and why. Readings and screenings (or videos) could be one other part of the festival.
- Healers from different part of the country could be present displaying the enormous variety of herbs and plants they use and the sources from where they get them. The sheer volume of the illnesses they cure must be explained ; the rites of healing could be recreated. Home remedies using plants could also be displayed. (do we also want to ask Ayurvedic companies to display/sell?)
- Displays of agricultural biodiversity (seed displays, posters, etc.).

Venue

A festival organised at the national level should preferably be held in one of the metros. These venues might also garner the highest visibility for the festival and its component concepts.

Selection of the venue depends on what we are looking for in it. If we want the festival to gain a lot of media attention which will generate a lot of public awareness and through that focus attention on the issues of biodiversity, the logical venue will be Delhi. But one drawback may be that Delhi is already crowded with celebrations of this sort and we may fail to gain much.

The other venues could be Bangalore or Mumbai. Whether Mumbai can host something of this sort and will the Mumbai media will have time to look and absorb something of this sort is to be discussed further.

Bangalore is a good venue. There are institutions like FRLHT, CES which are deeply interested in this issue and can host/contribute significantly to the event. Bangalore is also a city of culture, theatre and events. The media has been sensitised already to be alive to such issues.

(Bhopal is another possibility. It is central, and there is the Tribal Museum, as also persons like Kalyan Chakravarty who are willing to organise something like this).

Costs and Organisation

For a first time event of this nature, total costs would approximate Rs. 10 lakhs (US\$ 23-24,000). It may be a possibility to tie the festival in with the media campaign already envisaged for the NSBAP.

It is a possibility is to tie up with organisations like Dastkar (a craftspersons' organisation of repute) in Delhi and other parts of the country and sort of "subcontract" this to them to organise but keeping our mandate in mind. Their experience with the annual Man & Nature 'bazaars' is a useful background to organisation of a festival of this sort. Dastkar have been contacted and have expressed an interest in this.

Yet another possibility is to have smaller state-wise festivals. Many states are establishing/or have established 'Delhi Haat' kind of bazaars. State nodal agencies could look into this possibility. Such festivals could be held in conjunction with the state level agricultural and related fairs that are held anyway.