

NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN - INDIA

CULTURE AND BIODIVERSITY

Thematic Concept Note¹

Culture is understood as a way of thinking and acting, consisting of sets of codified and unspoken rules/norms/practices, which give a society cohesiveness and which simultaneously reflect changes in the material and spiritual milieu of a society. Religious and spiritual beliefs, gender roles and relations, educational practices and values, themes in folklore and the classical arts, and recurring themes in the day-to-day life and language of people are some elements of culture that are visible and possible to document. Other parts of culture could be a general ethic which informs daily practices, such as a culture of re-use that pervades day to day life in India.

Elements of biological diversity have formed one critical basis of all civilisations. India is no exception. In fact, the direct link between biological diversity and cultures is more apparent in India today than in many other parts of the world. The culturally defined gender division of roles and responsibilities also endows women and men within different cultures with different realms of biodiversity related knowledge acquired through their respective experience built through the ages. Women in most cultures rooted in subsistence economies have traditionally borne primary responsibility for household food security through domestication of wild cultivars, seed selection and storage and collection of a wide variety of foods, herbs, fibres and other subsistence goods from communal lands and forests. Due to this, they are the repositories of specialized biodiversity related knowledge of their respective ecosystems.

Given this understanding, the thematic working group would identify the inter-relationships between biodiversity (both wild and domesticated, as the latter may have more substantial linkages with culture than the former in predominantly agricultural societies) and the different aspects of culture, including their gender dimensions detailed above. It would then proceed to assess the current status of this relationship, and how it can be strengthened/revived in the current context.

Specifically, the Working Group would look into the following:

1. Identify the two-way positive links between cultural and biological diversity, how the former has arisen in response or amidst the latter, and has in turn nurtured/maintained/enhanced it through beliefs and traditions of conservation and sustainable/equitable use (it would be important to look at various strands of spiritual/religious systems in India) and the differing roles and knowledge bases of women & men;
2. Identify the two-way negative links between cultural and biological diversity, how certain cultural practices (e.g. of mass hunts) have resulted in biodiversity loss, and how state sponsored methods of conservation (e.g. official protected areas) have resulted in cultural

¹ This note was prepared by Bansuri Taneja, Member, TPCG, with inputs from other members of the TPCG.

- erosion (e.g. through alienation of communities from their natural surrounds with differing impacts and implications for women and men);
3. Assess how different forms of culture (classical/mainstream, folk/non-mainstream, and popular/emerging) together with changing gender relations and often increasing gender based conflicts relate to biodiversity. Scale would also be an important consideration, e.g., how biodiversity and culture interact at a site-specific level, regional level, and national level);
 4. Assess how and why the positive links between culture and biodiversity have been eroded in recent times, and the implications of this for conservation and sustainable/gender sensitive and equitable use;
 5. Identify and assess the ways in which elements of cultural expression have been and can be used to carry the message of conservation and sustainable/equitable use. This would involve estimating what formats (i.e. length, style, mode of presentation) are the most effective in relaying the message of conservation, and which media/formats have the maximum outreach. The review could also assess whether dissemination of messages is a major problem and how this can be dealt with;
 6. Identify initiatives to re-establish or strengthen the positive links between cultural elements and biodiversity and the potentially critical role of women in this, including some concrete case studies;
 7. Identify, review and analyse alternative culture and gender sensitive biodiversity conservation institutional arrangements which are community led which have been tried elsewhere and their potential for replicability.
 8. Recommend measures (short and long-term) to strengthen such initiatives and start new ones elsewhere;
 9. Prioritise these measures in terms of their importance, gender sensitivity and immediacy; and
 10. Identify resources (human, institutional, economic) needed for carrying out these measures.