

## ADDRESSING CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IN TRAVEL WRITING: READING AND REFLECTING ON WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S 'NINE LIVES'.

Nidhi Tiwari

DESSH,

Regional Institute of Education.

Shyamla Hills , Bhopal (M.P.)

Ever since the focus on cultural diversity and identities acquired prominence globally, there has been a shift in limiting sustainability only to environmental, economic and social dimensions. Culture is more than just the manifestation of culture, for example, 'the arts' and should be viewed instead as the 'whole social order' (Williams 1983). This naturally leads to an interrogation of the construct of sustainable development. The definition which emerged in the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) is the widely accepted one and it states, "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Over a period of time environmentalist framework dominated sustainable development and issues of ecological degradation were prioritized. But, as the concept matured, increasing emphasis has been placed on its interconnection to social and economic dimensions of development. (Kadekodi 1992) . Contemporary mainstream notions of sustainable development portray it as a tri-dimensional concept featuring the interface between environment, economic and social sustainability (Bell, 2003; OECD2001).

Culture and Sustainable Development occupy a marginalized status in the wide development debate. Though the issue of culture as the fourth pillar of the sustainable development was addressed at the Mauritius International Meeting for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), yet it has not gained mainstream attention. By virtue of their small size, SIDS are constrained mainly by factors such as high limitations on natural, human and technical resources bases thus compounding the challenges of high degrees of economic vulnerability, geographical isolation and extreme susceptibility to environmental change(Nurse,2006). In this context, their culture and identity also needs to be preserved.

Another important aspect is how culture is to be defined. Jon Howkes (2006:1) argues, "the tacit acceptance of arts and heritage version of culture has marginalized the concept of culture and denied theorists and practitioners an extremely effective tool." It is pointed out by several experts that when sustainable development is discussed it is essential to move beyond talking about preservation of the arts heritage and cultural identities" and "include the broad civilization notion embodied in culture as a 'way of life' because it informs the underlying belief systems, worldviews, epistemologies and cosmologies as well as human interaction with the environment."(Nurse, 2006)

J  
H  
E  
R  
S  
O

How important is this interpretation of culture? One can clearly realize its significance when one notices that even in sustainable development there is the ideology of power. It is easy to see through the notion of equality and social justice on one hand, and, the preferential treatment given to Western notions. All cultures are not equal. Traditional or localized knowledge is often considered backward, whereas Western science is regarded as 'solution to problems'. Let us look closely at the arguments offered by Leach 1998,

*Global environmentalism and its supportive science come to be seen as at least partly the product of particular, Western dominated cultural traditions and relations of power, the imposition of global orthodoxies and analysis over different environmental values and notions of sustainability can infringe not only on local livelihoods, but also on cultural freedom, in a deeply decivilizing process.*

The above lines are a clear pointer that there is a global imbalance in the cultural arena. It is here that developing countries have to look for options that support indigenous solutions rather than Western because they have a strong cultural heritage. Similar situation are noticeable even in the African context. Crew and Harrison, 1998, state, "For long, development attempts regarded African culture and literature as 'development barriers.'" How long can we accept that some cultures are inferior and so are to be given a backseat in development agenda? It is time to allow people cultural freedom and choose their own path to development. However, it is sad to note that Africans are discarding their cultural norms and traditions which include their techniques even when they are useful so that they become modern. In contrast Japan and China are model examples because they balance modernity and tradition. Therefore, Chinese healing techniques like acupuncture command respect in other countries too.

In the Indian context, development goals and plans normally respect the rich cultural diversity of India. The multicultural and multilingual terrain of India has fascinated many writers to visit India and depict it in their writings. William Dalrymple is one such writer who presents Indian cultural scenario in his travelogue 'Nine Lives'.

The Observer describes Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* as "the very finest travel writing.... A series of biographies which unpick the rich religious heritage of the subcontinent, it makes its political points more powerfully than say newspaper article and displays deep knowledge of the culture."

At the outset, Dalrymple probes deeply and addresses cultural sustainability in Indian context when he remarks in 'Introduction' that

*Yet to my surprise, for all the changes and development that have taken place, an older India endures, many of the issues that I found my holy men discussing and agonizing about remained the same eternal quandaries that absorbed the*

*holy men of classical India or the Sufis of the middle ages, hindered of years ago.*

In this paper I intend to reflect on two lives- ‘The Dancer of Kannur’ and ‘The Maker of Idols’. Indian culture is reflected through dance, sculpture and song in them, but it delves into the landscape of the soul as it intertwines religious beliefs of communities residing in South India. What gets reflected is beyond individualism which marks the pace of modernity globally! The bonding with people and community at large marks the socio-cultural life that gets presented in these real life stories. Dalrymple accepts that he conducted interviews with people in his trips and there were other people to help him talk to these subjects as different languages were involved in those talks. No wonder Rony MacLean of *Guardian* remarks, “William Dalrymple delves into the heart of a nation torn between the relentless onslaught of modernity and the continuity of ancient traditions.”

‘The Dancer of Kannur’ describes the life of Hari Das, a *Theyyam* dancer who resides in Kannur, Kerala. He has to portray Lord Vishnu through *theyyam*. When the writer asks him, “Is this a full time job, becoming a god”? Hari Das answers sadly, ‘No, for nine months a year I work as a manual labourer. I build wells during the week, then at weekend I work in Tellicherry Central Jail. As a warder.’

It is discovered that all the *theyyam* dancers lead a double life. Hari Das informs the writer that Chamundi looks after wedding decorations, Narsimha works as a waiter in a hotel, the boy playing Bhagvati is a bus conductor and Guligan ‘the destroyer’ is a toddy tapper. These ‘part-time gods’ gain significance only during the three months of *theyyam* season, December to February. They give up their jobs, and don’t eat meat or fish and stay away from conjugal relations. Hari Das explains:

*We bring blessings to the village and the villagers, and exorcise evil spirits. We are the vehicle through which people can thank the gods for fulfilling their prayers and granting their wishes. Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteist Namboodiri Brahmins worship us and queue up to touch our feet. (Nine Lives, 33)*

The etymology of ‘*theyyam*’ is from ‘*daivam*’, the Sanskrit word for ‘god’. This dance form along with *theyyam* stories is a rare ritual which is a survival of some pre-Aryan, non-Brahminical Dravidian religious system which got absorbed in Hinduism. What is most surprising is that in an orthodox, caste-ridden Kerala, this dance form inverts caste norms. The ‘*daivas*’ do not incarnate themselves into Brahmins but select the rejected and humiliated Dalits. Neither is the performance conducted in temples. The location is small shrines in countryside and even the priests are the Dalits.

This indeed is a surprising reality and makes one reflect on many issues connected with this role reversal. Seeing the performance the huge crowd that gathers to witness and even seek blessings and find solutions to their problems is indeed amazing. What gives

continuity to theyyam is the faith of the masses. These lines from the text support this remarkable faith:

*In fact people everywhere in this part of Kerala are still very devoted to theyyam... I think people like it because in a temple or church you see only an intimate image. Here you see god in the flesh and you can speak to him and ask him about your worries. People believe very strongly that in a theyyam the god speaks to them directly.*

One may question how conservative Kerala society accepts the inverted structure seen in theyyam. Otherwise upper caste Brahmins who are normally punishing dalits who do not observe social norms, not only accept theyyam but even worship the theyyam artists during theyyam season as they perform. The writer tries to answer this complex reality thus:

*Others argue that the theyyams were tolerated as an acceptable safety valve to allow complaints against the misdeeds of the upper castes to be expressed in a ritualized and non-violent manner. Either way , there is no doubt that today they are a stage on which the social norms of everyday life are inverted, and where for a short period of the year , position and power are almost miraculously transferred to the insignificant and powerless.*

Yet, more questions arise in the mind when one sees the ironies of the life. Once theyyam season is over the Brahmin who touched the feet of Hari Das with reverence, doesn't recognize him as a labourer. He doesn't allow him in his house. Though he digs the well for the Namboodri, yet he is denied access to the well's water. Still theyyam enables the lower castes to gain confidence and even allows their children to acquire education in schools and colleges. It gives them self-esteem and the power that they can fight back as several theyyam stories criticize the Brahmins for ill treating their fellow human beings. Hari Das narrates a tale when Lord Shiva taught a lesson to the great saint Adi Sankaracharya to treat all human beings equally. So, Sankaracharya himself initiated Pottan theyyam.

It is interesting to see that theyyam artists become famous and so many girls get attracted to them and they find good brides. However, Hari Das admits that even after marriage there can be complications and difficulties in domestic life as they have many admirers. Thus, theyyam unfolds many contrary aspects of life.

Concerning cultural sustainability, theyyam is there to stay. Business thrives as people make money by selling theyyam posters and DVDs of famous theyyams. Even political parties support theyyam, especially CPM too, though they are known to be atheists. Once again the remarks of Hari Das should be taken as a proof:



*Certainly this generation seems much more interested than my father's time. Back then, many of the people in the towns dismissed what we did as superstition, saying that there is nothing in the Vedas about theyyam and that it is all a load of Dalit nonsense. For all the development and technology we now have, people still have not forgotten the power of the theyyam ... One Brahmin came to my house last week saying he had been out of work for six months, despite going to the temple and praying every day. Yet after attending one of my theyyams he found a job in the Collector's office the following day. (p,49)*

And yet, ironically we find Hari Das musing about continuity of theyyam when he expresses, "... I fear for the future. Who in the villages will still be able to take off three months to do this work?"

Indeed 'The Dancer of Kannur' has much to offer- the socio-cultural life in 'God's own country' Kerala delights with its brilliance, with its dream like power to offer solutions to life's perennial problems and with several questions to tease the mind- the pendulum swings continuously. Cultural sustainability is addressed, concerns are revealed and an assurance that theyyam is strong enough to face the winds of change. Where else does one find solutions to casteist attitude better? Yet, it is a frail solution, temporary, and yet continuous.

'The Master of Idols' has another story to tell. It is the story of Srikanda Stpathy, an idol maker from Swamimalai, the great temple town in Tamilnadu. He belonged to the family of the famous bronze caster of the Chola Empire whose region was still the end of thirteenth century. He was the twenty-third in a long heredity line. He and his two elder brothers had maintained this family profession and they carried it out exactly like their ancestors.

The story opens with the beautiful words of Srikanda Stpathy:

*The gods created man, but here we are so blessed that we  
simple man as we are – help to create the gods. (p, 176)*

Srikanda hails from a Brahmin family. His business was flourishing and he was satisfied. Their family never took interest in making 'show pieces' for tourists, they made idols designed for temple worship and created them in accordance with Shilpa Shstra (ancient Hindu religious text). He shared with the writer that his ancestors had been sculptors of stone idols in Vellore and later learnt the art of bronze casting. They had assisted in the construction of two greatest Chola temples at Tanjore and Gangakondacholapuram. Later they settled at Swamimalai in the thirteenth century. One of their ancestors accidentally discovered that clay made from the fine silt of the Kaveri was very suitable to make the moulds in which the bronzes

were cast. Now 700 years had passed and this bronze idol business was still thriving.

Srikanda says with reverence that whenever he sees idols made by him in a procession he tries not to feel proud that it was made by him. He tries to think that 'this is a deity'.(p.178)

He admits:

*As we say, silpi matha, pitha shastra: the sculptor is the mother and the Sacred shastras are the father. Usually I want to keep them, but this is my profession, so sooner or later they must leave me, just as a daughter leaves her father when she is married. Once the eyes are opened by having their pupils chiseled in with a god chisel, once the deity takes on the forms of the idol and it becomes alive, it is no longer mine. It is full of divine power and I can no longer even touch it. Then it is no longer the creation of man, but a god only. (p.179)*

He expresses further that it is that faith of devotees which converts an inanimate idol into a God. As one reads further, one discovers that a slight change is noticeable when idols were cast in Chola period and modern times. Earlier the skill of the masters was so supreme that no finishing was required when the pieces emerged from the moulds. But now there are some flaws and the idols need polishing after emerging from the moulds. As if 'the secret of flawless casting' has been lost!

Ancient rituals demanded that only on a new moon or a full moon could a model be begun or cast. The time for carving and opening of the idol's eyes was between 4a.m. and 6a.m. when there was no disturbance. During initiation process the *Admartha Shlokas* had to be chanted and *Dhyan shlokas* had to be chanted when the work was in progress... All the proportions, gestures and sacred geometry were exactly laid down by tradition, and only the most elite families of Stpathy Brahmins, literate in Sanskrit and all the appropriate Shashtras were allowed to work on pieces intended for worship.(p.197)

The writer is informed by Srikanda that their work is beyond art, as it is related with religion. So, even while working their mind is to be full of reverence and devotion, and their workshop must be like a temple. Only such sanctity gives life to the idol and converts it into a deity.

In contrast there are idols made by others who can be even atheists or dalits which are meant for selling in shops. They may be good and may satisfy art lovers but they will not have divinity. An idol in the temple lasts for 850 years if it is maintained properly and worshipped with faith regularly. The idol thus has a life span. Another interesting information provided is about idols used for private pooja at homes. For such idols, "the horoscope of the husband and wife would be taken,

and the proportions of the god subtly altered to best suit the stars of that family.” (p.198)

We are told about the procession in which these idols are taken out on temple chariots amongst people during festivals. The devotion of the masses is clearly seen when they wait to have ‘darshan’ which is very important for the devotees and even for the gods. The writer describes it thus:

*But the gods of this country are understood to be jealous and territorial deities, and instead of sitting in their temple palaces, their devotees believe that they like to oversee their domains... like a raja surveying his domains, given a tour so that they can establish their sovereignty... Here in the streets and fields they receive tributes and offerings, while their devotees and subjects- including those of the lower castes who were traditionally not admitted to the temples- can see them, and make darshan, so giving the gods pleasure while at the same time providing spiritual merit for the devotees. (p.184)*

The above cited lines clearly establish the meaningful relationship between the deity and the devotees. It indicates an effort to include people from all classes and castes. So, this ceremony is an effort towards inclusion socially.

The aesthetic appeal of the idols is highlighted by Srikanda. He feels that these statues should be beautiful because ‘erotic is part of the human life’ and it forms the basis of attraction and devotion. To add to beauty, there is also the accompaniment of *Thevaram* devotional songs. It is in seven volumes and are composed by Appar, Sambandar and other renowned Tamil Saints. These are sung in the temple by professional singers. Shankar Narayan one of the last professional singer remarks, ‘As singers, we try to lose ourselves in the beauty of Lord Shiva... The bronzes allow us access to his beauty, and in turn our words help give life to the idols. (p.193)

Thus, it is to be noticed that a mutual bond is recurrent and it contains human elements in it perpetually. People have faith that the gods will solve their problems. It is mentioned that at times those devotees who sponsor the idols get possessed by the goddess, dance around and are in a state of trance. Then, once in a while some openly proclaim that they are the goddess and are there to solve the problems of the people. This situation seems similar to the *theyyam* dancers. They too allow the deity to come to them. Hari Das, in ‘The Dancer of Kannur’ had expressed aptly:

*Usually the deity comes when you look in the mirror and see your face as the face of god; but on that first occasion it happened even before I had looked, when I made the gesture of lifting my hands above my head. This is a formal invitation*

*for the god to enter you... If you pray to god with a sincere heart and focus on one deity with all your mind- then that is the moment when you cease to be the dancer and become instead that deity. From that moment it is not the dancer who dances but the god. (p.45)*

However, reflecting on the similarity, one sees a difference. The dancer has been initiated in the ceremony and puts an effort to be the animate God. But, the devotee before the idol gets possessed effortlessly. What is similar is the entry of the God and the power to provide solutions to the problems of ardently devoted followers!

Coming back to Srikanda in *The Maker of idols*, the concern about sustaining this culture and tradition is prominently portrayed towards the end of this story. When the writer asks him, “ would the tradition continue? (p.203) there is a clear indication that Srikanda’s face falls as he answers, “That is my only worry: who knows what will happen after my generation has passed away? My son is saying that he wants to become computer engineer in Bangalore, and that he will give up the family business, so breaking our lineage. His cousin- my elder brother’s boy – is much the same.” (p. 203)

When the writer probes further that it must be disturbing for Srikanda because he had taken pride in this lineage down the generations, Srikanda admits that it upsets him very much. He shares with the writer that he keeps praying to their family deity Kamakshi Amman to change the mind of his son and preserve this lineage. He feels that it is still ‘the age of bronze caster’.

Both the stories are deeply rooted in South Indian culture and portray the ‘sacred’ in human life. But, both *theyyam*, *thevaram* and bronze casting face the crisis of modern age- the lure of computers and internet on one hand and the market economy which may not provide periods of rest from a more or less settled job. As changing times threaten established traditions, which have a slower pace in the rapid speed of modern times, cultural sustainability is a major concern projected by William Dalrymple in both these stories. A beautifully written tale of the sacred life of the masses captures one’s interest, makes one reflect seriously on the rich treasures India has to offer and the desire to capture it for all times to come, not in the form of theyyam DVDs or replica statues that only touch you on the surface. The stories make the reader crave for the real touch, the real experience and the assurance that it is around for all times to provide a fresh space to recover from the turmoils and troubles of life. May be it is this ‘search of the sacred in modern India’ which can really sustain the culture in a fast developing India!



William Dalrymple also raises serious questions which directly address cultural sustainability and also seeks answers to certain established socio-cultural norms. He writes aptly:

*Much has now been written about the way that India is moving forward to return the subcontinent to its traditional place at the heart of global trade, but so far little has been said about the way these huge earthquakes have affected the diverse religious traditions of South Asia, or explored how the people who live out these rich traditions have coped with living in the eye of the storm.(Xiii)*

He expresses concern that father to son lineages are undergoing changes because India is transforming itself at speed. He writes further:

*All this raises many interesting questions...why does one think he can create a god; while another thinks that god can inhabit him? How is each specific religious path surviving the changes India is currently undergoing? What changes and what remains the same? Does India still offer any sort of real spiritual alternative to materialism, or is it now just another fast developing satrap of the wider capitalist world? (Xiii)*

These are significant questions and as one reflects over them one finds that in both the stories caste plays a big role. Srikanda is very conscious that he is a Brahmin and his family is chosen to create bronze idols of god. He is emphatic that other art pieces made by people of lower caste may be good but lack life and divinity. He feels that Brahmins being literate and well versed in Shastras, also being disciplined in the rigour of a religious life are most suitable for it. In contrast, Hari Das feels happy that *theyyam* is under the control of dalits and it provides them a chance to be powerful for a short while, in a way settle scores with Brahmins. He is happy to narrate that Lord Shiva himself taught a lesson to Adi Sankarcharya to respect all human beings. Both Srikanda and Hari Das have been proud of their fathers whom they saw in powerful roles. Naturally it instilled a feeling in them to learn this family business which is sacred, lucrative and earns a prestigious position for them in society.

However, as times change, new power roles emerge. Caste no longer occupies that hegemony. No longer will dalits seek temporary power and relief in established Hindu way of worship or seek solutions to their problems. Education, religious conversion and other modes of better earning are sought as solutions to problems in modern society. Therefore, the new generation will not show interest in older professions. *Theyyam* and *Thevaram* soon become relics of the past. Art and dance form may continue but may take new forms if the changing times so demand. Dalrymple may not talk about this so openly but hints are obvious. We as readers have to reflect as to what is really important. Even, readers may be subjective in their judgments depending on their socio-cultural background. Which India do we want? Are we able to move out of our comfort zones or is it the media who will highlight these customs? Will tourism industry come forward to protect customs

and organize festivals that regenerate an Indian culture? Or is it already engaged in such activity and is it sufficient?

However, caste issues definitely need modifications. Any artists can be theyyam dancers and anyone can be trained to discipline oneself, master the shastras and work with reverence to make idols. Such artists should be employed on regular basis and given handsome salaries. Otherwise no one would take interest to continue these traditions. New areas in education must emerge to provide dignified employment. Technology and its lure makes people think in one direction which narrows life's diversity. Cultural sustainability must be connected to honourable status in society. Only then can cultural diversity be sustained and even grow with the pace of development.

### Works Cited

- Bell, Simon (2003). *Measuring Sustainability: Learning by Doing*. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd.
- Crew, E. and Harrison (1993). *Whose development ? An Ethnography of Aid*. London: Zed Books.
- Dalrymple, William (2013). *Nine Lives*. London; New Delhi, Bloomsbury, Publishing Plc. All subsequent textual citations are from this text.
- Kadekodi, Gopal K (1992). "Paradigms of Sustainable Development." *Journal of SID* 3:72-74.
- Leach, Melissa (1998). " Culture and Sustainability," In *World Culture Report* (1998). Paris: UNESCO.
- Maclean, Rony. *Guardian* (back page of William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*)
- Nurse, Keith (2006). *Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development*, prepared for Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
- | *The Observer* (back page of William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*)
- William, Raymond (1998). *Culture*. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks.