

Whose Sense Makes Sense: Using Philosophical Assumptions to Deconstruct Sustainable
Development through the Lense of Organic Agriculture in Sikkim

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Abstract

“What’s emerging from the pattern of my own life is the belief that the crisis is being caused by the inadequacy of existing forms of thought to cope with the situation... [Abstract] art is one of the root experiences I’m talking about. Some people still condemn it because it doesn’t make ‘sense.’ But what’s really wrong is not the art but the ‘sense,’ the classical reason, which can’t grasp it.” (Zen Mtrcyl 211,214)¹

In wake of the global climate crisis that is sweeping the century the urgency for a sustainable model of development is ever pressing. India’s northern state of Sikkim, a traditionally mountainous agricultural land rich in Eastern philosophical tradition, has declared a mission to be an entirely organic state by the end of 2015. Organic philosophy is rooted in principles of cooperation and holistic health, making it alternative to mainstream neoclassical philosophy rooted in individualism and competition. This ethnographic study examines the manifestations of organic philosophy in the lives of farmers in the villages of Lingee Payong and Yuksom as well as explores the intersection of the alternative development theory of the Organic Mission and the ground reality of sustainable agriculture. The study aims to bridge an existing gap in literature between evaluating the theoretical basis of Eastern philosophy and traditional agriculture parallel to the shortcomings of sustainable development rooted in neoclassical principles, ultimately contributing to the knowledge base on pursuing a truly sustainable future.

¹ Robert M. Pirsing, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 206.

Introduction

Development as a Concept

A *concept*, according to sociology discourse, is an idea or notion whose existence is dependent upon a mutual observation and interpretation of a phenomenon. Concepts do not exist in nature outside of the mind. For example, we assert that rocks have matter and physical properties that are not subject to human interpretation and therefore exist and can be acknowledged as a rock independently of the human mind; a dog can observe and recognize these physical properties of a rock. Wealth, on the other hand, is a phenomenon rooted exclusively in the observation and interpretation of phenomena; it cannot be assumed that a dog or even another person will observe a situation and recognize “wealth.” Concepts exist outside of the mind only in a mutual understanding of interpretation by a group of minds – such a collective deposit of beliefs can be defined as *culture*. Within a culture, indicators are agreed upon, either explicitly or inherently by existing unchallenged, to define concepts: a process known as *conceptualization*. Money, for example, may be an indicator of the concept of wealth within one culture while another culture may not see value in money but may consider self-sufficiency in food production as an indicator of wealth. This commonality of understanding is normalized over time to seem fundamental within a group of like-minded individuals, but the limitations of conceptualization are illustrated across groups of differently-minded individuals, especially in the globalizing age of the present.

To make the limitations of conceptualization more concrete, let us consider the concept of development. Linguistically, the term development fundamentally assumes that the way in which an entity exists is not the ideal and therefore it must be “developed” to some capacity. Further, this framework implies that nations who are considered to be “developed” exhibit a

model set of characteristics. The term emerged following the Second World War; the dominant indicator of development was conceptualized as economic industrialization by a culture of neoclassical academics. The basic assumption of neoliberal economics is that maximizing profit and minimizing cost will maximize the efficiency of the market. Embedded within a system based upon free market theory is the rationale that human beings function with maximizing profit as their primary concern. In this way, neoclassical theory equates affluence with well-being and denotes autonomy as freedom of consumption. “The underlying philosophy – deriving from a popular (but limiting) interpretation of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* and formalized in neoclassical economic theory – is that markets maximize individual preferences and allocate resources efficiently.”² Further, “Hungarian philosopher Karl Polanyi noted that modern liberalism rests on a belief in natural propensity for self-gain, which translates in economic theory as the market principle – realized as consumer preference.”³

Therefore, as a product of the neoclassical mindset of the so-called developed world, the development agenda is similarly rooted in profit maximization through cost minimization and maximization of efficiency, with affluence as the predominant indicator of well-being; the neoliberal ideal which developing countries must pursue to become developed is an affluent society.⁴

Principles of the Neoclassical Conceptualization of Development

It is essential to keep in mind that recognizing the principles of neoclassical economics as the indicators for development is merely one understanding of the concept. In the same vain, this

² McMichael, P., “Development Theory and Reality,” 4.

³ *Ibid*, 5.

⁴ Cross Roads: Labor Pains of a New World View
Ronaldo Munck *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a New Paradigm*, 2.

conceptualization has and continues to fuel the dominant mindset in power to influence development from the Second World War to the present day. Following the Second World War, the dominant characteristic of a “developed nation” emerged as economic industrialization, rooted primarily in World Systems Theory⁵ and Dependency Theory. Progressed by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, World Systems Analysis refers to the transnational division of labor that divides the world into “core” countries who produce high skill, capital and extract raw materials from “semi-periphery” and “periphery” countries that produce low skill, labor-intensive commodities. In this way, core countries will always remain dominant to the others. In tandem to this, economist Hans Singer raised the observation that under such a model, peripheral countries would always be dependent on core countries such that the development of core countries would come at the expense of the underdevelopment of the periphery.⁶

Consequently, as assumed by the neoliberal agenda, competition is beneficiary to the economy, individuals are the unit of functional society, efficient means minimized cost and maximized profit, and ownership is necessary for profit to exist as a concept^{7,8} Ownership and efficiency are norms of the neoliberal agenda that are perpetuated by the values of competition and individualism. Efficiency is a term rooted in the industrial nature of minimizing costs to maximize profit, and to understand what is efficient or not is to understand what is considered a cost justified in minimalizing for profit. In a system by which money is the paramount profit, considerations such as environmental or human justice have no place in the equation other than to be minimalized as costs if it means maximizing profit. To be efficient in the industrial model is to be profitable and in such a model to be inefficient is to not be well-off, for if you are not

⁵ Wallerstein, Immanuel, *World Systems Theory*

⁶ McMichael, P., “Development Theory and Reality”

⁷ McMichael, P. “Development Theory and Reality”

⁸ Ronaldo Munck *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a New Paradigm*

maximizing profit, you cannot be achieving well-being when it is conceptualized as affluence. Ownership is a concept inherently linked to the ideas of profit and individualism. Ultimately, ownership grants an individual the right to render a resource useless to others without consequence. Isolation of the individual from the cyclical nature of resources is also evident in the current lack of responsibility for the state an individual leaves a resource in after death.

Deconstructing Sustainable Development

Sustainability simply is the ability to continue a defined behavior indefinitely. Deriving from a product of the World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainable development is defined as, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁹ Moving beyond economic dependence and unacknowledged largely by neoliberal policy through its continued prevalence is the quandary, as Philip McMichael recognizes, that asserting the ideal of developed as industrialized is cultural imperialism; further, “the privileging of ‘development’ denies many other collective/social strategies of sustainability or improvement in other cultures.”¹⁰ Recalling that, despite the normative quality of the conceptualization of neoclassical development, it is merely that, a cultural understanding and not an ideal guaranteed to live up to its assumptions, creates room for alternatives to development in the conversation of ensuring a sustainable future for human life.

Upon critical reflection, profit maximization accomplished by minimizing costs and maximizing efficiency is not a model that is capable of sustaining the Earth for future generations. There is no concept of profit nor of winning in nature; to sustain life is the most

⁹ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 43.

¹⁰ McMichael, P. “Development Theory and Reality.” 7.

essential purpose of an ecosystem and the most scientifically sound manner to sustain life is via an ever increasingly diversified network of life. This makes the system more resilient to destructive forces. Further, no species or individual “wins” in nature; if a species of predator were to entirely eliminate its’ prey, the predator would die of starvation while concurrently if a species of prey were to entirely eliminate its’ predators, it would consume all of the resources in the system and would die of starvation. ‘Winning’ in an ecosystem will ultimately produce the collapse of the system. “To naturalize (competitive) market behavior as a transhistorical attribute discounts other human attributes, or values – such as cooperation, redistribution, and reciprocity... economic individualism is quite novel in the history of human societies and specific to nineteenth-century European developments, rather than being an innate human characteristic.”¹¹ In an analysis of the sociological development of the Western model of development, Ashok S. Chousalkar notes that historically, “the relationship between man and nature was not competitive but was essentially cooperative.”¹²

The ecologically unsustainable aspect of profit is that it ultimately exists independently from the well-being of the ecological system it is created by. In a system that fundamentally values affluence above all else, the Earth’s natural resources, including human lives, have no place to be represented aside from a commodified value as raw materials. The quandary with such a system is reflected through the incapability of modern industry to value ecological and social concerns more or even as much as it values money, which is just as valuable to an economist if earned through ecological exploitation as it is if earned through environmentally and socially responsible practices.

¹¹ McMichael, P. “Development Theory and Reality,” 5.

¹² Chousalkar, A. S., “Mahatma Gandhi and the Problem of Sustainable Development,” 114.

“The Gross National Product includes air pollution and advertising for cigarettes, and ambulances to clear out highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors, and jails for the people who break them. GNP includes the destruction of redwoods and the death of Lake Superior. It grows with the production of napalm and missiles and nuclear warheads... and if GNP includes all of this, there is much that it does not comprehend. It does not allow for the health of our families, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It is indifferent to the decency of our factories and of our streets alike.”¹³ - Senator Robert Kennedy

Further, accumulating profit creates a dichotomy in values that, analogous to individualism, is unique to the human experience. The existence of a culture in which money is spent by individuals to fulfil their desires rather than returning that revenue to the system that created it in order to fulfil these same desires allows for valueless industry fueled by *externalities* – consequences of an industrial or commercial activity which affects other parties without this being reflected in market prices. In this way, the system which produces money for individuals is not directly responsible for fulfilling their needs. This separation creates an illusion that money is more valuable than as well as independent from the means that produces it; an implicit hierarchy is created that places the responsibility of fulfilling the basic needs of life on individuals above that of the systems which generate the necessities. The flaw in this logic is that the ecosystem is ultimately a closed system upon which each and every individual human life is dependent; individuals are reliant upon the systems that generate their basic needs for life, which money cannot buy sustainably if the means by which it is produced cannot value life.

Finally, in spite of the space for upward mobility alluded to by the terminology of “developed” and “developing,” the nature of reality rooted in Dependency Theory and World Systems Theory requires both core and periphery countries to sustain itself. In an internal memo, then Chief Economist of the World Bank and one of President Obama’s key economic advisors at the time wrote, “I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the

¹³ Woodin, M., *Green Alternatives to Globalization*, 14.

lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.”¹⁴ Further, “the alliance of property-owning classes controlling the destinies of most underdeveloped countries cannot be expected to design and to execute of set of measures running counter to each and all of their immediate vested interests.”¹⁵ Understanding that the affluence of the core entities is fundamentally dependent upon the underdevelopment of the periphery entities undermines the notion of development. In addition, the deconstructing the illusion that the pursuit of affluence is capable of sustaining human life on earth illustrates the inadequacy of the existing model of development to cope with the environmental and social devastation that it has created.

Agriculture as a Relevant Angle

Agriculture has become a lense through which to understand the flawed assumptions in neoclassical theory in the basic incomparability of ecology to the factory. Unlimited production is based upon the fundamental assumption of unlimited resources, contrary to the fixed quantity of natural resources available on Earth. Agriculture is also incompatible with the idea of industry in that consumption of agricultural goods cannot grow eternally; people can only consume so much food, regardless of how much is produced, making food an inelastic commodity and therefore unideal in the free market economy, despite its essential value as a basic human need. Agriculture as a means to deconstruct development is ideal in that it’s incompatibility with industry concretely challenges the sustainability of the neoliberal agenda and necessitates the reevaluation of the capacity of neoliberal policy to cope with sustainable agriculture and by extension the environmental crisis as a whole.

¹⁴ Shrivastava, A. *Churning the Earth*, 311

¹⁵ Baran, P.A, *On the Political Economy of Backwardness*, 66

Neoliberal Development and Sikkim's Organic Mission

The Government of Sikkim, a state in Northern India, has declared a commitment to be entirely organic by 2015. Heavily backed by the government in the late 1960s, the Green Revolution swept through India's agriculture advertising increased production via chemical fertilizer, pesticides, and nonnative seeds and leaving in its wake polluted water, poor quality crops and not fertile soil. In 2003 the government of Sikkim banned the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and declared the intention to be an entirely Organic State by the end of 2015. The organic certification element of the process began in 2011.

The principles of organic farming can be defined as balanced crop rotation with legumes, shallow ploughing with deep loosening of the soil, reliance on animal manures and green manures with minimal input of inorganic fertilizers and integrated pest management.¹⁶ In conceptualizing the ultimate indicator by which quality of life is measured as prosperity rather than affluence, organic philosophy is grounded in principles that are not aligned with those of neoclassical theory. The four principles of organic farming as stated on Sikkim's Organic Mission's website are as follows¹⁷:

- Health: organic agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one individual
- Ecology: organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them and help sustain them
- Fairness: Organic agriculture should be built on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities. (*diversity*)
- Care: organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment

¹⁶ Debnath, P. and Serpa, A.B. "Organic Farming: A Noble Approach to Sustainable Agriculture." 232.

¹⁷ "Sikkim Organic Mission"

The four key values of organic philosophy undermine the need for these four basic principles to exist in a society worth pursuing. Recognizing intersection of the historical context and the unintended consequences of neoliberal free market policies illustrate the fundamental neoclassical assumptions that must be challenged, the purpose of my study of Sikkim's Organic Mission will be to understand gaps between the philosophy of alternative development and the system of sustainable agriculture.

Organic Philosophy

Despite arguments by economists and other scholars that neoclassical theory is the best model to pursue for development, the very need for 'development' at all is questioned by others. Gandhi considered the craze for material affluence created by the industrial development paradigm unrealistic, unnecessary, undesirable, and counterproductive. 'It is this fundamental flaw in the very foundation of modern economics that is the basis of the craze for economic growth which has brought neither happiness nor even economic wellbeing, because of the gargantuan problems that it has unleashed including pollution of air, water and soil, environmental, degradation of resources, urban congestion, creation of slums and shantytowns, increase in crime and social disorders, and a plethora of mental and physical illnesses created by the modern industrial way of life'.¹⁸ Gandhian philosophy as well as the ecological views of Hinduism and Buddhism does not measure well-being according to affluence but rather quality of life is based on holistic prosperity.¹⁹

Dissimilarity, cooperation and community well-being are the principles upon which the philosophies of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Gandhian philosophy are rooted. Hinduism is not a native word to any Eastern language or dialect. In the Vedas, the concept of Hinduism is known

¹⁸ Chousalkar, A. S. "Mahatma Gandhi and the Problem of Sustainable Development." 190.

¹⁹ Ibid, 191.

as *Sanatana Dharma*, *Sanatana* translating loosely to eternal and *dharma* to true state; in this way, time on Earth is to be spent following the ethics of natural law.²⁰ Further, the Buddhist concept of *Sarvodaya* adopted by Gandhi's freedom movement is the ideal of welfare for all; as opposed to the (Western) utilitarian approach of the greatest good for the greatest number, *Sarvodaya* insists, contrary to the trickle-down approach of policy, that in an ideal society every action is done such that it benefits the poorest man.²¹ Another philosophy that Gandhi promoted along the lines of cooperation was the idea of Gram Swaraj as related to self-sufficient village republics functioning on a unanimous decision making process of equal representation by all village members.²² Organic farming mimics this principle of cooperation and by extension valuation of the existence of every entity in an (eco)system its contribution to the whole rather than as its utility as a means to an individualistic end.²³

Rather than ownership, Gandhi proposed a system of "trusteeship," which challenges both the concepts of ownership and profit. Trusteeship makes an important distinction between the concepts of revenue and profit. As opposed to profit which is removed from the system of generation into an individual's hands, in a model of trusteeship revenue generated by a process is returned to that process or put towards benefiting the whole of people involved in the generation process.²⁴ This concept is illustrated in organic agriculture's ecological value of focusing on the cyclical nature of agriculture and sustaining the future while farming for the present. Further, without profit, efficiency loses the basis of its conceptualization; efficient or modern farming techniques are also not compatible with the organic mission of ecology and health for the cycle

²⁰ Chapple, C. *Hinduism and Ecology*

²¹ Chousalkar, A. S., "Mahatma Gandhi and the Problem of Sustainable Development."

²² M. K. Gandhi (1909), *Indian Home Rule*

²³ Patil, RB, *Local Issues and Global Agendas*, 114

²⁴ M.K. Gandhi (1960) *Trusteeship*

of farming values each step of the cycle equally rather than giving preference to the product and viewing the process as merely a means to this end.

Research Questions

In challenging both theoretically and tangibly the basic neoclassical assumptions of competitiveness, individualism, profit, and efficiency, prior research and existing literature creates a space for identifying an alternative basis for structuring society. Existing literature exists extensively on both evaluating the theoretical philosophical basis of both Hinduism and Buddhism as related to agriculture and evaluating the shortcomings of neoclassical theory, however the gap that my research will contribute to fill will be to bridge the theoretical gaps through the identification of concrete manifestations of Eastern philosophical principles in agriculture such to provide a sustainable alternative to agribusiness.

In turn, I propose in my research to examine and observe the manifestations of cooperation and ecological well-being in the lives of the residents of Lingee Payong and Yuksom, Sikkim. I intend to challenge the assumption that competitiveness, entitlement, desire for efficiency, and individualism are inherent human values. Identifying concrete manifestations of Eastern life philosophies in everyday agriculture is important in moving beyond the theoretical critiques of the neoliberal development agenda.

Analytical Framework

As a critic of development coming to a developing country for the first time this semester I recognized my limitations in conceptualizing the ground realities of and cultural perspectives on the theoretical quandaries explored in the previous sections. My intentions were not to romanticize a traditional way of life nor was I naive enough to expect that my short study would

enlighten me as to how to reverse the sinking climate change ship that humanity is arguably merely rearranging the chairs on with current efforts. Formulating my research objective necessitated that I defined concepts such as organic, traditional, Eastern philosophy, neoclassical, development, etc.; however, consistent with the first section of this paper, I am aware that these conceptualizations are all rooted in and therefore limited by the shared cultures that I have been part of in my lifetime. In addition, I found that on more than one occasion my conceptualization of a term was not entirely applicable to the concept as it existed in the Sikkim context. The concepts used throughout the previous and subsequent text are understood as the following: Neoclassical theory and consequent neoliberal policy is rooted in the principles of individualism and competition. Development is an idea rooted in neoclassical philosophy. Organic philosophy is derived from the Eastern philosophical principles of cooperation and recognition of a holistic unit of society larger than that of the individual. Traditional agriculture is a practice rooted in organic philosophy.

Methods & Ethics

In order to gain a holistic understanding of the traditional philosophies of farmers in Sikkim as well as to triangulate the information I collected my research was conducted via a variety of methods. Throughout the independent study period I compiled interviews from farmers, community members, and officials of the Government of Sikkim to culturally situate my understanding of traditional farming and the Organic Mission. I spent nearly two weeks in a rural village homestay in Lingee Payong with the intention of identifying manifestations of Eastern philosophy in the lives of the traditional farmers. I stayed with a family who practiced organic, subsistence farming and visited a total of __ other farms and homes in the community. This ethnography was supplemented by group conversations and a total of __ interviews

including but not limited to farmers in order to triangulate my interpretations of farmers' actions based upon my background research on Hindu and Buddhist ecology and philosophy. Dr. Sharma aided in arranging my homestay family and Tikaram Sharma served as my liaison to and translator of the community members that I interacted with outside of my host family. I then relocated to Yuksom, West Sikkim for a week in order to observe a culture which, similar to Lingee Payong, has fundamentally traditional farming roots but, unlike Lingee Payong, has been interacting much more historically and presently with a growing tourist culture. I intended for this insight to provide me with a basis for evaluating the intersection of traditional and neoclassical assumptions. I spent my ethnographic time concentrated on observing the entity of eco-tourism and completed a total of sixteen interviews including farmers, KCC (Khanchendzonga Conservation Committee) members, NGO representatives, and non-farming residents. Most of these interviews were conducted myself in English, however Kinzong Bhutia did assist me with his presence to translate one farmer interview. The supplemental interviews included questions about priorities, values, and rituals such that I could interpret the meaning of life and agriculture as well as direct questions regarding the concepts of profit, efficient, competition, individualism, fairness, care, health, and ecology as related to community and individual well-being. In perceiving a potential cultural gap in values of older and younger generations, I interviewed and observed individuals of a range of ages. Myself and my study were introduced to all of the people that I interviewed and consent for use of their input in this culminating paper was received.

Findings

(De)Constructing the Organic Mission

Due to the mountainous landscape, terraced farming was the most prevalent model of crop cultivation that I witnessed. As observed in and around Gangtok, Yuksom, and Lingee Payong, the use of machinery for planting, harvesting, or maintaining fields is widely absent and manual labor is required and most common. The ineffectiveness of mechanized farming is acknowledged by farmers as well; Narmaya Sharma of Payong noted that there were too many rocks and the land was too terraced for machines, and her assessment was consistent with my observations of the seven farms that I visited in Lingee and Payong.²⁵ This, along with the reduced production capability of terraced land reduces overall production as compared to the plains. According to the Joint Director of the Organic Mission, “Sikkim is not a surplus producing state.”²⁶

The Organic Farming in Sikkim was presented to me as an economically practical pursuit via neoliberal principles by the non-farmer stakeholders that I interacted with. Through the lense of agriculture as an industry, producing organic to demand a premium price is aligned with the neoliberal market values of maximizing profit and efficiency. While the community benefits from the consequences of organic farming such as lower carbon emissions and cleaner water, MK Pradhan noted, “farmers only benefit from premium price.”²⁷ He went on to add that this is the value of the certification process. Representatives of the Amarjyoti Organic NGO also mentioned the premium price that farmers can receive for their organic products. The men also stated that the funding the NGO was currently receiving to educate farmers on organic

²⁵ Narmaya Sharma, personal interview

²⁶ MK Pradhan, personal interview

²⁷ Ibid

technology and methods as well as facilitate the certification process would conclude at the end of the year, parallel to when Sikkim would be entirely organic, and that their plan was to proceed as an organization to aid farmers in the marketing of organic crops including ginger, cardamom, and turmeric. Unaligned with the philosophically organic principle of a holistic approach but consistent with neoliberal principles, the entirely organic state of Sikkim will include hybrid seeds imported and tested by the government before distributed to the public, the marketing and selling of cash crops, and currently includes, according to the Prime Minister, 80% of food consumed to be imported from the plains.²⁸

The definition of organic also changed depending upon who I asked. Ram Chandra Sharma of Amarjyoti defined organic as a “modern technical system of farming” that is an “improvement” over the traditional system.²⁹ Further, he commented that in the traditional system there is no “documentation” of methods and therefore no “proof” that anything is “organic” or transferrable to the next generation. According to Pradhan, “knowledge is the basic input of organic while traditional agriculture is not based on knowledge.” Simultaneously, he spoke of “indigenous knowledge” and noted that “farmers are the better scientists.”³⁰ Similarly, Ran Chandra commented that “farmers have become scientists.”³¹ Everyone that I spoke to agreed that historically, traditional agriculture in Sikkim was organic, but beyond that there were varying interpretations of the term and its present implications. In contrast to the progressive lense of the government affiliated interviewees, an elder Yuksom farmer shared that organic means “going back to traditional practices.”³² Voices from the KCC identified that a gap in the

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Small group interview

³⁰ MK Pradhan, personal interview

³¹ Small group interview

³² Brikhaman Suba, personal interview

implementation of the mission was that local people don't understand what organic is and also that it's easy to say but difficult to apply.³³

Manifestations of Eastern Philosophy

All eight of the families that I interacted with in Lingee Payong practiced *pujas*, ritual acts of devotion which varied and overlapped in frequency, act, and components according to each household's set of beliefs. Pujas exemplify the Eastern philosophical principle of recognizing an individual as part of a larger ecological system spiritually. As part of his daily morning puja, my host father's father would mark his forehead with a tilak. The rice involved was harvested locally as rice from the market was deemed "second quality" for the ceremony.³⁴ The Hindu priest that was reading scripture at an annual sun sign puja in the village that I attended stated that pujas are to be done with natural offerings, and my host father's mother spent one morning during my stay crafting bowls out of ficus leaves for offerings, similarly noting that they were needed for pujas.³⁵ At the sun sign puja, there were eight offerings to eight deities all in leaf bowls including but not limited to rice, ghee (butter), flowers, medicinal plants, money, and incense. Tikaram noted that he had a small garden outside of his home in which he grew "sacred medicinal plants," and small gardens in which traditional crops were grown for pujas and offerings was common practice in Yuksom as well.³⁶ The sun sign puja is an annual ritual acknowledged by the Hindu community in Payong. The extent of the ritual depends on the sun signs read at birth for each individual, and instructions based on these sun signs can be found in the Sanskrit text. Ceremonies can range in length from one or two days to six or seven days. In

³³ Kinzong Bhutia, personal interview
Tshering Uden Bhutia, personal interview

³⁴ Gita Nath Koirala, personal interview

³⁵ Nar Narayan Dhakal, personal interview

³⁶ Tikaram Sharma, personal interview
Tshering Uden Bhutia, personal interview

addition to the display of the eight natural offerings, the scene included two Hindu Priests reading from the Sanskrit text after drinking calf urine to purify their bodies while chiming bells to alert the gods of the puja and request them to listen.³⁷

In addition to puja ceremonies, at the Lepcha Buddhist household that I visited were prayer flags and a practice of spiritual healing which also exemplified a basic unit of society other than the individual. Descendant of Tibetan people, the prayer flags around the home were there to “ward off bad spirits.”³⁸ Prayer flags were a reoccurring sight throughout the month in Sikkim and Darjeeling. Along the loop from Gangtok to Tashi Viewpoint then Ganesha Tok and back Gangtok, prayer flags adorned both sites as well as lined the road on and off along the way. In Yuksom, flags could also be found hanging at the historic sites of Coronation Throne and Kathok Lake as well as in restaurants, adorning guesthouses and residential homes, and at the Dubdi Monastery. Before he converted to Christianity, Indra Bahdur Rai was the spiritual healer of the Lepcha community in Payong; he protected the community from ghosts and evil spirits.³⁹

According to Tikaram, “biodiversity is a cultural practice,” and he made reference to this phenomenon throughout the week in regards to practices including the pujas, married trees, and seed saving. According to the Hindu community in Payong, the banyan and the ficus trees are considered to be married and sacred such that people do not climb them or cut them down and bring offerings of water.⁴⁰ It is the leaves of the ficus tree that are used to make bowls for puja ceremonies. He went on to add that, “we have lots of timber here and we could cut it down and sell it in the market and make money but that’s not sustainable.” Another culturally conservative

³⁷ Nar Narayan Dhakal, personal interview

³⁸ Indra Bahdur Rai, personal interview

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Tikaram Sharma, personal interview

rather than economically driven practice of the community was their seed saving practices.

Wrapped up and stored above the fire as the smoke protects them from bugs, the seeds are saved and shared year after year; the seeds made available by the government are not widely purchased among the farmers in Lingee Payong, and planted only on small experimental plots when they are used.⁴¹ Sharing seeds continues amongst villagers as an unmarketed and therefore unprofitable system.

Inconsistencies with Eastern Philosophy

Among the manifestations of philosophy contrary to individualism, there were examples of thinking not aligned with organic principles in the village as well. The retired spiritual healer Lepcha man's household had recently converted to Christianity as the multitude of Buddhist rituals and ceremonies was too expensive as compared to the budget to be accepted by Christian community; in this way, economic demands limited the manifestation of Buddhism in this historically Lepcha household. Another inconsistency with the cyclical nature of Eastern philosophy was rooted in the aspirational model of education. All of the children of villagers that I interacted with attended school. I did not meet the daughter of my homestay family for she was off at boarding school in a different town. Indra Bahdur Rai, one of the oldest men in the village, noted that he was not educated, that he built his house and farmed his ancestors land and that he is happy in his life. He further noted that he wants to be able financially to send his children to school for, "if they study well then they will be self-sufficient."⁴²

Similarly inconsistent with the holistic thinking of organic philosophy, Gita Nath Koiral, whose livelihood is supplement by government affiliation, shared a reflection on his life as

⁴¹ Ashadar Rai, personal interview

Tikaram Sharma, personal interview

⁴² Indra Bahdur Rai, personal interview

compared to his fathers, – my father for his whole life as a farmer, he was part of the panchayat once but otherwise just a farmer. He only purchased cloth and salt and tea from the market; “we are totally dependent on the market for everything but they depended on themselves.”⁴³ A consistent comment across my interviewees from Yuksom was that with the introduction of the road and the market of food imported to Sikkim from the plains, people had become “lazy” and uninterested in laboring in agriculture as compared to pursuing education or working NREGA jobs. Further, as I observed and was informed, the poorest of the poor in Yuksom chose not to cultivate land their land but to leave it either barren to sell it to the government in the process of seeking to meet their basic needs.

Also along the lines of agriculture and confirmed by all of my sources, knowledge and act of rice cultivation has been lost in Yuksom following introduction of government seeds during the Green Revolution; self-sufficient farming is now nonexistent in Yuksom as rice is exclusively purchased and not cultivated. Farmers in both Yuksom and Lingee Payong noted that government seeds include cardamom and ginger seeds consistently but not always local varieties such as millets nor are the seeds always available at the time of year in which they should be planted to grow best nor that varieties that are best suited to grow in varying altitudes always are always distributed at the right altitude.⁴⁴

Ecotourism

As acknowledged by the Joint Director of the Organic Mission, part of the rationale behind becoming an organic state is to accrue value that will appeal to tourists.⁴⁵ This phenomenon was at different stages in Lingee Payong and in Yuksom respectively. Hosting

⁴³ Gita Nath Koirala, personal interview

⁴⁴ Primary Sources 4, 7, 13 and 16

⁴⁵ MK Pradhan, personal interview

parties from both villages noted the endeavor to be driven by economic motivations while simultaneously both acknowledging the way in which it conserves culture.⁴⁶ The status of ecotourism in Lingee Payong is in earlier stages as compared to Yuksom; the homes available through the government for hosting ecotourists were in the process of being completed but other than past SIT students tourism was not an established aspect of Lingee Payong. In Yuksom, however, eco-tourism was a prominent aspect of the community. A system of 10 guest houses is in place organized through the KCC to place and brief interested on the function of eco-tourism in the village which is to incentivize the conservation of culture and nature to maintain the ecosystem for the current residents as well as the future tourists.⁴⁷

Discussion & Analysis

(Re)Conceptualizing “Organic”

The Organic Mission cites the following definition as the basis of their pursuit: “Organic is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystem and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved”.⁴⁸ Within this effort, the government retains the ultimate authority to decide what is and is not organic, and therefore, while rooted in organic philosophy, organic as related to the Organic Mission is a separate concept of shared meaning according to the mindset of the government. As framed by government affiliated officials upon the principles of profit and including the unaddressed but holistically unsound implications of growing cash crops,

⁴⁶ Primary sources 5, 7, 9 and 16

⁴⁷ Kinzong Bhutia, personal interview

⁴⁸ “Sikkim Organic Mission”

producing organic produce but consuming nonorganic plains produce and consequently lacking the consideration of waste in the cycle, the Organic Mission is on the spectrum of Eastern and neoclassical philosophy rather than rooted in organic philosophy. This does not discount the manifestations of organic philosophy in the lives of the farmers, but it does illuminate a gap in the ability of the Organic Mission as it exists currently to be truly sustainable given its foundational conceptualization rooted in neoliberal development policy.

The Reality of the Presence of Organic Philosophy

Consistent with the literature existing on the Eastern philosophical values of cooperation and an awareness of a system of being beyond that of an individual, these concrete findings serve as a basis for challenging the assumptions of neoclassical principles and their place in an agenda for a sustainable future. As far as models for alternative go, the Organic Mission is occurring in Sikkim at a unique time in the states globalization process. Having not been historically colonized by a Western power and having only just joined India in 1975, the generations exposed to the pressures of globalization are fewer in Sikkim than in other parts of India and the developing world. In this way, especially in the more rural village of Lingee Payong, the lure of education that pulls children away from farming agriculture is young enough that there is still a generation of elder farmers who were unaffected by this; these were the primary land owners, managers, and laborers of the farms in Lingee Payong. But yet, as Indra Bahdur Rai indicated with his desire to educate his children, the gap incurred via a generation of educated children uninterested in agricultural careers and aging farm managers threatens the sustainability of the Organic Mission by presenting a future situation of land with no farmers to work on it.

Ecotourism

Varying aspects of ecotourism are aligned across the spectrum of Eastern and neoclassical philosophy. The idea behind ecotourism is to value the environment and in doing so attract tourism who will come appreciate that value, thereby providing an income alternative to commodifying the resources of the land for income. While this may not be exploiting natural resources for profit, the basic foundation can still only see the value of nature as a raw material to a commercialized process of generating income, even if it is for maintaining that system. If the income truly does return back to maintaining the system, however, then this is less aligned with profit and more aligned with the Eastern philosophical value of (eco)systems as the basic unit of society. Primarily, the basic distinction that I identified between the existence of ecotourism in Lingee Payong and in Sikkim was in the origin of the endeavor. Yuksom's location as a trekking hub at the base of the entrance to Khanchendzonga National Park has historically attracted a flow of foreign visitors in a way that the village of Lingee Payong has not. In turn, ecotourism in Yuksom acts as a reaction to the flux of tourists and the pressure that their presence puts on the community to exploit natural resources, and therefore is more aligned with the organic philosophical value of holistic awareness as the endeavor originated from a demand of the land rather than being imposed upon a natural system as is the case in Lingee Payong.

Conclusion

Identifying concrete manifestations of organic philosophy in systems of traditional agriculture acknowledge an alternative to the neoclassical assumptions of human behavior. This insight serves to encourage a reassessment of the role of neoliberal principles in the conversation of alternatives for a sustainable future by offering a reality of life functioning under alternative

assumptions. The Organic Mission as an alternative model of sustainable development proved to have clear roots in mainstream neoliberal principles and therefore the true sustainability of its objectives and consequences is not supported by the groundwork of Eastern philosophy. Overall, due to Sikkim's early stages of globalization, the manifestations of the basic assumptions of cooperation in a system larger than the individual as the basis that did exist to challenge the neoclassical assumptions but are in the process of colliding with the assumptions of the mainstream neoliberal agenda such that the sustainability or unsustainability of the Organic Mission as an approach to sustainable development is incredibly dependent on this or the next generation.

A Way Forward

Future study as related to the consequences of these findings could include a multifaceted assessment of the sustainability of the Organic Mission or of the impact of globalization in the early stages that Sikkim is in. In addition, a study of the sustainability of or concept of eco-tourism presently or in the future in Yuksom or in any of the other number of locations supported by the government could be undertaken. Contacts include:

- Kinzong Bhutia (Yuksom) Founder of the Khanchendzonga Conservation Committee and an necessary contact for eco-tourism related projects
- Dr. Ghanashyam Sharma (Gangtok) Biodiversity scholar in Sikkim with statewide contacts concerning environmental related projects

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