

Nor any drop to drink

The Telegraph
30/1/95

The idea of nature has been the main prop in a series of dichotomies which constitute the building blocks of Western thought: nature-culture, nature-history, nature-mind. This being the case, the following conclusion seems inescapable: suppress the idea of nature and the whole philosophical edifice of Western achievement will crumble. *Harbingers of Rain*, the outcome of the author's doctoral research at an American university, focusses on one of the catchy issues of the decade: environment and its relationship to mankind.

But this book is not yet another post-modern thesis on the nature/society dichotomy. A.R. Vasavi has understood the limitations of the "ethnoscology of India" school (the prevailing school of anthropology of India in the United States) and the book is able to provide a cross-cultural perspective.

Drought is common in Karnataka's Bijapur district. Whenever villagers sense it is imminent, they prepare for war with nature. Harbingers travel from place to place and try to bring rain through magic. Rainmaking may not work but the participants at least endeavour to do something in a situation that would otherwise leave them dispirited and helpless.

The accompanying sense of accomplishment enables the locals to cope with drought; it is preferable to sitting idle and wringing one's hands. The harbingers attempt to conquer nature through a new cosmological order by trying to manoeuvre the temporal cycle (and thereby the calendar). This is done through rituals which Vasavi tries to analyze by integrating the region's cultural precepts and ecological aspects. With the aim of understanding the underlying meaning systems, the cultural context is examined in detail.

It is true that rituals dramatize time and even try to modify it symbolically. In Bijapur, the elusive time which emerges from the analysis of

HARBINGERS OF RAIN: LAND AND LIFE IN SOUTH INDIA

By A.R. Vasavi, Oxford, Rs 325

ritual categories gets merged with the ponderous entropic time of real world events. The author's field investigation has rightly followed the choreography of mundane social processes, which form the background against which rituals reconstruct the world. There is an underlying sensitivity throughout the book towards the cultural constructs of peoples, their interaction and the ways in which social structures could be perceived.

Discussions are held to show how patterns of labour — the ways a society organizes work and adjusts it to seasonal cycles, allocates tasks and arranges joint effort — depend largely on the available technology and the nature of resources being exploited. However, Vasavi goes beyond the general outlook of cultural ecology to study the shifts in the domains of agricultural production, knowledge system and identities.

An entire chapter is devoted to the attempt to recognize the bases for the state's entry in Bijapur by focussing on the means through which state agencies attempt to change the region and its culture. Vasavi examines ways in which anthropology can help us understand a world which is experiencing profound changes in the relationship between governments and the societies they govern.

Though the book may seem as just another addition to the series of theses written in the past few years on the man-environment relationship, it is unique in its methodology and approach. As a participant-observer, the author has experienced part of the life observed in the field. These experiences have found expression in the book. The result is a happy union of humanistic insight and scientific objectivity.

Bhaskar Chakrabarti
