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Cosmovisions: Indigenous Community Worldviews Inspiring Alternatives to Extractivism

Indigenous perspectives from India and South Asia are missing from the discourses that influence economic, environmental, social, and political decision-making at COPs and UN meetings, as well as in government policy, but this must change, Shrishtee Bajpai argues in her contribution to the BG text series “After Extractivism.”

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“Nature is the most important school and her most committed students are *adivasi* peoples (indigenous peoples),” says Sadhana Meena from the Meena adivasi community in Rajasthan in western India where they have been struggling against the mining mafia. As a woman-activist, Sadhana ji’s life isn’t easy as her struggle has often come at the cost of her own life.

For several communities at the frontlines, resisting extractivism in their lands and forests is part of their existence and survival. Along with their resistance, articulating the visions of a *post-extractive society* is equally crucial. In their struggles, such visions are embedded in a community thriving without destroying the earth and leaving half of humanity behind. These expressions of resistance are informed by peoples’ worldviews that thread a tapestry of varied possibilities of defining ways of social life and well-being.

Alternatives to the model of destructive development

Last month, from November 6 to 8, a gathering was held of indigenous and other traditional/local communities and knowledge-keepers, thinkers, practitioners, activists, researchers, grappling with solutions to the current ecological, social, economic and other related crises. The gathering was a small chromosome of beautiful diversity in India including various communities such as the Lepcha, Maldhari, Gujjar, Dimasa, Chakhesang, Gond, Warli, Ladakhi, Mishmi, Soliga and other community representatives, and civil society organizations. This gathering was part of [Vikalp Sangam \(Alternatives Confluences\)](#), an evolving process that was seeded in 2014, emerging out of a search for grounded alternatives to the current model of destructive development that is built on ecological devastation and rising inequalities.

India does not officially accept the term “indigenous people,” instead referring to Scheduled Tribes and Janjati for adivasis who constitute 7% of total India’s population. Analogous to this strategic ignorance, the extractive policies by the state, eventually, overlook the fact that adivasis depend on their forests for sustenance, livelihoods, social-cultural, and spiritual practices – a dependence that guides their daily practices of living, science, traditions, identity, culture and now their resistance to destructive development.



Artwork: Colnate Group (cc by nc)

The goal of the aforementioned gathering was to enable sharing a sense of urgency to bring in the perspectives of the indigenous peoples and other traditional local communities in the regional, national, and global dialogues and discourses on ecological and climate crisis, and newer, alternative pathways to address them.

Such perspectives from India and South Asia are missing from the discourses that influence economic, environmental, social, and political decision-making at COPs and UN meetings, as well as in government policy. There are a few spaces of dialogue between indigenous peoples and other traditional local communities (particularly women, youth, and disadvantaged castes and groups) on an alternative pathway to the current model of development in India and South Asia.

Cooperating with the natural world

For centuries, the indigenous and other nature-dependent communities have nurtured their embodied knowledge of being in closeness with nature and articulating those in their grounded struggles of resistance and emergence. Much of these in India and across the world have been guided by the rhythms and moods of the natural world, respecting of the ecological limits and cooperating with the natural world. “Narmada river is so sacred to us that just by taking her name, we can absolve all our sins. We, living on the banks of the river Narmada, are her sons and daughters. When Narmada entered our houses, all we could was to pray to her,” says Kevalsingh Vasave, a firebrand and full time adivasi (indigenous) activist of the [NBA](#): Narmada Bachao Andolan (“Save the Narmada Movement”).

The NBA has been a pivotal movement against the large destructive hydropower projects not just in India but across the world highlighting scientific maladies, ecological impacts as well as human rights violations that come with large-hydro. However, the indigenous leaders in the movement highlighted that the rivers are not merely sources of water rather entities with consciousness, with a spirit, and are so sacred that even if they burst their banks in a flood, submission is the act of reverence.

Many indigenous scholars and other activists have stressed that well-being, as conceptualized in the West, fundamentally lacks the radical questioning of the core concepts of modernity [Chuji et.al. 2019](#). Across the world, we see a plurality of ways how people conceptualize ‘good life’ or ‘well-being’ around notions of a relationship with nature, wealth, health, and governance among others. “Nature is our wealth and our culture. Existence and self-reliance is our wealth,” says Sadhna Meena while articulating their resistance against mining. Similarly, Prakash Bhoir from the Warli indigenous community in Mumbai who are struggling against a metro-car shed project in the urban forests says: “We are not the owners of forests but we are their caretakers and custodians. Earth is our home. We are not bonded but landed people.”

Cosmologies of interdependence

Uttam Bhatrai from the Dimasa community in Assam tells us that “among the *Dimasas* (indigenous community in Assam) in North-East India, forest and jungle is

known as *hagra*, meaning “land that’s elderly” (ha = land; gra = old/elder/aged). The forest is an elder whose wisdom dates much before the first humans came to these territories.” These cosmo-visions are part of these communities’ aesthetics rooted in their gritty experience, intuitive intelligence, and interdependence.

Several communities are facing immense challenges in keeping their worldviews and ways of being alive. Reasserting their care for the rest of nature is a way of asserting the need of the communities to survive as autonomous entities who have control and voice over what happens in their lands and territories. The current assault on territories is resulting in assimilation, co-option, and thus denuding the adivasis of their cultural autonomy, history, and spiritual moorings.

The central question being asked is: How can we consolidate ourselves to respond to these challenges along with building processes of solidarity, sharing, and networking on grounded alternatives to extractivism?

“Our people tell stories”

“The temperatures are rising, snowfall is getting less and less, and all you can see is modern excavators digging up the earth everywhere. We have disturbed the spirits of the land, of mountains, of snow, and also the ones that reside in us. If the spirits of nature are not happy, how can we humans be?” says Samnla Tundup, an elder from Saspotsey village in Ladakh when we asked him about drastic climatic change effects in the trans-Himalayan region of India.

Such articulations remind us that we need to look beyond our rationalist and dualistic minds and listen to what people who have been protecting these landscapes have to say. Our work towards post-extractive futures consists of first and foremost paying very close attention to such articulations, listening to the communities struggling and protecting, offering our active solidarity, and facilitating these voices to be actually present in corridors of power.

We need to tell these stories much more and in diverse forms. And as Minket Lepcha and Aleyen Lepcha, women storytellers from the Lepcha community in Sikkim (based in Kalimpong) reminded us during the Vikalp Sangam gathering “writing is a colonial concept. Our people tell stories. Our rivers carry our stories, and when you dam them, our stories of origin are dammed too.”

This text is a contribution to the Berliner Gazette’s “After Extractivism” text series; its German version is available on [Berliner Gazette](#). You can find more contents on the English-language “After Extractivism” website. Have a look here: <https://after-extractivism.berlinergazette.de>

Shrishtee Bajpai

Shrishtee Bajpai is a researcher- activist based in Pune and is member of an environmental action group Kalpavriksh. Her research focuses on documenting, researching, and networking on radical alternatives to dominant systems with specific focus on exploring indigenous, traditional, and customary ways of living, decision-making and their underlying worldviews. She helps in coordinating the Vikalp Sangam process (Alternatives Confluence) and is a core team member of Global Tapestry of Alternatives. She has been researching and networking on the rights of nature movement with specific focus on South Asia. She has helped found Rights of Rivers South Asia Alliance. She is executive committee member of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. Shrishtee is a fellow (2021-2022) at Post-growth Institute, US.

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