

If all life mattered, what would decision-making look like? (Analysis)

SHRISHTEE BAJPAI AND ASHISH KOTHARI

25 OCT 2024 ASIA

Comments

Share article

- *Across the world, Indigenous and other communities embedded in nature have articulated, as part their resistance to external domination, an inseparability of nature from all human activity.*
- *The authors say these worldviews challenge a dominant strand of Western thinking: that humans alone are possessed of rights and that other species exist only for human use.*

[See All Key Ideas](#)

In April 2013, the Supreme Court of India delivered a historic judgement recognizing the cultural, religious and spiritual rights of the Dongria Kondh Adivasis, an Indigenous community residing in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha state in eastern India. The community fighting against bauxite mining in their sacred landscape had articulated that “our way of life allied to the ‘sacred law,’ as prescribed by *Niyamraja* (King of Law, the deity presiding over the hills) disallows exploitation of the forest and the land.”

The Niyamgiri judgement is one of those rare moments where the modern state and law came close to recognizing the interconnectedness that communities have with the more-than-human world (the web of life).

Indigenous and other nature-dependent communities across the world have often articulated, as part their resistance to external domination, an inseparability of nature from humans. At this year’s [COP16 U.N. biodiversity conference](#) to implement a plan to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, Indigenous

leaders say this relationship with nature is necessary to reach the goal. To cite a few more examples of what this worldview looks like:

- “For you the river might be megawatts of electricity, but for us, the river is our mother,” said Adivasis of 300 villages gathered on the banks of the Indravati River, in Maharashtra state, central India, to protest plans for two mega-hydropower dams in the 1980s (both were abandoned).
- “When we cross the river, we pray to her; we have a connection with her, she is a living being and water is the first medicine in the world,” said the late [Ladonna Brave Bull](#), one of the earliest to protest the proposed Dakota pipeline that was going through sacred Sioux territory in North America, in a conversation in Portugal at a “Defend the Sacred” conference.
- “All the plants, animals, rocks, rivers, have spirits, just like us. Our daily lives are led in conversation with these spirits; they and the spirits of our ancestors speak to us in our dreams. This landscape is filled with life, how can we allow it to be destroyed?” Manari Ushugua, a Sapara Indigenous Nation shaman in the Ecuadorian Amazon told us, while describing why they are resisting oil exploration in their territory.
- “Nature is our god. Adivasis do not make cement idols or statues. The leaves, trees, animals, rivers and the spirits in the forest are our gods,” said Samaru Kallu, an elder from the Gond community of Korchi, in India’s Maharashtra state, while describing their struggles to take collective control over the forests and resist mining in their territory.
- “The river has a right to sing, play and feed,” opined a young girl living on the banks of the Indus River in Ladakh, the trans-Himalayan landscape of India, adjoining Tibet, in a conversation we had with school students.
- “River Teesta carries our stories of origin and emergence,” said Minket Lepcha, a storyteller from the Lepcha community in Sikkim state, northeast India, at a gathering on “Indigenous and Traditional Community Worldviews” organized by the national [Vikalp Sangam process](#).



For the peoples of the Sierra, the spiritual territory is superimposed on the physical space, and a vital part of their work is to take care of this sacred geography at all its levels. Image courtesy of The Esperanza Project.

The Mamos begin their apprenticeship in their infancy, developing relationships with the animals, the plants, the elements, and the spiritual beings in other dimensions — learning to read Nature like a book. Image courtesy of The Esperanza Project.

These worldviews challenge a dominant strand of Western thinking: that humans alone are possessed of rights and that other species exist for human use. These communities have respected rivers, mountains, forests, lands, seas, plants and animals, believing that they have agency of their own. They have grounded themselves in intuitive and embodied knowledge of the territories they inhabit, living in accordance with natural rhythms and rules, aware of consequences if these are broken.

This is by no means universal, and indeed Indigenous peoples have also caused extinctions. But, for the large part, and especially in comparison to “modern” societies, they have predominantly conducted their affairs within the limits of nature.

“When we enter the forests, we seek permission from deities, spirits and other beings because we are entering their homes,” says Namgyal Lepcha, an elder from the Lepcha community in Sikkim. For his community, nature is not mere rocks to be mined for profits, but rather an entity with agency.

For those of us trapped in or seduced by atomized modernity in our urban cocoons, the crucial question is: how do we integrate into our lives those elements of reverence, respect, reciprocity and interdependence with the rest of nature that many of the traditional systems mentioned above embody? How can we rekindle the balance between human needs and aspirations, and the rights of other species to thrive? How do we find seats for other species in our decision-making spaces? How do we move beyond narrow legalistic notions of “rights of nature” to more holistic worldviews of respect, which also require changes in how we live and love? How do we reduce our ecological footprint so that those currently deprived of basic needs are able to meet them?

Rather than further scrutinizing traditional Indigenous systems through dominant ideological frameworks, can we understand their basic principles and bring them into balance to allow for new ways of organizing our systems of governance? Even as we encourage internal changes within traditional practices to remove discriminatory practices? Can we move towards more, what we call, “Earthy governance”?

Sapara Indigenous nation members in Ecuadorian Amazon. The community asserts self-determination based on material and spiritual links to territory. Image by Ashish Kothari.

A sense of responsibility, not just rights

From a reductionist, modernist or commercial perspective, these Indigenous articulations we listed above appear as nonsense. But struggles of territorial defense are often based on an understanding that humans are not atomized individual selves. Neither are they separate from the more-than-human. Prakash Bhoir, a Warli Adivasi engaged in a struggle to protect his community's forested habitat in Mumbai from a proposed metro project, told the Indigenous and Traditional Community Worldviews gathering: "If we are displaced, we may well find another home, but where will the leopard go?"

According to Izamsai Katengey, another Gond Adivasi activist from Korchi, "*Changla jeevan jage mayan saathi sapalorukoon apu apuna jababdarita jaaniv ata pahe*" — "To achieve well-being, everyone needs to know what their responsibility is."

In Gondi, there is no word or expression for entitlements or rights. Rather, their language lays emphasis on duties and responsibilities. Like many Indigenous communities worldwide, Gonds believe that their sense of responsibility expands to all humans as well as more-than-humans.

Indigenous peoples and other traditional communities across the world have similar worldviews centered around responsibility to all life: *Sumac kawsay* (in Quechua), *kametsa asaike* (in Asháninka), *buen vivir* (for the Andean peoples), *minobimaatisiwin* (in the Americas, or *Abya Yala*), *ubuntu* and *botho* (in Central and Southern Africa), *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, *swaraj* and *kyosei* (in Asia), *Country* (in Australia), and so on.

As part of traditional decision-making processes rooted in community assemblies, in the trans-Himalayan landscape of Spiti in northern India, they often consult their *devta* (deity), Chukyong Ronglong.

"A few years ago, the devta warned us that excessive trekking on Kanamo peak is resulting in its degradation. We immediately stopped trekking on that sacred mountain," said Tanzin Thinley, a resident farmer and conservationist.

In these lifescapes, people's lives are part of a cosmic order. Land, water, ecosystems are protected through deities and spirits, such as *lhas* and *lhus* in the northern Indian region of Ladakh. They need to be cared for, by embedding all human activity within nature, and consulted for crop cultivation, sowing, plowing, grazing.

Dongria Kondh Adivasis in Odisha, India, rejected mining in a landscape they hold sacred.



Dongria Kondh Adivasis in Odisha, India, rejected mining in a landscape they hold sacred. Image by Ashish Kothari.

Living within a modern state

In many of these examples, we see the assertion of people's ideas of what makes meaningful lives, bound to being in a deep relationship with nature. Opposite to that, we see the hegemonic "development" discourse and the "nation-state" model across the world. The state, increasingly hand in glove with private corporations, retains strong political, administrative and economic power.

In India, attempts at political and administrative "decentralization," providing constitutional powers to institutions of self-governance at village, district and urban levels, have provided some counter-trends to this, but mostly remained half-hearted in both concept and implementation — except where a locally empowered community has asserted itself.

Meanwhile, processes of land grabbing and environmental devastation in the name of "development" continue apace, the results of which are evident in independent reports of ecological collapse, including the climate crisis. The problem with such "development" is given a cosmological explanation by Smanla Tundup, *ex-Goba* (traditional headman) of Saspotsey village in Ladakh: "Temperatures are rising, snowfall is much less, and all you can see are JCBs digging up the earth everywhere. We have disturbed the spirits of the land, of mountains, of snow. If the spirits of nature are not happy, how can we humans be?"

Even when dominant regimes acknowledge the need to integrate ecological issues into economic planning, they do so in the form of reductionist tools like "environment impact assessments," which do not integrate the cultural-spiritual relations of communities with the earth.

Traditional and customary governance systems are important to be understood, articulated, highlighted, reasserted and learnt from. But it is also important that their embedded discriminations and inequities, related to gender, caste, ethnicity, ability and age, are addressed. And some modern institutions of democracy have their own benefits, including the possibility of going beyond traditional power elites, or creating spaces of meaningful participation for marginalized sections through provisions in national constitutions or laws.

But communities also find certain modern institutions problematic in many ways, such as the introduction of divisive party politics that electoral democracies are centered around, and strengthening existing elites or creating new ones. Crucially, much of modern governance has looked at people's ways of organizing their lives and relationship within nature as "backward." Their systems of consulting spirits of the forests and land to grant or deny permission for mining and damming are simply labeled as

superstition.

However, increasingly it is also being recognized that these worldviews have been based on deep ecological understanding of the landscapes and have been able to protect much of the remaining biodiversity of this planet.

Confluence of Pin and Spiti rivers, India — landscape where humans & the more-than-human co-exist.



Confluence of Pin and Spiti rivers, India — landscape where humans & the more-than-human co-exist. Image by Shrishtee Bajpai.

Blending the traditional and the modern

There has been limited work to understand the dynamics of traditional systems in practice while they interact with the newer, statutory systems of governance, and what kinds of conflicts and complementarities emerge between traditional norms and modern constitutional values. In our study of the Goba system of Ladakh, in which a village elder is chosen for a complex set of cultural, political, social and economic tasks, we found that despite the establishment of the constitutionally mandated *panchayat* (village council) system, in most villages the Goba system still held sway. And this included decision-making that integrated spiritual relations with the land and water, something completely outside the domain or mandate of elected state institutions such as panchayats. But the Goba system also needed reforms to remove gender and caste discrimination.

The stark evidence of ecological and social collapse emerging across the world is leading to slow but visible paradigm shifts in the Global North too. New frameworks such as Earth Jurisprudence, Rights of Nature, More-than-Human Rights, Wild Law, Earth Spirituality, ecofeminism and ecosocialism are signaling a shift from extractive mindsets to one where such societies recognize that nature should have its own place in laws, ethics and how we govern ourselves.

However, when embedded in formal legal frameworks, they do not meaningfully encompass the worldviews that we mention above, such as radical autonomy to sustain their territories, exercise their sovereignty, communalize economies, or recognize the agency of nature. Exceptions are where such legal changes emanate from or centrally involve Indigenous peoples, for instance the recognition of the rights of the Wanganui River in Aotearoa (colonial name: New Zealand), born out of a century of struggle by the Māori Indigenous people.

In all such struggles, it is important to understand the roots of the crises, such as patriarchal, colonial and capitalist relations, or the domination of nation-states. Nation-state-building has been supported by an ideology asserting that capitalist and extractive modernity is the only way to organize lives, that a centralized state is the only way to extend “welfare” to the “masses,” and that this justifies taking over

territories of Indigenous peoples and local communities for national goals like “development” and “security.”

Even where it has furthered democracy in its liberal, electoral form, it has not been able to integrate biocentric or ecocentric ways of governance, and spaces for grounded self-determination by communities remain limited. In many cases it has mirrored colonization by one state over another, through internal colonization of territories within a nation-state.

Without questioning the hegemony of nation-states and corporate and other centralized powers, we might fall into the trap of “feel-good” nature paradigms that attempt to be biocentric, such as “Half-Earth,” or “30 by 30” or “nature-based solutions,” or climate paradigms like “net zero.” Ecological narratives are being co-opted by corporations who will claim to hold a seat for nature on their boards, while continuing to mine sacred landscapes across the Global South.

Such greenwashing, including those embedded in many “green new deals” and paradigms like “green growth,” continue to [perpetuate relations of inequity](#) and exploitation between the Global North and the Global South, requiring “sacrifice zones” to feed the consumption patterns or the so-called “climate transitions” of the former.

Both to challenge currently dominant systems in their old or new forms, as also to present viable, deeply democratic alternatives, “Earthy Governance” is a concept and practice whose time has come.

Banner image: Oracle in Rumtse village, Ladakh, India, where decision-making involves spirits of the land and water. Image by Ashish Kothari.

Shrishtee Bajpai is a researcher and writer working at the intersections of environmental justice, social justice, more-than-human governance, and systemic transformations. She is a member of Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, and serves on the executive committee of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature.

Ashish Kothari is a founder of nonprofit Kalpavriksh, and is active in people’s movements including the platforms Vikalp Sangam and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. He has taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration and as guest faculty in several universities. He coordinated India’s National Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan, served on boards of Greenpeace International & India and the ICCA Consortium, and is a judge on the International Tribunal on Rights of Nature. He is co-author/co-editor of Churning the Earth, Alternative Futures and Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary.

What Indigenous leaders want from the COP16 U.N. biodiversity conference

From Oct. 21 to Nov. 1, Indigenous and local community leaders from around the world will gather at the latest U.N. biodiversity conference, or COP16, which delegates say is poised to be a “historic” conference that could mark a turning point for both biodiversity and those who protect it. Ahead of the talks, several delegates ... [Continue reading](#)

Conservation news

Latest Mongabay podcast episode: Australia’s Global ‘Nature Positive’ Summit features Indigenous voices,

but little government action. Listen here:

Global Nature Positive Summit features Indigenous & cc

0:00

29:58

1x

FEEDBACK: Use this [form](#) to send a message to the author of this post. If you want to post a public comment, you can do that at the bottom of the page.

 **Latoya Abulu**
EDITOR

TOPICS

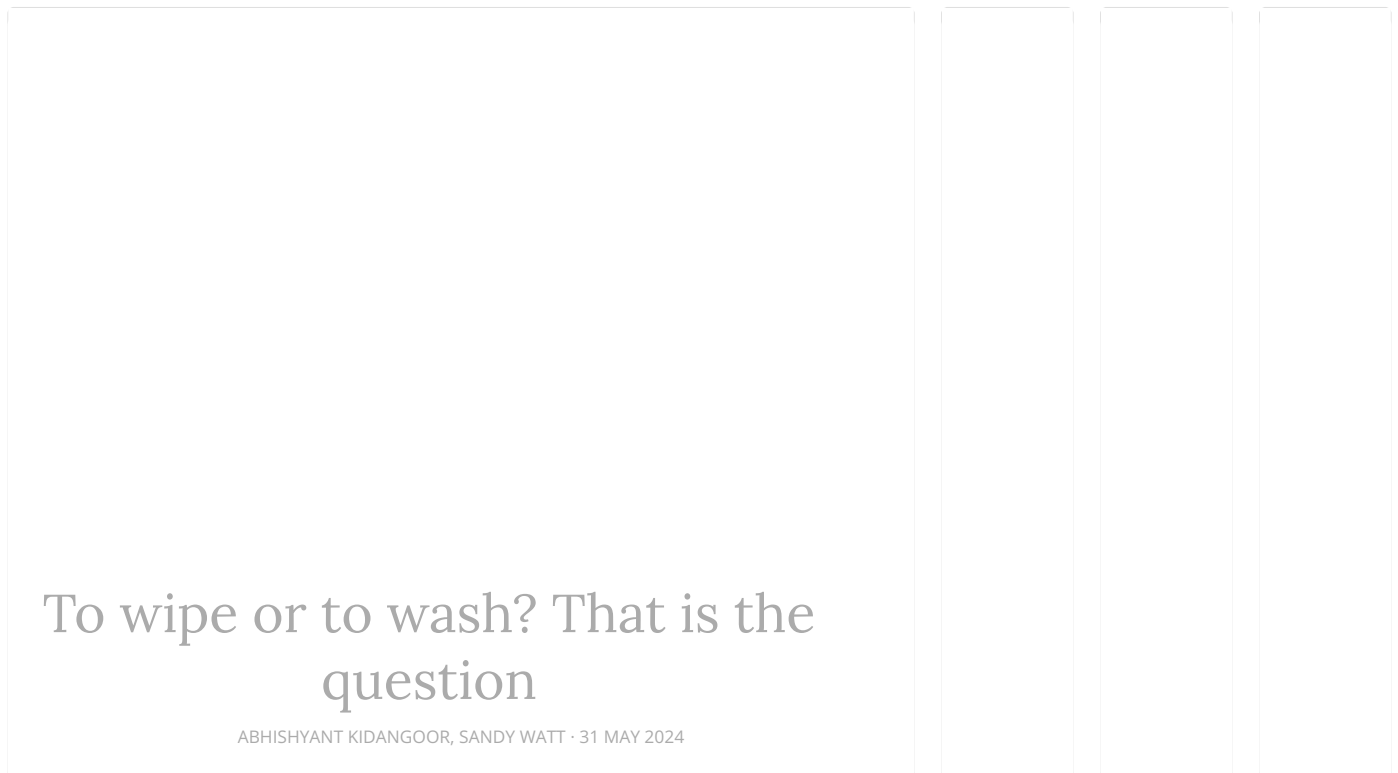
- Analysis
- Ancient Cultures
- Community-based Conservation
- Conservation
- Culture
- Environment
- Environmental Law
- Governance
- Indigenous Communities

CREDITS

- Indigenous Culture
- Indigenous Cultures
- Indigenous Peoples
- Spirituality and Conservation

[See Topics](#) 

Consumed



To wipe or to wash? That is the question

ABHISHYANT KIDANGOOR, SANDY WATT · 31 MAY 2024

Consumed traces the life cycle of a variety of common consumer products from their origins, across supply chains, and waste streams. The circular economy is an attempt to lessen the pace and impact of consumption through efforts to reduce demand for raw materials by recycling wastes, improve the reusability/durability of products to limit pollution, and [...]

Consumed series →

Free and open access to credible information

[Learn more](#) →

Latest articles

[All articles](#) →

FEATURE STORY

Brazil sets a date to remove illegal miners from Munduruku land, more details await

[JENNY GONZALES · 6 NOV 2024](#)

What was achieved, and not, for Indigenous and local leaders at COP16

[AIMEE GABAY · 6 NOV 2024](#)

Atmospheric methane removal: A promising but challenging climate solution

[SEAN MOWBRAY · 6 NOV 2024](#)

Do forest conservation pledges work? (commentary)

[MATTHEW SPENCER · 6 NOV 2024](#)

Indonesia fisheries minister eyes aquaculture expansion under Prabowo

[M AMBARI · 6 NOV 2024](#)

New standard for ethical palm oil faces backlash before it's even issued

[HANS NICHOLAS JONG · 6 NOV 2024](#)

Report reveals how environmental crime profits in the Amazon are laundered

[AIMEE GABAY · 5 NOV 2024](#)

Is the delay of Europe's deforestation regulation a cause for regret, or an opportunity? (commentary)

[ALAIN KARSENTY · 5 NOV 2024](#)

[All articles](#) →

Subscribe

Stay informed with news and inspiration from nature's frontline.

[Newsletter](#) →



NEWS FORMATS

- [Videos](#)
- [Podcasts](#)
- [Articles](#)
- [Specials](#)
- [Short news](#)
- [Feature Stories](#)
- [The Latest](#)

ABOUT

- [About](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Donate](#)
- [Newsletters](#)
- [Submissions](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Wild Madagascar](#)
- [Rainforests](#)
- [For Kids](#)
- [Mongabay.org](#)
- [Tropical Forest Network](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [Youtube](#)
- [RSS / XML](#)
- [BlueSky](#)
- [Mastodon](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)
- [Android App](#)
- [Apple News](#)

© 2024 Copyright Conservation news. Mongabay is a U.S.-based non-profit conservation and environmental science news platform. Our EIN or tax ID is 45-3714703.