

# A clash of worldviews

How the modern world can learn from Indigenous cultures

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Adivasis from three regions and tribes of India, at Worldviews Vikalp Sangam @ Ashish Kothari

*We may still be able to live elsewhere, but where will the leopard go?*

With this seemingly simple question, Prakash Bhoire, a Warli Adivasi (Indigenous) singer and painter in western India, was opening up a philosophical can of worms. Bhoire is part of a community actively fighting against the destruction of the forests they reside in, on the outskirts of Mumbai, [for a metro rail carshed](#). The project is justified by the state government of Maharashtra in the name of better ‘public transport’ for the 20 million residents of this teeming metropolis, but the Adivasi community as also ecologists and human rights activists question the wisdom of locating it in one of the area’s remaining tropical forest areas that are also home to Adivasi peoples. For the government, it is part of a certain notion of ‘development’ that cares little for ecological and social issues and even less for the ‘primitive’ lifestyle of Adivasis. For forest-dwelling communities, it is a death knell not only for their way of life, which is infinitely more sustainable than the resource-guzzling rich of Mumbai, but also for the wildlife they live with.

Bhoire was speaking at the Indigenous and Community Worldviews Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence), a gathering of Adivasi, pastoral, farmer and other communities, and civil society organisations on 6-8 November 2022. This gathering was organized by [Kalpavriksh](#), [Inner Climate Academy](#) and other groups, and hosted by [Timbaktu Collective](#), an initiative promoting transformations towards equity and sustainability in over 300 villages in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. It was an attempt to highlight diverse ways of being and living and knowing of such communities across India, and to enable greater understanding and collaboration amongst them. The 30-odd participants included members of Adivasi or Indigenous communities like Warli, Mishmi, Dimasa, Gond, Soliga, Chakhesang, Oraon, Meena, and Lepcha, pastoral Maldhari and Van Gujjar communities, and Dalit women farmers from Telangana.

## Clash of civilisations

Participants at the Sangam provided many examples of the kind of clash of cultures and civilizational values that Bhoire's question highlights. In the Himalayan region of north-east India, the Lepcha Indigenous community has been fighting a pitched battle against mega-hydel projects that are damming rivers like the Teesta. Their struggle is not only about the displacement of villages and the submergence of forests and riverine habitats teeming with life, but also about the erasure of cultures and ways of life that are very different from the mainstream system. While the latter view a river as a resource for generating power, the Lepcha view it as a life-giver, a being with its own life and spirit. Minket Lepcha and Alyem Lepcha, story-tellers and activists, spoke about how the Teesta River is picking up stories all along its course and continues doing so as it flows into the sea, evaporates into clouds and falls back on the hills as rain. If it is dammed (as has already been happening), how will the human inhabitants of its valley learn the stories that connect them to their neighbours, ancestors and the rest of nature?

Sonal Kachap and Nirmala Kerketta of the Oraon and Munda Adivasi communities (respectively) of central-eastern India, Ameer Hamza of the Van Gujjar pastoral community in north India, and Uttam Bathari of the Dimasa Adivasi community of north-eastern India told how their traditional governance systems, within which the politics of decision-making is intricately connected with their ecological-spiritual landscapes and cosmologies, are being replaced by the formal Constitutional institutions of governance imposed by the state. The written and printed word is displacing the oral, and as mainstream institutions of education like government schools take over what used to be community spaces of learning, it is getting harder to sustain the worldviews that have been the foundation of life. Adam Suleman, a Maldhari pastoralist from Kachchh in western India also associated with the group Sahjeevan, lamented how the government was handing over huge tracts of pastureland to industries. In all these and other areas, youth are getting uprooted, increasingly also alienated from traditional occupations or unable to find the livelihoods they aspire to. This is one of the biggest crises that Indigenous and other traditional communities face across India.

Adivasis (or what India officially calls ‘scheduled tribes’ – it does not accept the term ‘Indigenous peoples’) constitute about 7% of the country’s population. About 8-10% are pastoral communities, and about 35% are small or marginal farmers (with less than 2 hectares of land). There would be some overlap among these, but we are still talking about over 40% of India’s population or about 500 million people. These people have been systematically marginalized in India’s development policies, as also in political decision-making, with the Adivasi and nomadic pastoral communities being the most sidelined, neglected, or exploited. During the making of India’s Constitution, there was considerable debate on the need for special status for Adivasis, and indeed some important safeguards were included for particularly vulnerable or unique groups and regions. Subsequently, too, rights and privileges were extended to such communities under legislation such as the [Panchayat \(Extension to Scheduled Areas\) Act 1996](#), which recognized the importance of self-governance according to traditional customs, and the [Forest Rights Act 2006](#) which recognized community governance over forests. However, most of these provisions have been violated, sidestepped, poorly implemented, and/or formally weakened in the last few years to make way for massive landgrab by industrial and mining interests. Dalits (the so-called outcastes of Hindu society) continue to be severely discriminated against.

Migratory routes and pasture lands of nomadic pastoralists have been rendered inaccessible by large-scale infrastructure projects like highways and canals, the designation of lands falling on these routes as ‘protected areas’ for wildlife, or other such land-use classifications decided by governments with no public consultation, [threatening their very survival](#). Small and marginal farmers are increasingly [becoming wage labourers](#) as farming becomes less remunerative and farmlands are grabbed for industrialization and urbanisation. Areas previously off-limits to large-scale industrial infrastructure are being opened up as New Delhi consolidates more and more power to itself, and [colonises its 'frontiers'](#). The latest is a blatantly violative approval of [mega-projects on the Great Nicobar Island](#), involving the clearance of 13000 hectares of tropical evergreen rainforests (with over 850,000 trees) in what is supposed to be a UNESCO-recognised Biosphere Reserve as also a tribal reserve for vulnerable Indigenous Shompen and Nicobarese peoples.

Accompanying all this is the dominant belief that such communities are ‘backward’, needing to be ‘brought into the mainstream’ and given jobs in the modern economy as an act of charity. This seems to underlie a recent announcement by the Government of India’s Tribal Affairs Minister that 35,000 Adivasi settlements will be [developed as 'model villages'](#) by 2026. There is also considerable tokenism, e.g. in making an Adivasi the country’s President, while continuing to grab Adivasi lands across India. For the Indian State, worldviews such as that of the Warli and the Lepcha and the Oraon and the Soliga, are of no importance, and the sooner they are replaced by modern ‘rational’ thinking and living, the better. These attitudes run deep – so many times have I heard city-dwellers (including children) referring to Adivasis as if they were lesser human beings, and to livelihoods such as hunting-gathering, pastoralism, and subsistence farming as belonging in the distant past, to be abandoned and replaced by modern industrial or service-based jobs. When I

point out that Adivasis have done nothing to contribute to the climate crisis, rather that it is 'civilised' and 'developed' modern societies that have caused it, some of these people do pause to reconsider such beliefs, but the majority simply ignore it.

## People's response: resistance and alternatives

In all the communities represented at the Sangam, there are ongoing acts of resistance against destructive 'development' projects or other kinds of imposition by the state. Mayalmit Lepcha is active in the [Affected Citizens of Teesta](#) fighting for years against the destruction of the Teesta valley by hydroelectricity dams. Sadhana Meena of [Dhaatri Trust](#) has been physically attacked by commercial interests shaken by her community's resistance to mining and their claims for collective forest rights in Rajasthan. The Maldhari community through its organization Banni Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan (BPUMS) has successfully filed a case against the [encroachment of pastures](#), and through another organization, Kutch Unt Ucherak Maldhari Sangathan (KUUMS), against the [destruction of mangroves](#) along India's western coast by the salt manufacturing industry, affecting a uniquely adapted camel breed that swims out into the sea and feeds on these mangroves. Ameer Hamza and other young pastoralists through the [Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan](#), are making the community aware of their rights, including under the Forest Rights Act, to sustain their access to pastures including within national parks.

But along with resistance, these communities are also presenting constructive alternatives, including the assertion of their own traditional systems (which they consider the mainstream!) and innovative new initiatives. Nawa Gibi, an elder of the Idu Mishmi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, recounted how four of its clans have declared their ancestral territory as an [Elopa-Etugu Community Eco-Cultural Preserve](#), off-limits to any activities that could disturb its unique wildlife and biodiversity. Sahil Nijhawan, a wildlife scientist and anthropologist working with the Idu Mishmi, stressed the importance of combining traditional and modern science, and building evidence to help resist destructive projects and as a foundation for community-led conservation. Seno Tsuhah, a Chakhesang tribal from Nagaland, noted how the [North East Network](#), a women's rights organization, is promoting sustainable agriculture and handicrafts as livelihood options and using participatory video for intergenerational learning. K. Mogulamma and G. Narasamma, Dalit women of the [Deccan Development Society](#) spoke about how 5000 such women have achieved ecologically sound food sovereignty using their own seeds, knowledge, practices of solidarity, and traditions revering the earth as mother.

The Lepcha women are using story-telling as a powerful means of reaching out to younger generations. Sadhana Meena stressed how they are mobilizing women to be much more central in village assembly decision-making, and how collective forest rights are being claimed as a means of asserting local democracy and sustainable livelihoods. The [organisation ACCORD](#), represented at the Sangam by Stan Thekaekara, has enabled Adivasis in the Nilgiri hills of southern India to transition

from landless labourers to cultivators of organic tea and coffee and generating incomes from sustainable honey extraction while retaining the essential Adivasi values of respecting nature and each other. Mobilised through their own organisation, the [Adivasi Munnetra Sangam](#), these Adivasis have claimed collective rights to the forests that were taken away from them in colonial times. Such rights have already enabled the Soliga Adivasis in another part of southern India, to resist eviction and dispossession in the name of a wildlife sanctuary, and sustain their own ways of life as also new livelihoods like organic coffee. C. Madegowda, the first Soliga to get a PhD and head of the Adivasi group Zilla Budakattu Girijana Abhivrudhi Sangha, is helping [combine traditional and modern knowledge](#) with input from the Ashoka Trust for Ecology and the Environment, as a base for this. Groups like [Sahjeevan](#) and the [Centre for Pastoralism](#) are enabling pastoral communities to also make their ways of life better known, and promote livelihoods based on old and new knowledge and technologies such as the use of camel milk in various products.

Indeed, the phenomenon of 'hybrid knowledge', and alternative forms of learning and education that could combine traditional and new approaches, is present in many such initiatives across India. In this, communities are asking themselves several crucial questions: what is an appropriate balance of traditional and modern? What aspects of their own cultures and knowledge are still relevant, and what needs to change? How can imposition of a uniform religious regime, encouraged by a hyper-nationalist State, be resisted? How can weaknesses and problematic aspects of traditions, such as gender inequality in decision-making, or casteism, be dealt with? How can modern technologies help rather than hinder all this? What can be done to sustain or revive mother tongues, of which India has an astounding 800?

How, also, can political boundaries be challenged when they are hindrances to the ecological and cultural flows needed for a sustainable, equitable living? The Lepchas are spread across two states (Sikkim, West Bengal), as are the Soligas (Karnataka, Tamil Nadu), and both are seeking to look at governance at a transboundary, landscape level. Such approaches could be connected to the movement for bioregionalism, or biocultural regionalism, that is slowly emerging in many parts of the world, a nascent beginning of which in the Indian subcontinent is the [South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group](#).

The re-assertion of traditional governance is also part of the struggles, an example of which was given by Karma Sonam of Rumtse village in Ladakh, who works with the [Nature Conservation Foundation's high altitude programme](#). Here, gobas (traditional headmen who still play a crucial role in village matters) have recently [formed an association](#) for a more combined learning and advocacy front responding to the inappropriate imposition of state power.

Participants at the Worldviews Vikalp Sangam committed to building wider alliances to resist the erasure of their ways of life and being, to assert local governance, and to sustain or revive a diversity of languages and cultures and faiths, while also transforming internal inequalities.

They realise that the most important and difficult challenge is that of clashing worldviews. The modern capitalist and statist system, built on patriarchy, racism and casteism, and intricately linked to a human-centred approach that sees nature as a resource to exploit, has tried to sideline and erase the diversity of worldviews represented by the peoples I speak of above. But as global crises engulf the earth, of which climate change is the most visible now, there is a serious reconsideration of such ancient and alternative worldviews. If the so-called 'educated', urban, modern world is to have any hope of making peace with the earth, it has to listen to the cosmologies and ways of life of such peoples. It has to at least respect, if not re-learn, how to view itself as part of nature, how to think of ['we are the river, the river is us'](#) (in the words of the Iwi Maori in New Zealand when arguing for the recognition of the rights of Whanganui River). This entails enormous and difficult transformations – but surely, there is nothing more pressing and urgent for humanity?

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