Bioregionalism in Amazonia and South Asia as pathway for healing the Earth

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Three activist-scholars from the world's majority take us on a journey from the devastating legacy of colonialism and nation-state divisions to the possibility of radical democracy through bioregionalism. From grassroots movements in India to transboundary conservation efforts, this essay demonstrates how bioregional approaches create futures where borders dissolve into bridges, fostering a symbiotic relationship between humanity and the Earth.

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Introduction

"*Panchi nadiya pawan ke jhonke*

Koi sarhad na inhe roke

Sarhadein insaano ke liye hai

Socho tumne aur maine kya paaya insaan hoke"

(Translation)

"Birds, rivers and the gusts of wind

No borders can stop them

The borders are for humans

Just think, what have we got by being human?

These lines by Indian lyricist Javed Akhtar illustrate the poignancy of human-made borders o map. Early in 2021, author Freddie Wilkinson revealed how a US Department official drew, in 1968, an arbitrary line on the map to close what he found was a gap in the then India-Pakista border (Wilkinson, 2021). Since then, the Siachen area has been a scene of conflict between two countries. Other nation-state and political borders in various parts of the world have crea similar conflict situations or disrupted ancient cultural and ecological flows and relations. The colonial carving up of Africa in the late 19th century is a classic example (Ajala 1983), as is th division of South Asia, to which we return below. What would it take to re-imagine boundarie

such regions, in ways that begin to undo the damage? We look at the idea and practice of *bioregionalism* as an approach towards this, with a focus on two regions – the Amazon forest across the Ecuador-Peru border, and the South Asian subcontinent – to see how these could respect and regenerate the true wealth of the planet.

Colonialism, capitalism and the nation-state

In the last 500 years, colonial conquests of vast regions of the earth by European and North American powers, based on capitalist forces and rapid technological development, resulted i the decimation of numerous cultures and communities. This includes the death of over 50 million natives in (what subsequently came to be known as) Latin America, devastating famin in Asia and Africa caused by debilitating policies imposed by colonisers, and the conversion c millions of hectares of natural ecosystems into commercial agro-plantations, logging estates, livestock ranches to feed the consumer demands of Europe and North America (Arnold 1989 Wolf 2010; Koch et al. 2019). In the same period, there emerged the idea and practice of the nation-state.

This dominant ideology has also created the delusion that humans are separate from nature, that human progress is contingent on conquering it, and that 'wealth' is to be measured only in financial terms (Kothari et al 2019). In the post-WWII period, with old forms of colonialism defeated in most parts of the world, 'development' as an ideology (developmentality) was introduced to continue the domination of the west, convincing the world that human progress was linked to ever-expanding material and energy growth (Deb 2009). The ecological crises the world is facing today are largely a result of these five centuries of colonialism and developmentality. It is in this context that there is an intense search for radical alternatives which can meet the needs and aspirations of all peoples while living in harmony with the rest of the Earth, re-establishing our true wealth in nature and culture.

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Moving away from the nation-state: radical democracy and bioregionalism

One of the fundamental challenges to the domination of the nation-state comes from movements for radical, direct democracy. Indigenous peoples have struggled for self-determination, winning legal and constitutional victories in some countries, and global recognition through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In India, the village Mendha Lekha in central India declared three decades ago 'In Mumbai and Delhi, we elect the government, but in our village we are the government' (Pathak and Gour-Broome 2001). Anarchist movements, with experimental initiatives even in cities like the commune of Freetown Christiania in Copenhag have argued against the notion of the centralised state (Scott 2014). There are close affinitie between these movements and what Mahatma Gandhi called *swaraj,* a worldview that assert autonomy, freedom and sovereignty, but in non-violent ways that are responsible to the autonomy and well-being of all others.

Radical democracy forms a base for re-examining current political boundaries. Near Mendha Lekha village in the same region of central India, 90 villages have formed a *mahagram sabha* (federation of village assemblies) and are asserting their decision-maker over the entire regio

defined using a traditional sense of biocultural identity rather than current administrative or political boundaries. In 1999, 65 villages that were part of a river basin in the Indian state of Rajasthan, formed a people's parliament for a decade to govern it as an eco/bioregion, ignori the administrative division of the basin (Hasnat 2005). These and other examples are pointer a radically different approach to governance: *bioregionalism*. In other parts of the world, such Kurdistan, communities are attempting something similar through the notion of democratic confederalism proposed by the Kurdish freedom fighter Abdullah Ocalan.

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While many of the current human-made boundaries disregard nature's flows and territories, many local communities and indigenous peoples' have long lived with deep understanding and respect for these. They have been rooted in the principles of self-reliance, local control over means of production, responsible stewardship of commons along with harmony with nature, respecting and sustaining the ecological flows, regenerative capacities, and interdependence and interrelationships of all living beings across the landscape/seascape.

There are several old and new examples of bioregional governance. Nomadic pastoralists, e.g. those in Iran have used large territories encompassing a diversity of ecosystems, their practices tuned to an acute understanding of which ecosystems could take how much and what kind of use, which areas to leave completely unused for various reasons (ecological, cultural, as areas for emergency use only, etc), and many other aspects of sustainable use. Based on these, such peoples have nurtured values, ethics and knowledge systems that are centred on an earth-centric rather than anthropocentric vision, even while ensuring human benefits.

In more recent times, the Indigenous nation of Monkox of Lomerio, Bolivia, obtained territorial self-determination rights in 2006, and attempted transformations in its economic, political, social and cultural life based on a life plan for the whole region (Rodriquez & Inturias 2020). The Great Eastern Ranges project aims to protect, connect and restore habitats across a 3,600 km swa of eastern Australia, by creating regional coordination channels among various actors. In mar other parts of the world, Indigenous Peoples or other local communities are sustaining traditional landscape governance mechanisms, or creating new ones, as part of a global phenomenon now known as Territories of Life. Many of these cross political and administrativ boundaries, respecting instead ecological and cultural flows and boundaries.

Reconceptualising South Asia from a bioregional perspective

For various historical reasons including colonisation, South Asia is currently divided into seve nation-states, with political borders that cut through contiguous natural ecosystems and cultures. For instance, the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, is divided by the India-Bangladesh border; the high mountains of the Himalaya and the vast desert areas in th west are divided between India and Pakistan; the great high-altitude plateau north of the Himalaya is fenced off with Ladakh on one side and Tibet (governed by China) on the other; th waters of the Indian Ocean are partly partitioned off amongst India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives.

Here is a vision for South Asia, part of an imaginary address to inhabitants of South Asia by Meera Gond-Vankar, in 2100 (Kothari and Joy 2017).

> "... while India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and China still retain the 'national' identities, boundaries (have) become porous, needing no visas to cross. By the middle of the twenty-first century, oppressed nationalities of the twentieth and early twenty-first century ... could choose their own political future. Local communities have taken over most of the governance in these boundary areas, having declared peace zone previous conflict zones like Siachen, the Kachchh and Thar deserts, and the Sundarbans The same applies to the Palk Strait, with fishing communities from both India and Sri Lar empowered to ensure sustainable, peaceful use of marine areas. Greater Tibet has beco a reality, self-governed, with both India and China relinquishing their political and econo domination over it ... In the Greater Thar, communities of livestock herders in both India Pakistan have been similarly empowered for self-governance. In all these initiatives, nar nationalism is being replaced by civilizational identities, pride, and exchange, a kind of o ethnicity that encourages respect of and mutual learning between different civilizations cultures.
>
> Both nomadic communities and wildlife are now able to move freely back and forth ...
>
> .. the people of ... South Asia have been significant movers of an increasingly borderless world ... "
>
> *Meera Gond-Vankar*

While this is a futuristic vision, some tentative pathways towards this are already being forge Several people-to-people dialogues are underway, e.g. by the Pakistan-India People's Forum Peace and Democracy. The idea of a Siachen Peace Park in the intense conflict area between India and Pakistan has been proposed for many years, and even endorsed by former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Transboundary conservation cooperation exist for some oth border areas, e.g. between Manas Tiger Reserve in India and Royal Manas in Bhutan, aligning with several dozen such initiatives already established around the world (Sandwith et al 200 But of course, given the continuing atmosphere of distrust and conflict, there is a long way to

Shaping a bioregional approach to the Amazon Sacred Headwaters

The Sacred Headwaters region in the Upper Amazon is one of the birthplaces of the Amazon, spans 35 million hectares (86 million acres) in Ecuador and Peru, and is home to nearly 600,(indigenous people from 30 nationalities (including peoples in voluntary isolation). It is the m biodiverse terrestrial ecosystem on the planet. Indigenous peoples' struggles have kept this region largely free of industrial extraction (Nogueira et al. 2017; Nepstad 2006). Studies by international organizations, such as the UN, Rainforest Alliance or Hivos, and highlighted at th climate COP 26, have demonstrated how indigenous peoples are the best guardians of natur especially in the Amazon bioregion.

One such initiative, led by the regional Amazonian indigenous confederations of both countries, CONFENAIE and AIDESEP, with other nationalities and local organizations, is the Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative (ASHI), calling for:

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> "the global recognition of the Amazon Rainforest as a vital organ of the Biosphere. We call on the governments of Ecuador and Peru, on the corporations and financial institutions to respect indigenous rights and territories and stop the expansion of new oil, gas, mining, industrial agriculture, cattle ranching, mega-infrastructure projects and roads in the Sacred Headwaters. The destructive legacy of this model of "development" has been major deforestation, forest degradation, contamination, and biodiversity loss, decimating Indigenous populations and causing human rights abuses. We challenge the mistaken worldview that sees the Amazon as a resource-rich region where raw materials are extracted in pursuit of economic growth and industrial development. (...)"

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ASHI is asking the world to go beyond "development" and understand the complexity and urgency of radical decision-making across national borders, especially in "sacred" places that are key for life regeneration. They are putting forth not only alternative conceptual approaches of space, territories, cultures, states, ecology, etc., but also are demanding clear actions and programs from different actors that help protect the "territories of life" that are essential to dream with a living future for Earth and human species.

ASHI's Bioregional Plan 2021 proposes holistic transformation around the pillars of biophysical indicators to evaluate well-being in the transition, indigenous governance and self-determination, diversified production and economy, intercultural health, formal and non-formal education, energy and technological sovereignty, and ecological conservation and restoration.

How would bioregional approaches help?

The benefits of bioregional approaches, encompassing radical democracy, are immense. Loca they offer communities the chance to rebuild and enhance their lives and livelihoods, free of t constant fear of conflict and violent extractive industries. Cultural, trade and ecological connections could be re-established, migratory paths for both pastoral communities and wild reclaimed, cultural identities sustained or revived. In the Amazon they could help secure the ecological, economic and cultural sustenance of several Indigenous nations and other local communities, as also provide all the local to global ecological benefits of the world's largest rainforest. In South Asia, withdrawal of armed forces and other police/paramilitary forces on land and in the seas would mean that the suffering such personnel go through could be eliminated, especially in the treacherous and freezing conditions of the Himalayan border are between India, Pakistan and China. In many parts of the world, wasteful military spending co be diverted to social priorities .

Of course, such an approach could not be sustained only by institutions of direct, local democracy. These would need to be threaded together across larger land- and seascapes. Bu such ecoregional and larger institutions would exist only for essential functions such as governance of the subcontinental commons (the seas, the atmosphere, large rivers, and so on and facilitation of inter-cultural and longer-distance economic relations. They would be

answerable to the ground level institutions of self-governance. Larger level connections may also be important to help deal with what are sometimes locally intractable inequities and exploitation, such as of gender, caste, and ethnicity.

Such an approach would also entail undoing past damages to bioregions, as far as feasible. In view of the latest IPCC report, it is evident that impacts of climate change in forms of drought and floods are real and going to become worse. It is crucial to re-imagine how we govern wetlands, and entire bioregions. Some or several existing dams on trans-boundary rivers may need to be decommissioned, to re-establish water, ecological and biological flows. Any further damning and substantial diversions must be avoided. A healthy river is often a first line of defence against climate crises for communities, including its functions as it merges into the s A bioregional approach may also help cope with some of the worst impacts of climate change such as the displacement of coastal communities (including a likely attempt by Bangladeshi climate refugees to enter India, which could become a huge humanitarian crisis without adequate fore-planning), or the movement of wildlife to higher altitudes.

What are the prospects?

Bioregional approaches face significant challenges, not least of which are 'nationalist' notions that continue to support hard nation-state boundaries, lack of spaces for sustained dialogue between neighbouring countries, the intermingling of nationalist and religious identities, and weakly developed people's initiatives pushing for such approaches. The India-Pakistan border conflict, now 75 years old, combines all these challenges. And yet, there is hope from a number of opportunities and possibilities.

> *"Overall, b approaches c back the re wealth, the abundance o bounties, a cultures co replacing confineme financic*

In the South Asian region, the international institution ICIMOD has carried out extensive research and initiated dialogues for such conservation across the Himalayan region. People-to-people dialogues to reduce international hostility and enhance the chances of peace, such as between India and Pakistan, provide another source of opportunity and hope (see, for instance, the work of the Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy). Some countries (Australia, Canada several Latin American ones) are also increasingly recognising the identity and integrity of lar Indigenous biocultural territories, and the rights of local peoples' custodianship over these territories.

Another approach with relevance is the recognition of the rights of nature. Several judicial policy decisions or proposals on these point to bioregional governance.

Recognising such rights could enable management and governance based on the ecological realities of the region. This also opens up the opportunity for us to alter currently dominant anthropocentric and colonial law, towards a pluriversal legal framework. Taken beyond the la it opens up the possibilities of articulating indigenous worldviews of viewing nature as a living being, even within formal institutions; and of re-creating a mutually flourishing future for humans and more-than-humans where people's lives are rooted, active, engaged, and 'reasonably scaled' in ecologically and culturally defined territories.

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REFERENCES

This article is a shortened and slightly revised version of the following: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/nation-states-are-destroying-the-world-could-bioregions-be-the-answer/. Full references to the citations given above can be found i