DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

Governance as if the earth mattered

The Rights of Nature framework is limited by its legalism. Earthy Governance, practised by indigenous communities, goes further: it decentralises power and brings the voices of nature directly into community decision-making.

Published : Feb 04, 2026 13:19 IST - 20 MINS READ

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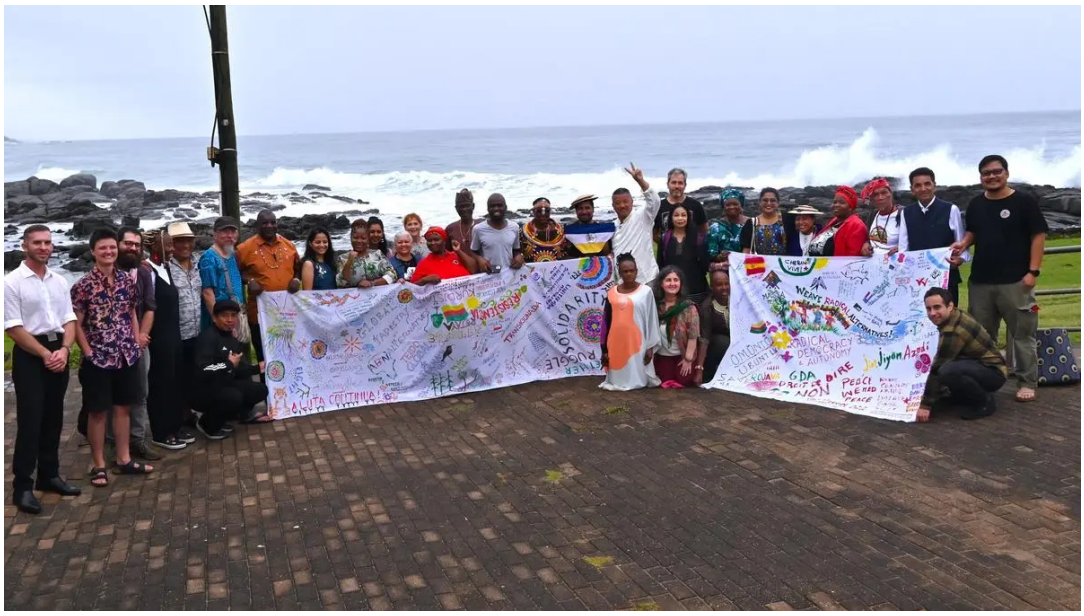

Participants of the gathering on Radical Democracy & Autonomy in Port Edward, South Africa, in February 2025. From gram sabhas in central India to coastal struggles in South Africa, Earthy Governance offers a living alternative to extractivist development and state control. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

> “Nature is our God. Leaves, trees, animals, rivers and the spirits in the forest are our Gods. They are with us, whenever we take decisions.”

—Samaru Kallu, an elder from the Gond adivasi (indigenous) community in central India.

On a visit to the Korchi territory inhabited by Gond adivasis (indigenous or tribal peoples) in central India, one of us was witness to a remarkable pilgrimage. “It is in the state of trance that the beings of this world interact with the beings from another world. These beings use priests as mediums to communicate with people, often guiding what’s gone wrong and how to mend it, while people seek penance for their past actions,” explained Izam Katengey, adivasi activist and resident of Salhe village. Since 2007, Korchi’s traditional forests along with the sacred forests of Kanni Path Pahadi region have been proposed for iron-ore mining by the Maharashtra government along with private companies, without seeking consent of the affected villages.

People in Korchi have been raising strong objections to this, asserting their spiritual, philosophical, and physical interdependence on the forests. By 2017, communities realised that they needed to strengthen their self-governance. After several deliberations, they established a federation of 90 gram sabhas (village assemblies), called the Maha Gramsabha (MGS), which would be more inclusive, fair, accountable, and transparent.

Samaru Kallu, an elder from Zendepar village, added: “‘Rao Pat Gangaram Ghat’ is just one of the many deities residing in the forest. The Gods are not visible to our eyes. The air is also invisible but does that mean that the air does not exist? Nature is our God. Adivasis do not make idols or statues made from cement. The leaves, trees, animals, and birds are our Gods.”

Listening to these stories, we realised that the sense of deep connectedness, the cosmological, spiritual threads that tie communities in Korchi with the rest of nature, are fulcrums guiding people's struggles and their assertion of autonomy.

From a conventional development point of view, Kanni Matth Hill is a potential site for iron-ore that can be extracted to generate profits, create jobs, and boost GDP. For the communities in Korchi, however, the hill is their guiding force of life, as alive and thriving as any of us humans. "If you respect your ancestors and spirits in the forests, you will have your livelihoods, food, and basic shelter guaranteed," says Kumari Tai Jamkatan, a local adivasi woman activist.

In Ecuador, the Sapara indigenous nation has fought for and gained the right to self-determination over their territory, over 3,75,000 hectares of the Amazon rainforest. They are asserting these rights to stop proposals for oil and mineral exploration that are backed by the Ecuadorian government. The struggle is not just about saving their people's cultural identity and nature-based livelihoods, but nature itself. "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?" said Manari Ushigua, a Sapara shaman.

On the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape in South Africa, the Amadiba people have a similar articulation. For centuries, they have resisted domination by kings, the apartheid regime, and the current power centres of South Africa, asserting their cultural and political identity and their right to take all decisions relating to their lands. They have resisted proposals for mining by an Australian company, offshore oil and gas exploration by Shell, a "smart" city, and an expressway, all of which would have gobbled up their land or destroyed the coast and ocean

area they live next to.

Their struggle is not only about the violation of the rights of humans in the current generation. It is also about protecting their ancestors. Nonhle Mbuthuma, a leader of the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC), which has been mobilising the resistance, told one of us in 2024: “Our ancestors are living in the sea, the animals that are our kin are residing there. How can we allow oil and gas exploration in the ocean?” The Amadiba struggle is also about safeguarding the interests of human generations still to come, as also honouring the lives of other species, both on the land and in the sea.

Back in India, communities in the trans-Himalayan landscape of Spiti (Himachal Pradesh) often consult their *devta* (deity), Chukyong Ronglong, as part of traditional decision-making processes rooted in community assemblies. “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 with Nature Conservation Foundation, on a recent visit by us to study the traditional governance system.

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Across the world, indigenous peoples and other traditional communities have related to each other and to the rest of nature based on cosmologies or worldviews centred around responsibility to all life: *sumackawsay*, *kametsa asaike*, *buen vivir*, *minobimaatisiiwin* (and others in the Americas, or, as they are called by their indigenous peoples, Abya Yala and Turtle Island), ubuntu, botho (and others in Africa), *vasudhaiva kutumbakam, swaraj, sohoj, kyosei* (and others in Asia), country (in Australia).

In these, people and communities are asserting what we

are here calling Earthy Governance. Previously, one of us has been writing on Radical Ecological Democracy, where people on the ground are the key decision-makers, and when they take decisions, they consider, respect, and bring on board the interests and voices of not only their own but also other human communities, as also the rest of nature. Earthy Governance as a term brings much more centre-stage the agency and role of nature in RED.

This is in many ways fundamentally different from the Western, liberal form of democracy currently prevalent in most countries. It is also different from, though with some common threads, the legal "Rights of Nature" approach.

Going beyond liberal democracy

Most countries of the world have adopted a model of democracy that involves citizens voting into power representatives who will form the government. While in theory the party that forms the government is supposed to implement the will of the people, in practice it centralises power and deviates from the promises that enticed people into voting for it. There are of course many instances of more open and transparent governance practices, greater participation of citizens in policymaking and programme implementation, and better welfare and rights-based measures. But almost inevitably, these run against the limits imposed by the compromises that become necessary to hold onto power, and the weak development of capacity and confidence amongst "ordinary" people to take decisions for themselves.

Capitalist corporations, aided by nation-states in cut-throat competition with each other, create aspirations for material lifestyles amongst a majority of people. This combines with an education system and mass media (especially "social media") that creates a population unable or unwilling to question authority, and willing to accept superficial explanations from right-wing parties

that blame “the other” (religious and ethnic minorities, refugees, and migrants) and promise that if they get elected, they will deal with these others.

The division of lands and waters into nation-states with rigid boundaries is itself one of the fundamental flaws in the currently dominant form of democracy. One can even question, if the original meaning of democracy was “power of the people”, how can a rule by a small set of politicians and bureaucrats (and behind them, often pulling the strings, corporate CEOs) be even given this name?

But are there alternatives? Indeed there are, as was recently demonstrated in narrative after narrative told to a gathering of indigenous peoples and local communities from over 20 countries, in South Africa, in February 2025. This Global Confluence on Radical Democracy, Autonomy and Self-determination was organised by the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, Academy of Democratic Modernity, Jineoloji Academy, and the Amadiba Crisis Committee.

Grounded communities were able to present their concept and practice of radical democracy, with an attempt to widely distribute power for decision-making. They spoke about how their foundations were not hegemonic power and profits, but justice, equity, and respect not only amongst peoples but also with the rest of nature.

Mzamba Gorge, Xolobeni in South Africa, is part of the multi-species landscape that the Amadiba people have protected. At Mzamba and Xolobeni, the Amadiba struggle shows how Indigenous democracy confronts extractivism while defending oceans, ancestors, and future generations. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

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The host community, the Amadiba people of Xolobeni, gave a glimpse of how their governance works. While it has its structural hierarchies from local sub-chiefs to the king, in practice people have considerable power to take and influence decisions. Political or traditional "leaders" who have tried to align with exploitative forces (such as mining companies) have been deposed. For various historical reasons, women have considerably greater say than is the case in many other South African communities. A crucial basis of autonomy here is that all land is held in the commons, and is not privatised.

Several other examples of grounded democracy and autonomy were given at the Confluence: the Kuna indigenous peoples in Panama, the Lachung people in Sikkim, India, the Karen in Burma-Myanmar, the Kurdish in central Asia (especially in Rojava, Syria), the Tharaka community in Kenya, the Sarayaku people in Ecuador, and the Tao and other indigenous peoples who are part of the Indigenous Taiwan Self-Determination Alliance, among others. Though not present, the example of the Zapatista autonomous region in Mexico was also cited.

In all cases, people are not accepting the domination of national governments, nor of capitalist corporations, but are asserting their own systems of governance. But they also realise that there are internal inequities and conflicts in their communities, so a crucial part of their initiatives is to enable greater voice for the marginalised sections, and create conditions of greater equality and equity. For instance, in the case of the Korchi Maha Gramsabha, separate women's assemblies have helped build greater confidence and capacity amongst women to be equal participants, challenging and transforming what were

once male-dominated decision-making forums.

These grounded, radical forms of democracy also encompass, or are embedded within, relationships of mutuality with the rest of nature. Unlike liberal democracy which is predominantly human-centred, governance in many systems of radical democracy and autonomy takes into consideration the interests and voices of the non-human. The peoples and sites mentioned above are examples of such Earthy Governance.

Going beyond Rights of Nature

Over the last couple of decades, instances of legal rights of nature being recognised have proliferated. According to the Eco Jurisprudence Monitor, there are over 500 laws, judgments, constitutional provisions, and other legal forms of such recognition across the world. The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature keeps a regular tab on these developments, which are both in the Global North and in some countries of the South.

Los Cedros forest, a protected cloud forest of great biodiversity in the Andean mountains of Ecuador, was similarly recognised as a living being and protected from mining; Bangladesh recognised the river Turag as a living entity with legal rights and held that the same would apply to all rivers in Bangladesh; Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled that the Atrato River possesses rights to "protection, conservation, maintenance and restoration". In India, a State High Court ruled that the rivers Ganga and Yamuna had rights of personhood, though this was later stayed by the Supreme Court.

Beyond legal rights, the Rights of Nature (RoN) movement has seen articulation of fundamental respect towards the rest of nature, and the assertion of elements of nature previously considered "non-living" as also being alive. "The forest defeated the mining company and was able to

protect itself. I didn't write the ruling. The forest wrote it through me," says Agustín Grijalva, judge of an important ruling that recognised Los Cedros Protected Forest as a living being.

The Ecuadorian government and mining companies were furious because the economy would suffer, but local communities, artists, musicians, poets, scientists, naturalists, lawyers, and activists had sought such rights for the forest. Agustín further added: "All of them became part of writing the ruling and this form of radical democracy, which is not just about us but a Global South wisdom where social process and movements become an important force... the ruling sits on the efforts of a lot of people."

This indicates progress in questioning anthropocentrism and the view of nature as a commodity. Nevertheless, RoN's frequent reliance on formal, legalistic, statutory foundations severely constrains it. This can be seen in countries where law or judicial pronouncements have included RoN, but adherence to it has to be fought in courts of law, all while the rest of the society and economy continue their exploitative tendencies.

Repeatedly, therefore, RoN is undermined by the forms of governance that ignore or sidestep it, through continued faith in growth-led "development" and centralised forms of decision-making, and often, the failure to confront capitalism.

The Western legal framework has emerged from an essentially anthropocentric worldview, which sees nature as property to be extracted and appropriated. While many RoN advocates challenge this worldview, as a whole it is unable to break free from the limitations of the framework.

This is primarily because as a formal legal approach, RoN is still appealing to or giving central importance to the

State, an institution that inescapably separates “humans” from “nature” and “individual” from “community”. In this framework, a community that involves more-than-humans is unthinkable. RoN in such a case emerges as an interface that enables such a system to only partially recognise the inseparability of humans and rivers, mountains, and the rest of nature, and the entanglements amongst them.

The Zendepar Yatra enroute to a sacred site for celebration and resistance in Korchi, Maharashtra. More than a pilgrimage, the Zendepar Yatra is a living assertion of Gond autonomy, where forests, spirits, and village assemblies shape resistance. | Photo Credit: Shrishtee Bajpai

Additionally, most formal or legal RoN frameworks are not able to encompass the worldviews that we mention above, such as radical autonomy to sustain their territories, exercise their sovereignty, communalise economies, or recognise the agency of nature in their own decision-making.

There are exceptions, notably where such legal changes emanate from or centrally involve Indigenous peoples, for instance the recognition of the rights of the Whanganui River in Aotearoa (also called New Zealand), a result of a

century-old struggle by the Maori Indigenous people. The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN) has pro-actively built alliances with Indigenous peoples struggling to safeguard their territories, and established an Indigenous Council; and the International Tribunal on the Rights of Nature which it helped set up, has taken up several cases of violations of both indigenous people's rights and the rights of nature.

Also worth mentioning is the case of Ecuador, since the move to incorporate the rights of Mother Earth here led to more widespread respect of the worldviews of local communities, but also as an example of how even Leftist governments have for the most part failed to implement it within the context of a still-extractive model of development, as also a nation-state model of centralised governance.

Earthy Governance is a form of radical democratic politics centred on two elements, both of which take it well beyond a legalistic RoN framework. First, power itself is exercised on the ground by communities and collectives, rather than centralised in nation-states or corporations. Second, humans are only one of many natural entities whose voice is heard.

As the Sapara shaman Manari said: "Our daily lives are led in conversation with these spirits, when they speak to us in our dreams. Our autonomy is not only about us taking decisions in our territories, but taking them in consultation with all elements of nature around us." In the Global North, while the rights of a river or a species may be recognised, this has not yet led, to the best of our knowledge, to the incorporation of these entities into decision-making. There continues to be, in other words, an "othering" in the formal RoN movement, even if it is a respectful othering.

If movements for RoN do not question the hegemony of nation-states and corporations, and the patriarchal

foundations they rest on, there is a danger of falling into the trap of well-intentioned but neocolonial approaches (mostly emanating from the Global North) such as “half-earth”, or “30 by 30”, or “nature-based solutions”, or climate paradigms like “net-zero”. These are prone to capture by centralised nation-state and corporate powers, greenwash the deliberate schizophrenia of continuing extractive and exploitative “business-as-usual” while claiming to be also speaking on behalf of nature, and continue to marginalise peoples and communities who co-exist with the rest of nature.

Earthy Governance asserts a culture of respect for nature, and embeds such respect in daily life and decision-making, thereby putting human life back in sync with the rhythm and moods of the natural world. It does this in ways deeper than RoN, where RoN is primarily a legal tool, by bringing the voices of the rest of nature into daily decision-making, as also locating decision-making power in the human communities who directly co-exist with the rest of nature.

In its attention to forms of community-led authority and decision-making, and its emphasis on various forms of human-to-non-human relationality, Earthy Governance relies not on court cases and appeals to nation-state governments, but on the exercise of responsible, caring power on the ground—power to do good (for all life), power with rather than power over others (human or non-human). It has a foundation of principles that emerge from (or are embedded within) grounded practice and collective worldviews: solidarity, reciprocity, interbeingness, diversity, collective work, the commons, community rights and responsibilities, and respect for and kinship with all of life.

It is place-based, rooted in the needs, rhythms, and movements of a land, its mountains, forests, oceans, etc. It is localised in its smallest unit, respecting the uniqueness of each landscape and based on the needs of

respective biocultural regions. It is about respecting autonomy for all beings. It rejects any form of state sovereignty, or other ways to colonise Indigenous peoples and other beings. Earthy Governance observes that we are embedded in the inter-species habitats and connected to all beings around us in forms of inter-species justice. The strength and resilience for survival and revival can only come out from this deep-rooted embeddedness and connectedness.

Earthy Governance over larger scapes

One criticism of such forms of governance is that it can work at a small scale, but not over larger landscapes. This is not true. Some examples of radical democracy are already at relatively large scale (in terms of geographic spread as also numbers of people), such as those of the Zapatista and a number of other Indigenous peoples in Mexico, and parts of the Kurdish territory in central Asia. These and many others could be even larger if it were not for hostile nation-states (such as the current armed attack by Syrian forces against Kurdish peoples) and rigid national boundaries that they run up against.

Dongria Kondh adivasis in Niyamgiri, Odisha, claim that Niyamraja (the

deity ruling the hills) refused mining. The Dongria Kondh defend their living mountain through gram sabhas, turning Indigenous faith into a powerful check on corporate mining. | Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

The limits to scale are not inherent in the logic of RED or Earthy Governance, for within this is the possibility of horizontal alliances, confederations, and networking that could create scale. The Kurdish ideologue Abdullah Öcalan (in solitary confinement in a Turkish prison for the last 27 years) has promoted the notion of "democratic confederalism" in which small self-governing settlements can coordinate over larger landscapes with each other.

Mahatma Gandhi's notion of "oceanic circles" was somewhat similar, with every unit of *swaraj* (self-governed collectives) connected in wider and wider landscapes. Importantly, governance institutions at these larger scales would not be allowed to concentrate power, through methods such as right to recall, frequent rotation of representatives (while at home, capacities of more and more people to become representatives would be built), constant processes of education of representatives in the principles of radical democracy, and so on. These processes are quite different from current political formations that centre power in representative institutions, from the national to the global.

Also, the earthiness of governance would also enable scale while limiting centralisation of power, for it would constantly learn from and mimic nature itself. A vast rainforest such as the Amazon has no central decision-making structure; millions of entities are taking decisions all the time, yet the result is not chaos, but a self-regenerating system that produces diversity, functionality, and breathtaking beauty.

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Learning from the mycelial behaviour of fungi, several movements and networks are trying decentralised,

distributed approaches in their internal governance, that are perhaps also more resilient to shocks than centralised ones. Pathways of distributed power and working within nature do exist, and have been and can be further emulated or learnt from by humans.

The scale of Earthy Governance can also be built on the foundations of another growing movement, bioregionalism, or as we are trying to rephrase from a Global South perspective, biocultural regionalism. In this, currently rigid political borders (between or within nation-states) that have divided natural flows and connectivity, as also broken cultural and economic flows, are challenged. The attempt is to expand or change political decision-making units to those which re-establish or sustain such flows. In a world where nation-state boundaries are considered sacrosanct, such a movement has obvious hurdles, but in many parts of the world such conceptualisation is ongoing, for instance by the South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group and the Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative.

Conclusion

By contrasting or comparing frameworks of liberal democracy and rights of nature, common elements but also fundamental differences appear. Earthy Governance accepts that liberal democracy has elements that are more progressive than authoritarian forms of governance, but in building on the principles of Radical Ecological Democracy, it pushes the boundaries of distributed power into qualitatively new paradigms. It does not reject the RoN paradigm, but goes beyond it, and pushes it to become more radical, more embedded not so much in legal or formal systems but in the everyday lives of people.

In all these ways, the spread of Earthy Governance is essential to humanity's quest to re-establish some level of harmony with the earth, and within itself. For this, it is essential to learn from peoples and communities who still practice and live it, recognising their collective

territorial rights, self-determination, and the pluriverse of ways of life they demonstrate.

Ashish Kothari and Shrishtee Bajpai work with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives'

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