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23 October 2022

Transcript of lecture delivered in 'Green Northeast Summit' in Shillong

# Indic ethos of nature governance

This begins with our basic perspective of nature. When the 'modern' man says, let's go 'back to nature' - we understand that this man is a bystander, someone who is observing nature from outside and considers himself aloof from nature. With this perspective, you can 'study' nature and consider your actions as 'interventions'. This is not an indigenous Indic or Bharatiya perspective. Our ancestors never forgot us as integral components of nature. We regard nature as a living entity from where we were born. That is why she is called mother; she is bigger than us and she gave us this life. Although this is enshrined in our mantras, chants, and modes of worship, we tend to forget the intrinsic reason of these mantras and consider them as 'rituals'. Rituals are rites without meaning.

## Fundamental tenets

The Warli tribe has a tradition of Kaambad dance, which begins with this song: "अठ नाचू काय तठ नाचू, या धरतरीच्या पाठीवर. ही धरतरी माझी मायु रं, हिला पाय कसा मी लावू रं" (meaning: where shall I dance, here or there, on the back of this Earth. This Earth is my mother, how do I touch her with my feet?) This spirit is no different from a Sanskrit verse: "समुद्रवसने देवि पर्वतस्तनमंडले, विष्णुपत्नीं नमस्तुभ्यम् पादस्पर्शम् क्षमस्व मे" (meaning: Oh goddess clad with oceans with breasts of mountains, I bow to thee. Forgive me for touching you with my feet) Or Poem-of-the-Earth<sup>1</sup> in Vedas that says, "माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः" (Earth is the Mother, I am her son). I am sure people from all places in our country will come up with evidences of this relation of mother and son between earth and man. Have you noticed in many parts of Bharat, the Chai-wallahs offer the first cup of tea and a glass of water to Earth when they begin business every day?

A friend of mine when conducting a survey was interviewing an old tribal lady. He asked her about wild animals and she could not think of any. So he prompted her, does leopard come to your village? And she burst out, “oh leopard, he is always around! Why do you call him wild? He is just a resident like us.” This is the second element of Indic perspective: considering humans as one with others in the nature. I was participating in a morcha where hundreds of tribal farmers protested for land rights. The leaders slogan was in local language, “आमु आखा एक से” (We all are one). I asked an elderly farmer what the slogan meant. He said - we all are one with our animals, plants, and land. For him, it was not unity among a particular section of humans, but oneness of people and nature.

Humility to nature and oneness with nature are two fundamental tenets that provide the foundation of Indic ethos of nature governance. Governance needs institutions, rules, and processes. These are developed in line with the objective of governance. For instance, the British developed the Forest Department for a clear purpose - that is mentioned as the sub title of the Indian Forest Act 1927 - ‘an act to control the trade and transit of timber’. The forest department was not born with the purpose to conserve forests, it was there for establishing a monopolistic colonial control over timber in Bharat’s forests. Once the purpose is clearly before us, we can understand why the ensuing institutions, rules, processes became exploitative and why our forests perished after 150 years of the so-called scientific management by her majesty’s forest department. On the contrary, what was the purpose of Indic way of nature governance?

### Purpose of governance

It can be explained by a common village woman: when she sits in the Angan to clean rice or other grains, she throws away some grain for the sparrows to eat. When a farmer harvests paddy, he does not remove the fallen grain from the field. He says it is the share of birds and insects. Making it available for all - humans and others - is the purpose of our nature

governance. What then are the institutions of this governance? Or are these just some random sporadic traditions?

Building up slowly – that is sustainably. I quote here from ‘Aaj bhi khare hain Talaab’ by Anupam Mishra<sup>ii</sup>.

नेष्टा को पहले वर्ष छोटा बनाते हैं। पाल से भी बहुत नीचा। नई पाल भी पानी पिएगी, कुछ धंसेगी, सो तालाब में पानी ज़्यादा रोकने का लालच नहीं करते। जब एक बरसात से मामला पक्का हो जाता है तो फिर अगले वर्ष नेष्टा थोड़ा और ऊपर उठाते हैं। तब तालाब ज़्यादा पानी रोक सकता है।

When a lake is built by a village community, they build the drain outlet (Neshta) less than half the height of the lake walls (Paal). The walls are built of compressed mud. The first season of rain will feed water to these walls and the walls will become solid. They store water less than half the capacity of the lake because of the low-level of drain outlet. This reduces weight of water and lets the walls be stronger. Gradually over years they raise the level of drain outlet, thus increasing the storage year by year. The governing principle here is when you want to sustain, build slowly. Do not be greedy.

Another incidence of the same principle is an old lady from a Warli village I knew well. She used to talk of some medicinal leaves and would tell a way to take/pluck the leaves: ‘you must go to the tree only at times when your shadow does not fall on the tree. You must pluck leaves with one hand and only once. Then you must turn around and not even look back at the tree, because then the medicinal ingredient in the leaves will lose its power’. This sounds mystic, but has a very clear rationale. Do not pluck more than what you need. Do not interrupt the life of plants except at certain times. I have come across communities in northern Western Ghats and in Gujarat who never hunt during the four months of monsoon. There are some who hunt only on certain days of moon – typically once in fifteen days. These are systems of sustaining the environment while satisfying human need. The purpose is clear to every grandmother in thousands of villages across our country.

## Institutions

We find a wonderful mix of institutions, education, and legitimacy - that makes our system of governance.

If you have read this amazing book by Anupam ji Mishra, 'आज भी खरे हैं तालाब', it mentions the systems of creating and maintaining ponds. The community had engineers, masons, funders, and labour. You still find people with the title 'Gaj-dhar' in Rajasthan. A Gaj is a yard-stick. The holders of yard-stick as the word Gaj-dhar literally means; these people were the skilled planners of ponds. Each pond had a maintenance schedule; wherein the village community would contribute in terms of labour and money. How did the schedule remain in force? It was annotated with days called 'festivals'. The Indic wisdom had better ways of protecting the sanctity and cleanliness. It was not a prohibitory billboard, but a guardian deity on the ridge that reminded people of their pledge to keep water clean. The temples in villages - often mistaken as mere places of worship - were community centers for people to gather on certain occasions and to make certain decisions. The temples had committees that would supervise the commons; viz. the ponds and sacred forests. The committee invariably had members from all the communities in the village.

I come from a village in Konkan i.e. Western Ghats in Maharashtra. Our village has a Parshuram temple and there used to be a rock-built canal flowing from a cordoned spring in the mountain to the temple. This canal as my grandmother told me once belonged to the temple. People used the free-flowing water from the canal for all domestic chores. The maintenance of the canal was done by the temple. By temple, it meant heads of families of all castes in the village - that benefited from the canal. This system was active till about 40 years ago, for the last 200 years.

Let's go to Tamilnadu, the land of the famous Cholas. There the lake or pond committee of a village was called 'Eri-Variyam'. 10th Century CE Rock

inscriptions in Uttaramerur village give elaborate procedure of election of the lake committee and other village committees by ballot.

Let's rush to Karnataka, which was Mysore state at that time, had a state chief engineer (some Major Sankey) - he writes in his report in 1920s that there is hardly a place where the state could build a new tank/pond, because village communities have already built a chain of ponds. Wherever the backwater of one tank ended, the other tank upstream began its catchment.<sup>iii</sup> It was common for a village assembly to build a water body – usually with state grants or with individual donations.

The British Madras government had appointed a Famine Commission in 1880, which reported a flood of letters from villages for offering contributions to works of public utility.<sup>iv</sup> Where did this power to raise resources come from? It was this centuries-old village governance system. It was the deep-seated habit of people to govern natural resources of their own village.

So what was the principle of the institutions that governed the commons:

न सा सभा यत्र न संति वृध्दा | वृध्दा न ते ये न वदन्ति धर्मम् |

नासौ धर्मो यत्र न सत्यमस्ति | न तत्सत्यं यच्छलेनानुविद्धम् ||

This shloka appears in three places; in the Narada Smriti, in Mahabharat<sup>v</sup>, and on the walls of our Parliament house. What does it convey: it defines an assembly or Sabha. It says the Sabha must have elderly people who are righteous and speak of the law (Dharma). The law must be such that is based on unadulterated truth.

Why is being elderly so important in such institutions? These Sabha and Samiti developed in the times of peace. Unlike in the times of war, when a community needs masculine valorous youthful leadership, the times of peace demand experiential wisdom. The prime place for elders in the Indic systems of governance is because of this reason. You know the Gao-budha in northeast. The same is called ग्रामवृद्ध (Gram-Vridha) in Arthshastra of

Kautilya that was written 2000 years ago. The word found in rock plates of King Dadda in Naosari (Gujarat) is महत्तर (Mahattar). And the assembly was called Sabha or Gram-sabha since ancient times.

Kautilya i.e. Chanakya's book was followed by kings for a long time. He was a teacher in Gandhara; i.e. in the present-day Punjab state of Pakistan and the most authentic hand-written copy of his Arthashastra – a 450 year old copy – was found in Karnataka. So we can guess what influence this book held over the entire country and for how many centuries. Arthashastra says the king should entrust the Gram-Vriddhas to settle land boundary disputes.

### Enlivening systems

Eastern parts of some states like Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra have a system of 'marriage of a lake'. When a new lake or a well is built, there is a celebration of wedding of the lake, when people bring water from five or seven other water bodies and pour the water in the new lake. Unless the wedding takes place, nobody uses the lake water nor do they cross the lake. This lets the ecosystem of the new lake stabilise. The bringing of water from neighbouring villages underlines the feeling that water is a common resource. There is also a celebration of '*praan-pratishtha*' (connecting life to supreme consciousness) of a water body; i.e. where the learned and the elderly chant mantras to remind everyone in the village that **the water body is a living being** and should be treated with utmost honour and cleanliness.

Festivals are occasions of knowledge transfer and of offerings. For instance, there used to be a festival of Lhaas in Jaisalmer is where the rich and the poor or the king and the commoner participate in voluntary labour to unearth the silt in the main lake of the city. There would be mass meals for all the participating people. And there would be so-called entertainers; who would actually story-tell the beliefs and genesis of the festival. This custom of story-telling with music and instruments often goes on for the whole night as I have seen in many tribal villages of western ghats. There is a festival of 'khaliya-dev' where sacrifices of goat and chicken are made to deities of forests

before taking home the farm produce from a farm that is located in forests. There are story-tellers who recite why the forest belongs to all living beings and that the human can not take his share without offering care, respect, and sacrifice to such beings. The alpha male of the family fasts on certain days and avoids eating any meat or new vegetation for six months before performing the 'khaliya-dev'. This keeps the entire family alert about not harvesting or hurting any living being in the forest. Every family in a village happens to follow this festival in a kind of rotation, thus restraining the human footprint in the forest.

### Distribution of means

There are three species of Bamboo found in my village (Palghar district of Maharashtra) and the surrounding area. Various families keep their family deities in a conical basket made of a certain species of Bamboo. The family does not eat shoots of that species of Bamboo. Thus, the extraction of Bamboo shoots is divided across people. And they will not extract a lot of shoots because they care for the other family who would need this Bamboo for other purposes.

There is a case of a river island village in Karnataka documented by Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha<sup>vi</sup>. The village has around 15 communities. Some are vegetarian, others eat fish. All the fish eaters do not catch fish, some buy it from others. Those who catch fish have a traditional division of where to fish; some would go in shallow waters, some in rocky patches, and some in deep waters. Naturally, they use different instruments to catch fish and these instruments are made from different plant material. In a way, this system assures that every community gets enough food, enough material for tools, and even cash income by selling fish to others. This system has survived for at least a few centuries.

### The mismatch

The age-old wise systems of nature governance have survived the onslaught of colonial and post-colonial centralization of governance and its

objective of exploitation of natural resources. The ancient systems are getting weaker with the competition for resources becoming cut-throat with cutting-edge technologies of exploitation. These systems are not fossilized. They are still in practice, in small scale of course, but in hundreds of villages all over the country.

Bharat can be the lighthouse for the world to sustain its resources if we are able to shed or discard the colonial attitude that has shaped our 'modern' 'mainstream' systems. The objective of 'Sarve bhavantu Sukhinah' (may all be happy) is not for philosophers to preach, but for states to practice. Common people thankfully know it and respect it. It is for the policy makers to understand and make the right turn.

Unless the contemporary system is grafted on the rooted stem of tradition and local ethos, it shall not bear the fruit of common good.

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## *References*

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<sup>i</sup> भूमिसूक्त (Poem of Earth) in अथर्ववेद (Atharva Veda), 12.1.12 "यत् ते मध्यं पृथिवि यच्च नभ्यं, यास्त ऊर्जस्तन्वः संबभूवुः। तासु नो धे ह्यभि नः पवस्व माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः। पर्जन्यः पिता स उ नः पिपर्तुः॥ अर्थात् "हे पृथ्वी, यह जो तुम्हारा मध्यभाग है और जो उभरा हुआ ऊर्ध्वभाग है, ये जो तुम्हारे शरीर के विभिन्न अंग ऊर्जा से भरे हैं, हे पृथ्वी मां, तुम मुझे अपने उसी शरीर में संजो लो और दुलारो कि मैं तो तुम्हारे पुत्र जैसा हूँ, तुम मेरी मां हो और पर्जन्य का हम पर पिता के जैसा साया बना रहे"

<sup>ii</sup> अनुपम मिश्र, आज भी खरे हैं तालाब, गांधी शांति प्रतिष्ठान 1993 free book for download at <https://archive.org/details/AajBhiKhareHainTalaab-Hindi>

<sup>iii</sup> Randhawa MS, A History of Agriculture in India, Vol I, p. 460

<sup>iv</sup> Madras Famine Commission Report pt. ii, p.112

<sup>v</sup> Udyog Parva of Mahabharat 35.49

<sup>vi</sup> Gadgil M and Guha R, Ecology and Equity, 1995