

Indigenous Values and Sustainability: Possible Linkages to Big History

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Citation | Vashum, Yangkahao. (2023) Indigenous Values and Sustainability: Possible Linkages to Big History.

Journal of Big History, VI(1); 89–97.

DOI | <https://doi.org/10.22339/jbh.v6i1.6111>

Christianity and Western scientific knowledge have dominated academic research and its disciplinary education. At the same time, Indigenous knowledge and religious traditions have been dismissed as a way-of-knowing by Western and dominant power-structures. Since Tribal systems often cannot be easily quantified, they have been frequently dismissed as ‘superstitious,’ ‘primitive,’ or ‘unreliable.’

But recent works by Tribal peoples around the world have resulted in a growing recovery of Indigenous knowledge for the benefit of Native and non-native people alike. This paper looks at Indigenous values and practices as alternative ways to sustain people in close relationship with Nature. In the context of the present-day ecological crisis and global warming, we must seek sustainable development, such as by learning about Indigenous values and practices.

This paper shares some vital traditions of the Tribal peoples of North East India.¹ It also argues that the rights of Indigenous peoples must include their recognition of the validity and value of their collected knowledge and ways of knowing. Of interest to this paradigm shift is how the inclusive ways of Tribal knowledge occasionally intersect with Big Histories’ inclusiveness, especially in its Asian formulation.

Holistic Vision of Life

Let me begin by reminding ourselves that we are all influenced by our worldviews, ideologies, and philosophies of life. Our attitudes towards life, the ways we think and act, and even our lifestyles are shaped by our worldviews and values. A worldview is an underlying foundational principle that holds peoples’ visions, orientations and thinking together as a community. It is a foundational principle that informs and directs all aspects of existence – how people relate to one another and how they interact with Nature, creation, and God(s).² Worldview shapes and is shaped by such attitudes and orientations toward life and the world.

Broadly speaking, there are two opposing worldviews – a neo-classical, capitalist worldview and an Indigenous worldview. The former holds a dualistic perspective that makes sharp distinctions between the physical and spiritual, secular and religious, matter and spirit. The latter affirms a holistic vision of life with no such distinctions. The former is characterized by anthropocentric and highly individualistic attitudes, while the latter is creation-centred and characterized by communitarian values. Our Indigenous perceptions about life, creation and the world are deeply influenced by

the way we understand ourselves, our communities, and the world.

If you understand the nature of human beings to be inherently egoistic – as it is understood by neo-classical theorists – then the idea of ethics and development will be shaped and influenced by that view.³ Neo-classical theory is based on the premise of individual freedom and the maximization of individual satisfaction. Its proponents understand development in terms of economic growth and production. Driven by an ideal of individual satisfaction, neo-classicists work toward accumulation of wealth by all means available.

Their understanding of ethics is predicated on the valuation of individual freedom and worth. It is ethical so long as one’s actions are geared towards achieving egoistic goals. It does not seek well-being for all, while the ideal of sharing natural resources and wealth goes against their goal of competitive development. As ecological economist Herman Daly and environmental philosopher John Cobb point out, the individual-centred economy ‘has no place for fairness, malevolence, and benevolence, nor for the preservation of human life or any other moral concern.’⁴

Holistic Worldview of Indigenous People

Space, creation and land together serve as the foundation of Indigenous people’s concept of life – relationship and interdependence. Indigenous worldview is creation-centred and is characterized by understanding the interdependence and the inter-relatedness of all, including human beings. Therefore, Indigenous people all over the world, including those in North East India, believe that the whole of creation are our relatives. Everything is connected; there is nothing / no one which / who is not connected / unrelated. So one must act responsibly.

The Lakota Nation in North America have an expression that describes beautifully all that concerns the Indigenous worldview: ‘We are all related.’ According to Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr, the similar phrase, ‘All my relatives,’ is not merely a religious sentiment, as many people have supposed, but it also ‘describes the epistemology of the Indian worldview, providing the methodological basis for the gathering of the information about the world.’⁵ Deloria goes on to explain the implication of this worldview:

‘We are all relatives’ when taken as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge means

that we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it. That is to say, everything in the natural world has relationship with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it. This concept is simply the relativity concept as applied to a universe that people experience as alive and not as dead or inert.⁶

I believe the Covid-19 pandemic reminds us just this. Unlike the West's utility and mechanistic worldview which posits that Nature and creation derive their identities from humans, Indigenous people believe that every creation has its own identity given by the Creator. Let us consider a few examples.

Spatiality vs. Temporality

The relationship between space and time is another critical issue. Indigenous people give space precedence over time. Their worldview is spatially oriented rather than temporally focused, in contrast to Euramericans. This sense of spatiality accentuates and locates all important Indigenous relationships among human beings and the whole of existence. This understanding embraces the way Indigenous peoples view the world and relates to spirits and god(s).

In the West everything is centred on time. Time is money; time is everything. So they rush to meet deadlines, with little time for family, friends, or even oneself. There is no time for rest, being always on the run.

Indigenous peoples give importance to building relationships and quality of life. In a sense, they control time, not the other way round. They utilize time for enhancing relationships, friendships and quality of life. For Indigenous scholars, the traditional linear-thinking of temporality that is fundamental to the Western intellectual tradition is quite alien and is seen to be, in fact, destructive to their livelihood.

Need Based Economy: Simple Living and Lifestyle

Indigenous people follow and practice a need-based economy or subsistence economy. Their life has often not been complicated by global and external intrusions, but this has been changing. They live in tune and in tandem with Nature and their surroundings. There is an Ao-Naga myth about Lijaba, their Supreme Being and 'earth designer,' which goes like this:

Lijaba came disguised in the form of an old man, almost naked, having sores all over his body ...

He blessed the rice field of the two orphan sisters who were residing at the outskirts of the village. The old man instructed them to cut a string or rope of their basket when they had enough harvest. Then he left them. The harvest time came. The two sisters had such bountiful harvest that they had no place to store their grains. Then, as instructed by Lijaba, they cut the basket-strings and to their surprise the harvest was completed.⁷

The Indigenous people's wisdom of 'Cut the basket-strings when it is full' represents their life attitude towards wealth, natural resources and relationships. It means not to be greedy and selfish. Do not accumulate wealth and resources for yourself. Take what is needed and necessary. They do not cultivate the land throughout the year. Indigenous people live by the season, and so they have plenty of time for rest, recreation, visiting friends and families. This is in stark contrast with the neo-classical capitalist view of 'the sky is the limit,' 'winners take all,' 'limitless profit,' 'accumulate as much as you can' ...

Sharing and Hospitality

Commercialization of land and resources is a recent development for Tribal people. In the past, they practiced barter / exchange or sharing of resources according to their needs. Tribals are known for their hospitality and generosity. They loved to share whatever they have. To a large extent, under a subsistence economy, everyone is given a fair share. The poor are given necessary care and protection. In the past, every time a crop was harvested, certain quantities were left un-harvested and set aside for poor people. This was also clearly seen by how Tribal society did not have beggars among them. On the whole, Tribal society was known for taking care of each other. Of course, things are changing rapidly. Influenced by the ideology of profit, people have become individualistic and highly commercialized. The culture of consumerism has taken over people's lives and is reflected by new lifestyles.

Indigenous People and the Land

For the Tribal people, land is life. All life activity revolves around land and its surroundings. It is central to their identity, history, spirituality, economy, and their very survival. Land has her own distinct life; it is never a dead object. It is a living entity endowed with spirits. As Mizo scholar K. Thanzauva has written: 'In a non-literate society the land is their scripture through which they read about the spirits and God and create myths and songs.'⁸

The importance of land to Indigenous people lies in the fact that even their Supreme Being is understood in rela-

tion to the land. A number of the Northeast Indian tribes, including the Aos, Sangtams and Chang Nagas, call their Supreme Being, *Lijaba* – *li* [soil] + *jaba* [enter] can be translated as: ‘the one who enters or dwells in the soil.’⁹ It is the belief of the people that *Lijaba* enters into the earth with the seeds and rises up again along with the crops. Hence for the people, the blooming flowers, the trees bearing fruits and the rice signify the presence of the Creator.

The Tribal people’s notion of time and history are related to the land. Their yearly calendar and agricultural activities are based on the cycle of the earth. All the festivals, dances and songs of the people are connected with land. Moreover, their religious activities are all centred on the land. R. R. Shimray poignantly puts it, ‘Every mountain, every range, and every ridge has a legend and every peak a tale to tell.’¹⁰

Tribals believe that it is the land that owns the people, not the other way round. The people know that it is the land that gives them their identity. Land is therefore highly respected.

Ethical life is closely based on the land. As long as one lives on the earth, one is expected to live an honest and truthful life. They believe their Supreme Being is everywhere and knows everything, and so they live in constant awareness of the eternal presence. They believe land is older than human beings and so is wiser. Tribal wisdom says: ‘The land never lies; do not lie to the land.’ Making a vow in the name of the highest divinity and the land is anathema, so people resort to it only for serious cases, such as land or boundary disputes, when every possible effort fails. They will eat a lump of soil and, normally, the one who gets sick or dies prematurely is declared guilty.

Land Tenure System and the Tradition of Conservation

In Tribal society, land is generally owned by the community. For example the land tenure in Naga society is well reflected in this Government of India report:

In Nagaland, each tribe had a well demarcated territory within the villages inhabited by that tribe were located, with well-defined boundaries. Though the practice of each tribe differed, the village land was generally classified as (a) common village land, (b) clan land, (c) individual land, and (d) *morung* land. The village council was responsible for the management. Clan land was mostly *jhum* land owned by a particular clan. Certain areas, usually terraced land were owned by individuals. Some portion of the village land was designated for *morung* where the young boys slept there.¹¹

A similar pattern is also found among the Khasi-Jaintia of Meghalaya, where the land is classified as *Ri Kynti* [clan land] and *Ri Raij* [community land].¹² The principle behind this system is to ensure that no one in the village is landless or poor, so, as a result, landlessness and beggars had been unknown to Khasi-Jaintia society.

The India Planning Commission report is expressive of land systems among the Tribals in Northeast India. In most cases, the community or village owns the land, with the chief holding nominal control.¹³ The village chief is normally assisted by the village council, the people’s representatives, while the ultimate power rests in the hands of the people as a whole. It is they who empower the chief and the council to carry out tasks on behalf of the village. There are a number of ways by which the tribal people conserved and preserved their lands.

- Terrace cultivation methods are widely practiced in the region to protect the land from erosion and landslides.
- Shifting/Jhum cultivation takes place after six to eight years, a cycle that leaves the land fallow and allows for its rejuvenation for a year. In recent time, however, the length of the cycle-years has shortened due to a number of factors, including increases in population and the need for more food, logging, business demands, etc.

Ethics of Conservation: Genna, Taboo and Totem

Land is regarded as a Mother who nourishes her children with fruitful bounty. For Indigenous people, Earth Day is not new. Our ancestors have held their own Earth celebrations since antiquity – for days or even weeks at a time – as they consecrated *gennas* for the land and the earth. There are many taboos for conservation of the land and Nature. Hunting and trapping are prohibited during breeding seasons, pregnant animals cannot be killed, and use of poisonous roots or leaves that kill fish while spawning is outlawed.

When animals give birth to new life, such as a calf or piglet, or when chickens hatch, a family honours them with taboos to protect the young ones. Wanton felling of trees and cutting of plants are strictly prohibited. Whenever trees are felled, Indigenous people first pray and ask their forgiveness. Before clearing the jungle for cultivation and farming, ceremonies are conducted to get approval of the land. Only then could they begin their work.

Closely connected with the observance of *genna* and taboo is the practice of totem. There are a number of clans in the Northeast who trace their origin to a totem animal

or plant. They have a great deal of respect for this totem, and hence they would not eat their totem animal or plant. The other way of maintaining their close relationship to the totem is by conferring religious significance on the totem animal or plant. In such a case, the totem being is eaten sacramentally at certain ceremonial feasts (but is otherwise tabooed) by all those descended from that totem life.

All these practices – *genna*, taboo and totem – are part of Tribal people's prudent ways of relating and conserving the land, Nature, and creation.

Conclusion

I started by claiming that the idea of ethics or development is influenced and shaped by the worldview one holds or by the way one perceives the human self to be. Accordingly I argued that the ethics of neoclassical economists are shaped by the way they perceive the nature of human as being 'egoistic.' The neoclassical theorists claim that their view of human nature is universally true for all people, which is of course making a huge general assumption and thereby committing a serious mistake. If this is true, how do we explain those societies and communities, including Indigenous people, that practice subsistence economy based on reciprocity and sharing? For these societies, humans are essentially relational beings whose existence depend upon the interdependence of each other. Their ethics are based on conceptions such that humans are relational beings and that everyone in the community works for the good of the community. Working for the good of the community includes taking care of each other and sharing the resources that are available among people.

The need of the hour is for conversion of our attitude, values of life, and our ways of life and lifestyle, etc. I believe there is something we can learn from the Indigenous people, their knowledge and wisdom, and ways of life, as we search for alternatives in the midst of ecological crisis and innumerable crises brought about by modern development. What we need today is to look for values that promote quality of life and sustainability. The recent crises – such as floods and raging wildfires in and around the world – speak volumes about the perils in which we live today. And this calls for urgent action from the world community to mitigate the challenges and begin leading a different ways of life. Big History's openness to alternative views and ways of knowledge makes it possible for me to talk about Indigenous peoples' knowledge, values and ways of life. And I hope, I am making the connections between the Indigenous ways of knowing and the ideals of Big History as I spelled out the values of the Indigenous peoples.¹⁴

It is something important for us all to think about.

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Endnotes

1. I will be referring to the Tribals in Northeast India and other Indigenous peoples using the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Tribal' interchangeably. While the Indigenous populations in India are commonly referred to as 'Tribals', they are all integral members of the world's Indigenous community. My consistent use of 'Indigenous-Tribal / Tribe' affirms that membership and its fundamental relationships and my use of the terms will reduce much confusion. Secondly, Tribals in Northeast India are themselves Indigenous people, meaning they are the Native people of the land. The term tribe or tribal is an imposed term given to the Indigenous people of Northeast India by the colonizers and Western anthropologists and sociologists. Additionally, the Indian Government, for administrative purposes, has simply categorized the Indigenous people in the region as 'Scheduled Tribe.' The people never called themselves tribals; they know each other by their own ethnic names, such as Sumis, Khasis, Garos, Tangkhuls, Boros, Mizos, Adis, Wanchos, etc.

2. Cajete 2000: 62. Smart: 2000: 54.
3. DeMartino 2000: 38.
4. Daly and Cobb 1989: 159.
5. Deloria 1999: 52.

6. Deloria 1999: 34.

7. Longchar 2012: 32.

8. Thanzauva 2004: 130. For a detailed discussion on tribal concept of land, please refer to the following. Longchar 2012. Vashum 2020.

9. Longchar 1998: 16.

10. R.R. Shimray 1985: 6.

11. India 1984.

12. Rymbai 1998: 16.

13. For example, there are tribes like the Kukis of Manipur and the Sumis of Nagaland where land-holding is in the hands of the village chiefs.

14. This article is a revised and expanded version of a presentation I made in the 2021 Global Big History Conference on 'Changing the World: Community, Science and Engagement with Big History,' organized at the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Symbiosis International University, Pune, Maharashtra, India on 1–4 August 2021. In addition to SSLA and J.F. Oberlin University (Tokyo), its sponsors included the International Big History Association, the Asian Big History Association, The Indian Association of Big History, and the Eurasian Center for Megahistory & Social Forecasting.

