

THEME: BIOCENTRIC SOLIDARITY: COVENANTAL BOND FOR COSMIC WHOLENESS

Title: A Destressing Global Eco-degradation: An Indigenous People's perspective from India

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Introduction

Due to a lack of stewardship and care of the ecosystem and land, unprecedented rises in temperature, water crises, landslides, rain, food crises, and different kinds of diseases are experienced. Plenty ness, diversity, and life-sustaining power are under threat. The poor and Indigenous communities who depend on land, water, and forests suffer the most. Once custodians of land are becoming landless and homeless. This demands a re-examination of the global discourse on eco-justice.

Indigenous activists, with their unwavering voices against land alienation, mining, and colonization of their spiritual heritage, have been the torchbearers of this movement. Their resilience and determination have not gone unnoticed. Similarly, Indigenous theologians, since the WCC Canberra Assembly in 1991, have been advocating for the ecumenical movement to make justice to the land a cornerstone of its future vision. They have been challenging the global Christian community to articulate a theology that affirms the interrelatedness of all life. Their voices are not lost, but they need to be amplified. A fresh re-examination, firmly rooted in present eco-justice, is imperative to revitalize the ecumenical vision and practice.

This research paper attempts to articulate eco-justice by exploring resources of Indigenous people's spirituality, especially indigenous communities in North East India. Critiquing the contemporary capitalist economics system, the researcher examines the human relationship with nature, the covenantal bond that binds humanity with the Mother Earth, care for the ecology and calls to repent our selfishness, and suggests a theology of stewardship for transformative Cosmic wholeness.

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invincible,” begins the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the basic statement of Christian faith formulated in the fourth century at the first and

second ecumenical councils.¹ The opening words of believing in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...establish a fundamental relationship between God and Creation, who is known as God the Maker or Creator of all of both the earthly realities of the mountains and minerals, creatures and cobwebs, and all these heavenly realities that remain mostly veiled to us (Genesis 1:1-3). Because of this relationship, we cannot relate to creation alone, earthly or heavenly, without recognizing and affirming its relationship to God. Examining this relationship between God and Creation is at the core of a developed Christian eco–justice theology or the theology of creation.

A glimpse of Indigenous Spirituality

In this paper, I acknowledge that there is a great diversity among Indigenous² societies and uniqueness in each Indigenous person and community rooted in their relationship with local ecosystems, histories, and experiences that have, and will continue to shape their beliefs, identities, and worldviews. While keeping this in mind, it is important to highlight common characteristics found across Indigenous communities worldwide.

In Indigenous societies, living in the natural world provides the ideal environment for developing both the individual and the community. Nature is the essential frame of reality and has traditionally formed the learning experiences of all Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, Indigenous societies have aligned all aspects of their social organization with their understanding of the natural world as it is mirrored in their region. Natural reality also thoroughly informs Indigenous cosmology. The geographical and structural features of Indigenous communities orient us to our natural place within the cosmos. A communal consciousness emerges, including the natural world in an intimate and reciprocal relationship. Through clan and societal symbolism, ritual, art, and visionary tradition, Indigenous communities connect their people with the plants, animals, waters, mountains, sun, moon, stars, and planets of

¹ [Justin-Cannon-Exploring-Ecotheology-ecotheo.org_.pdf](https://www.ecotheo.org/_pdf/Justin-Cannon-Exploring-Ecotheology-ecotheo.org_.pdf)

² The word Indigenous is capitalize in order to indicate the specialized and specific knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous people. Common characteristics of Indigenous peoples include a value for all living things, systems thinking, stewardship of the land and non-human members of the shared ecosystem, and intergenerational, nature-based learning experiences.

their world. Spirituality and a sense of the sacred permeate all aspects of the Indigenous community. Life is sacred, the relationship is sacred, nature is sacred, and one's People is sacred. These processes and structures are "creations of the highest thought" and are tied to the guiding myths of the People and the foundations of their religious expression.³

Indigenous wisdom and spirituality can be broadly categorized under two areas: (a) Just-peace eco-justice in relation to Land/creation (b) Just-peace eco-justice in relation to other fellow beings. It is to be noted that indigenous peoples' wisdom is not written, and so it is not fixed. It is dynamic. It is owned by the community and interpreted by the community. It is also important to note that elders are the custodian of the traditional wisdom. They were considered authoritative and highly respected. However, attempts to use local resources for community peacebuilding are recent, as traditional practices were seen as evil by Christian missionaries. Due to the colonial mindset, our people are still reluctant to use our local resources.

Just-peace eco-justice in relation to Land/creation: Wati Longchar and many tribal scholars have done extensive research in this area. It is generally understood that there is "No peace without doing justice to land." Many wisdoms and practices are developed geared towards the protection of land and its resources. Indigenous peoples' worldview can be best described as spirituality of interconnectedness of all life. For the indigenous people, this interconnectedness is possible not only because of God but also because of Mother Earth. The land is the mother of all life. It is the land that sustains people and gives them an identity. Many indigenous societies maintain a special relationship with the land. Land, for them, is more than just a habitat or a political boundary; it is the basis of their social organization, economic system, and cultural identification. The land is the basis that enables them to co-exist with other living beings in peace.

Since indigenous people view the land and all living beings are interdependent, they maintain a close balance between people and ecological needs in such a way that

³ [Environmental justice must include the rights of all species to life and respect: integrating indigenous knowledge into education: International Studies in Sociology of Education: Vol 30 , No 1-2 - Get Access \(tandfonline.com\)](#) (Accessed date: 15/8/24)

both are protected and preserved. Thus, their culture, beliefs, and practices were geared to maintaining a balance between human and ecological needs. Such a balance was essential to protect nature from the danger of over-exploitation. This balance was maintained through the practice of taboo and totem. I wish to elaborate on some of the ideas expounded in this discussion by Wati Longchar in his book *Transforming Culture and Praxis*.⁴

(a) Taboo - It simply means 'prohibition' or forbidden activity, something that is not permitted, something that stands against social approval and is disallowed by norms of behavior. The practice of taboo covers the whole activity of the indigenous society. It applies between sexes, different age groups, households, different clan members, and village wise, and even according to change of seasons. A taboo is observed with awareness that it affects the whole community. When the observance of taboo is neglected, it is not only the human community who suffers but even the animals and plants are affected. Taboos are, therefore, the signs that the whole world is interrelated and interconnected.

Some taboo practices are: A husband is not allowed to kill any animal when his wife is pregnant. He must also abstain from eating honey. A warrior or priest is not allowed to kill any animal while observing restricted day(s); the whole village is not allowed to kill any animal on restricted day(s). It is taboo for a woman to hunt. Women are not allowed to eat fish that have no scales such, as the stinging catfish and the butter catfish. This prudent use of resources that protected nature from destruction allowed one group or sex to utilize the resources while the other was restricted from doing so. This culture of restraint protected nature from being overexploited.

There are certain taboos that prohibit the killing of animals at certain stages of their life. For example, hunting and keeping traps are not allowed during the breeding seasons. The same rule is applied to hunting pregnant animals. Fishing and the use of certain poisonous roots and leaves that kill fish in the

⁴ Refer to *Transforming Cultures and Praxis* (Kolkata/Hualien: PTCA, 2018), pp. Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

rivers or springs during the spawning season are restricted. If a calf is born or there is a new litter of pigs, or chickens are hatched in the house, the whole household observes taboo to preserve, dedicate and welcome the life of the newborn calf, piglets and chicken. A period ranging from three to six days is devoted to caring and welcoming the newborn to the family, as many societies attach great importance to domestic animals. In fact, in many societies, domestic animals are also a part of the family. The observance of taboo is thus applied to all beings, regardless of whether they are humans or animals. When it comes to agriculture, taboo is observed to ensure good food crops and bounteous harvests. The land is allowed to rejuvenate its fertility through the observance of rituals and taboos. In addition, it is forbidden to cut certain trees because they are considered sacred. Trees like the banyan, oak, etc. are protected throughout the villages. Cutting these trees is considered to be highly taboo by the people. Unless the priest performs the appropriate rituals to gain divine approval, these trees are never cut down. Many communities believe that such trees are dwelling places of spirits.⁵ Young people are prohibited not only from cutting such trees, but they are also not allowed to remove the outer bark of those trees. If they do so, they will displace the indwelling spirit that could cause their sudden death or shorten their life span. Young people are even prohibited from transplanting trees like the oak, banyan, etc., believing that these trees would outgrow the good fortune of the planter. Besides, many communities set aside some places as sacred spaces where the community congregates for different rituals, festivals and ceremonies. Therefore, many societies regard trees/forests, sacred places and animals as not mere objects to be used, but they are alive and active and, thus, must be respected and protected.

This prudent utility is reinforced by religious sanction. In the primeval religious system, taboo is observed in every religious act. It is a sacred holiday from work and a day of rest and prayer (Genesis 2:3). Taboo takes place in different durations and intensities. Some are for one day, others for a few days, a week, or more. While some taboo days are observed by the whole village,

⁵ In Christian understanding, the spirit indwells the heart. It is personalized and limited. However, the indigenous people always perceived the spirit in relation to preservation of nature. The spirit works not only in human person but also in whole of creation.

some are observed by the clan and family only. While observing taboo, people do not talk to strangers. The daily routine work comes to a standstill, nothing goes in or out of the house, no animals or birds are allowed to be killed, and sexual contact is to be avoided. Everything is left to rest completely. It is a rest period for the land, family, and community. It is a period meant for the revitalization of the earth bringing holistic benefit to the community. Taboo also provides opportunities for people to be more charitable to themselves and others, to the animals and the plants around them, and to their rice fields.

Without taboo with its ample rest, the indigenous people may not have been able to develop a healthy God-world-human relationship. Taboo, therefore, enriches the whole land and community along with the flora and fauna. Such an observance is essential to protecting nature from exploitation. This culture of restraint and spirituality of interrelatedness are the foundation of harmony, peace and justice to nature and human beings.

(b) Totem - The totem is another practice that ensures balance and harmony in society as well as with environment. The indigenous people restricted certain animals and plants from being exploited by maintaining a totemic relation with natural objects. A totem is usually “a species of an animal or a plant or insect or bird and very rarely a class of inanimate objects, very closely related to a group, in that the group of people is believed to descend from the animal or any of the species.”⁶ Some of the common totem animals are tiger, tortoise, cobra, monkey, jackal, deer, dog, buffalo, cock, peacock, owl, fish, and so on, and the plant’s totem are like rice, cereal, cucumber and mushroom. A common phenomenon of totem belief is that the clan that traces its origin to such a totem sometimes names after the totem and attributes it as a supernatural power.

The practice of totem reinforces interconnectedness and harmony of life. For example, while some clans kill certain animals and consume them, the others do not. While one clan eats beef, the other clan is prohibited. While some

⁶ J.H. Thumra, “The Primal Religious Tradition”, *Religious Traditions of India*, eds. By P.S. Daniel, *et.al.* (Kottayam: ITL, 1988), p. 51.

clans kill birds, others do not. Most clans do not kill monkeys, tigers, bears, elephants and pythons. Some clans would kill and eat the totem animals and plants without any restrictions to gain blessing and protection from the deity. Some clans will kill and eat only on certain occasions, which may be followed by a period of mourning. People look upon this eating as a re-establishment of the bond between the clan and its totem. For some clans, the totem is so sacred to the clan bearing its name that it becomes the focus of reverence and awe that they do not kill and eat. This practice is common to many indigenous communities.

The indigenous communities maintain a very strong symbiotic relationship with the environment because of their totemic roots. The surroundings are personified by attributing personality. Each clan considered it an obligation to protect their totem. Because of this totemic relationship and the myths related to animals and plants, the indigenous communities revere them greatly. In that way, they were interconnected with the whole natural resources which in turn protected and preserved from being over-exploited.

However, we need to be critical that some of those practices operate within a patriarchal structure. I am a woman. I will not be allowed to inherit land. Without land, women are like second-class citizen. We need to re-examine some of our inherited traditions from women's perspectives.

Just-peace eco-justice in relation to humans: Many communities have developed social ecology to promote peace. One is intermarriage between different clans. It is taboo to marry within one's own clan in my culture, though it does not apply to some tribes, e.g. Kuki, Mizos, Chin, etc. This practice of inter-clan marriage is still retained among some tribes and we need to promote such practices. For Tangkhul, the woman who marries outside of one's tribe/village becomes *pukhriela*, the one who mediates between two warring village/tribes. For Aos, when the two warring communities were confronted face to face in war, only women were allowed to speak at that time. In some tribes, when someone takes shelter in women's *meghala* (wrap-around), the enemy will not attack the man. Women have been contributing immensely to peace-building and eco-justice but have always been treated as inferior.

Aos, the practice of *Aksu* which means giving pigs as present. This practice is done between tribes, villages, clans, and families to bring reconciliation, friendship, acceptance, and recognition and to renew and affirm old-age relationships and goodwill. Though this practice is very patriarchal in nature, it is still practiced among Ao villages to promote brotherhood (not much of sisterhood). The practice of *Aksu* must be modified, including women and children.

Despite the undeniable progress initiated and achieved, women continue to experience exploitation, discrimination, and inequality in all areas; women's experiences as victims and as marginalized remain unchallenged in many communities, and women's contributions, talents, and abilities remain unrecognized and untapped. Despite women's restrictive role in a traditional and patriarchal society, women are still involved in peacemaking as they see life as more important than power. Women have been promoters of peace at home, in society, and in conflict situations.⁷

It is important that we reaffirm the potential of women in bringing just-peace eco-justice. But a lasting peace can prevail only when we uphold the sanctity of the land and its resources. True just-peace- eco-justice will prevail only when we respect fellow humans, including giving rights to women. God became human in Jesus Christ in the human form not to abolish our traditional cultural values but to abolish unjust cultural systems like patriarchy and ritualism that deny justice (Mathew 5:17).

Just Peace: Devaluing use of Mother Earth:

The devaluing of Indigenous women during and since colonization contradicts traditional worldviews that were informed by the creation stories, oral histories, family and community structures, politics, and governments of Indigenous people. Through colonization, hierarchical worldviews imposed upon Indigenous people marginalized women, sabotaging their individual and collective power while simultaneously devaluing Earth and its non-human inhabitants for profit. We have never been short of wisdom on how to appropriately learn about and coexist with nature; we have simply dismissed the wisdom of nature articulated by Indigenous peoples while simultaneously devaluing the female gender in a myriad of ways. The

⁷ http://www.ocms.ac.uk/regnum/downloads/Witnessing_to_Christ_in_Northeast%20India-wm.pdf

greatest female figure we have devalued is Mother Earth. Our collective disregard for her results from the culminating impact of patriarchy and dominant industrial thought, which encourages exploitation rather than conservation of the blessings of Mother Earth. Sadly, these same ideologies have framed all earth lives, including human life, as commodified resources like in the Human Capital Theory that results in our social and environmental de-evolution.⁸

This practice inevitably calls us to question spiritual attitudes that impact our relationships with our environments. From a deep ecology perspective, our anthropocentric values have justified our plundering of the Earth and treating other intelligent beings as disposable ‘resources’ in the interest of capitalism, individualism, economic power, and material success. One of the obvious dangers of contemporary society around the world is the ecological crisis. It has become a vital concern of the contemporary world to heal nature and earth and restore its purity. The environmental and biological balance of the earth’s biosphere and the home to multi-million variety of plants and animals both aquatic and dry land is endangered.⁹ Our atmosphere, water, air, and soil are being attacked and damaged, leading to natural calamities, erratic climatic change.

The eco-crisis is related to pollution which is caused by chemical, physical and biological factors such as water pollution which is one of the urgent concerns that affects the biosphere and is caused by poisonous gases released by industries, motor vehicles and human waste. The dreaded pollution that endangers all forms of life is the radiation that is caused by nuclear power waste, radio-activities of sunrays, and depletion of the ozone layer also poses great dangers to all living creatures, which is the contribution of modern-day science and technology.

Today, even Dimapur, the smallest semi-city of Nagaland in Northeast India, is also experiencing unprecedented climatic changes; there is the issue of global warming, natural calamities frequently occurring, causing damage to life, property, land and environment, etc. Besides, soil erosions are taking place at a fast rate causing immense harm to plants, animals, and humans alike. With all these crises, many biotic species are extinct many are on the brink of extinction and even human beings

⁸ International Studies in Sociology of Education; ISSN: (Print) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riss20> (Accessed 14/9/24)

⁹T. Swami Raju, *Christian Theological Response: Contemporary Contextual Response* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2014), 90.

are being threatened. This entire crisis relating to ecology is an ultimate sign of bringing life to a standstill, which is by far and more the product of human greed and negligence. Thus, unless drastic measures are taken and conscientization of the people takes place, the world faces a grim future.

The development of ecotourism is further causing wide-scale eviction of Indigenous people and other marginal communities from their ancestral lands leading to the breakdown of traditional values, wisdom and identity. Today, the continuity of indigenous people and other marginal communities and their spirituality, cultural, and traditional way of life is at risk. It breeds injustice and thus contradicts the testimonies of the Bible. Thus, it is a ministerial, missiological, and theological challenge. It is imperative that the churches and theological education make a critical prophetic stand on this issue and critique the whole enterprise of tourism industry from the vantage experiences of the people who have been denied human dignity.¹⁰

The fires that raged in Australia during 2019–2020 rightfully caught worldwide attention as houses were burned down and human lives were lost. However, the greatest losses caused by the Australian bushfires were the nearly 1.2 billion members of Australia's wildlife and countless plant species that comprised their native habitats. From an ecological justice perspective, Australia's bushfires and the disproportionate levels of human, wildlife, and ecosystem losses are caused by and are a reflection of, our anthropocentrism. It is one of many apparent indications of what Kolbert in 2014 explains as the sixth great extinction of our planet. It requires a combination of awareness, caring, and significant human change to counteract.¹¹

Thus, in the residue of this article, we tend to become so complacent that many people are oblivious to the situation. Human beings have sold their ethical values to capitalism, materialism and opportunism. We attempt to reconstruct a model of learning that intertwines social justice recognizing Indigenous ways of living, knowing, and environmental justice recognizing also the rights of the Mother Earth and her species, let us assume the role of priest that creation finds her fulfillment and its completeness in our Creator. Therefore, a shift must take place in education from an anthropocentric paradigm to one that prioritizes reconnecting learners to nature.

¹⁰ Longchar Wati, *Transforming Culture and Praxis: Engaging Peoples in the Margins*, PTCA & YTCS-2017, 22-23.

¹¹ International Studies in Sociology of Education; ISSN: (Print) Journal homepage: J.LIN. ET AL.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riss20> (Accessed 23/9/24)

Just Peace: Equality of all species-Indigenous traditions and wisdom:

Ecological justice must include respect for all species of nature. Indigenous people have long felt a deep connection with all species of nature. They communicate gratitude to all living things that sustain them, including the Earth herself. Through story-telling and oral histories, Indigenous communities teach each generation that all living things are purposefully created and integral to the web of life. All living things are connected, their ecosystems and humans, and all living things are sacred.

The tribal communities reflected “natural” community and they oriented themselves through intimate, meaningful relationships with the stars, mountains, deserts, rivers, lakes, oceans, plants, animals, and spirits of a place. All of these processes have moved learners toward the goal of finding and honoring the “spirit of place.” What has emerged is a deeply felt “ecological” relationship between a people and their homeland, born of intimate familiarity with the land and place. The homeland is an extension of the “great holy” in the perceptions, hearts, minds, and souls of the Indigenous People who have lived in it for generations. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why Indigenous people around the world have lamented the loss of their land. From their perspective and reality, these losses are, in truth, the loss of part of themselves.¹²

Globalization and the free-market economy, on the other hand, have also cultivated injustice through oppression through unfair wages to farmers, deforestation of global ecosystems, nutrient-depleting monocropping, and harmful poisoning of local groundwater sources, and harming of indigenous ecosystems. Though the ecological injustices spread wider and affect more people each day, there is still hope that we can relearn the Creation narrative as told from the margins and bring a change only when we listen to their cries and take action to protect them.

Theological Response:

In spite of its negative effects, we need to recognize its immense potential to create a global community for peace and justice. God created the world not for Himself but

¹² Jing Lin, Genevieve Hildebrand , Angela Stoltz & Annie Rapoport (2020): Environmental justice must include the rights of all species to life and respect: integrating indigenous knowledge into education, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1854827> (Accessed 24/9/24)

for the world, and in creating it, he was moved by love that was not limited even by divinity but that poured forth outside of Him. Thus, all creation is Love and is loved by God because “God is Love.” Hence, from the very beginning, we can see that God was not separate or isolated from the creation but He is intrinsically part of the created order.

For the indigenous people God is in creation and creation is in God. Therefore, when humans destroy creation, they destroy both themselves and God. That is why they love creation and take care of it. This is the theological message the indigenous people wanted to give to the world society in general and those who take nature as the unlimited source of raw materials in particular.

If humans do not limit their unlimited consumption, and accumulation, creation will force them to limit in their own time in the form of a catastrophe. From time immemorial the indigenous people are aware of this fact, and so they intentionally decided not to develop and civilized at the expense of nature.¹³ Today, the indigenous people’s wisdom is sending a message to the world society to come to the good sense and to make the right decision before it is too late.

Thus, from the above discussion we learned that the indigenous people are life affirming people or are the worshippers of life. They see and experience life in all the created beings and things. They take the life of God and so they worshipped it and make sacrifices for it. They see and experience the life in the creation as mysteriously related to their own lives. As a result, they feel a blow whenever something destruction is done to the creation. That is why indigenous people do not commercialize forests and land. They think that selling land is selling themselves.¹⁴ Indigenous people affirm that life is God-given wisdom. Because the Bible also affirms life. The Bible says that life is God’s life-giving breath, which means life belongs to God (Gen.2:7; John 1:1-4). On the other hand, the tribals hold that, if there is no life, there is no creation. It is the Spirit of God, who is the life that connects God, creation, and humans.

¹³ Rongsen, “Continuing Aggression against Indigenous Peoples and Environment,” *Doing Theology with Indigenous People’s Spirituality: Asian Contribution to Theology of Creation and Wider Ecumenism*. PTCA/CCPRA Publication Series No.7, 2016. 24

¹⁴ Ibid., 24-25.

Conclusion

In Genesis, we see that it is our duty to care for and protect the earth, which is made quite clear, yet so often, this account is read in another theological manner. Many insist that the earth was given for humans to subjugate and control. However, sadly, this mentality has resulted in violence to the earth, and abusive use of the earth's resources, leading to the extinction of thousands of species, depletion of resources, and possibly irreversible damage to the waters, land and atmosphere.¹⁵ Throughout the scriptures, from the "peaceable kingdom" that is mentioned in Isaiah 11:1-9 to the hope for the restoration of all things in Acts 3:20,21, attest to God's reigning intention for the proper ordering of all creation.

Thus, the world's state due to the global ecosystem's degradation is unsubstantiated. It is no wonder that ecologists, economists, and theologians are all heralding the impending end to fossil fuels, the unethical enslavement of Indigenous farmers to corporations, and the depletion of soil for growing food for our earth of around 8 billion inhabitants. Therefore, I call upon all that, it is our duty to search for new ethical principles that honor the dignity of all Creation. It is also important and it is our role to transform our very souls through our right actions to ensure ecojustice and our survival in attaining a more holistic, restorative and inclusive future by making the right decision before it is too late.

¹⁵ [Justin-Cannon-Exploring-Ecotheology-ecotheo.org_.pdf](https://www.justin-cannon.org/Exploring-Ecotheology-ecotheo.org_.pdf) Accessed 24.9.24