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WISE SAYINGS FROM AN 'ECOSYSTEM' COMMUNITY

Reflections from a search for challenging
neoliberal worldviews on nature

John Kurien

The greatest sense of estrangement we face today as humans is our increasing lack of connectedness with Nature as a whole. Though the resources and processes in Nature provide for our benefit and well-being, we are being increasingly alienated from them. Despite this, we contend that we can control and dominate these processes and resources, and if need be, can replace them with products of human ingenuity and technology. This mentality is in large part the result of our minds being commandeered by the dominant neoliberal ideology of our times.

The neoliberal ideology commodifies the resources and processes of Nature. It is an ideology which prices the sea and assigns monetary value to the pleasure we get from watching the waves lapping the beach sands. It alters the language of discourse. The sea becomes capital; the waves perform services and the sandy beach is considered green infrastructure. All three can then be converted into 'markets' to persuade people, who otherwise obstinately see no monetary value in them, to now believe they are all worthy of utilisation for humans. This is neoliberalism's way of preserving Nature.

Merely putting a price on Nature and not consciously changing the way we perceive and respond to Nature will be at the peril of our very existence on this planet. Nature will rejuvenate. Humans will perish.

Undoubtedly, many of us attempt small beginnings to live in greater sync with Nature. We search for good examples to follow. We read the numerous declarations and manifestos put out at the increasing number of conferences dealing with our common future on this planet. We seek inspiration, wisdom and lessons.

My own search for perspectives on these issues has not come from conscious academic investigations or new innovative approaches to Nature but rather from the many wise sayings of a group of 'ecosystem people'¹ with

whom I have worked – ordinary fisherfolk around the world, who relate intimately with Nature for their livelihood, by their interactions with the dynamic aquatic ecosystems of our planet.

Let me share my reflections from this search.

Encounters and wise sayings

I start by recounting four encounters – from the many I have had over the last four decades with fisherpeople – to put in context a sample of their wise sayings.

I describe them in some detail as these encounters have been definitive moments of great learning and unlearning for me. They helped me reframe the way I perceive resources and processes in Nature as well as the interactions between them.

In our world today, we are tutored to look only at the materiality of Nature and treat it as an open tap of resources and a sink for our wastes. Some of the perspectives from fisherpeople provide a radical challenge to this mindset. They also provide insights for us to offer an agenda of resistance to the neoliberal perspective and prevent us from being completely co-opted to that worldview.

Indomitable faith in the sea

The first encounter goes back four decades to the very first days of my tryst with a fishing community in Kerala. I had just graduated from an elite business school and after turning my back on a job in industry I decided to work with a group of fishers who had set up a fish marketing cooperative with the help of a dedicated team of community organisers.

It was a late humid summer evening in 1973. With the sea as the backdrop, I was amidst the *kattumarams*² and nets which lay drying on the beach. Seated in front of me were a group of fishers – enthusiastic members of the cooperative. They were my captive audience, keen to listen to my ideas of how together we could better streamline the workings of their organisation.

The huge fluctuation in their daily incomes, caused by risk and uncertainty associated with fish harvest from the sea, was my topic of the day. Sometimes they labour in vain. On some other days they return with a bumper harvest yielding substantial earnings. There is no such thing as an 'average earning' in marine fishing. Given this situation, I was entreating them to save for the 'rainy day'. A state-owned bank had opened a branch in the neighbouring village and I was avidly proposing that they open bank accounts to save their 'surplus incomes' from bumper harvests.

They listened patiently. And enthusiastically too, I thought!

After my *bhashan* (talk) was over, I asked if anyone had doubts. There was a hesitant silence. The fishers exchanged glances with some egging the

person sitting next to them to ask if they had doubts. Soon one of the older fishers – Pathrose Gomez – made a reluctant expression of his need to interject. I encouraged him, saying no question is a dumb question.

He first made a V-sign with his right forefingers, brought it to his mouth and spat out the betel-leaf he was chewing. He then raised a rhetorical question which has stayed with me since. It was my first lesson in unlearning.

“I am not sure I fully understood everything you said, but I have a doubt,” interjected Pathrose. Gesticulating with his thumb pointed to the sea behind he said, “Are you suggesting that this which forms the terrain of our daily labour, may dry up tomorrow?”

I was taken completely off-guard by his rhetorical query. It was a totally different worldview. Not one which was obsessed or overtly anxious with planning for the future. Not one which was keen to be fully integrated into a new system which they did not comprehend. When they had at close proximity a vast ecosystem which, despite its vagaries, gave freely of its resources and sustained them over generations, why worry about saving money for tomorrow?

Though I was only 23 years of age, given my middle-class background and education, I was so supremely confident that I knew a lot about the ways of the world which I could share with the fishers in my effort to bring a modicum of financial discipline and economic rationale to their lives.

This doubt of the elderly fisher stood my understanding of the world on its head. I had not the faintest clue that it was their total connectedness with *Kadalamma* (Mother Sea) and the fervent and simple faith that she will always provide, which was the basis of the fishers’ carefree attitude about the ‘rainy day’ and their hesitation to ‘save’ for future eventualities.

Intertwined futures

The second occasion was a decade later.

Joyachen Antony was an undisputed leader of the small-scale fishers in Kerala. He was instrumental in uniting them. Without using religion and caste identities, he organised them along class lines. In 1983 he began a *sathyagraha* (fast) against the unwillingness of the government to control the incessant and destructive trawling boats which were destroying the marine ecosystem and affecting the livelihoods of small fishers. Backing his actions were thousands of fishers who had recently mobilised themselves under the banner of the Kerala Swathantra Matsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF). But there were two important unspoken dimensions to the *sathyagraha*. Firstly, Joyachen belonged to an ‘outlier’ community which was left out of the world-famous Kerala Model of development³ and secondly, the powerful KSMTF had no political party affiliation – both anomalies which were not missed by keen observers of the socio-political context of the state of Kerala.

However, the bigger anomaly, which had a more pervasive impact in the larger context of the environment–development debate in India, pertained to Joyachen’s insightful perception of the inextricable and intertwined future of a declining fish stock and his own community’s future.

One day when visiting his *sathyagraha pandal* (tent) in front of the government secretariat I asked him to summarise the purpose of the KSMTF struggle. His answer to me was spontaneous and highly instructive: “This struggle is for the future: ours and that of the fish” he said confidently.

Only ecosystem communities, who depend on the environment and its natural resources for their life and livelihood, can see this inextricable link. We middle-class, social scientists and activists – biosphere people – merely fight for saving the environment and the resources per se. Our livelihoods do not depend on it. But perhaps soon our very lives will!

Three decades ago this insight from Joyachen was an eye-opener for me. Being a staunch supporter of the fishworkers’ movement, I thought that both Joyachen and myself were fighting the same battle, but from different standpoints. But after what he stated to me that day, I realised how foolish and naïve I was to hold this view.

For Joyachen it was a fight for the combined future – of his community, the living resource and the marine environment. He was willing to give his life for it. His statement was an expression of ‘empirical subjectivity’ – a shared condition of deep feeling combined with concrete experience of being a real active fishworker and a community leader.

My concern was at best an honest and fervent conviction of a supporter of the fishworkers – it did not affect my livelihood or my community. It was a third-person perspective of an ‘objective reality’ which I had slowly got to know through my interactions with fishers.

But as fate should have it, Joyachen was snatched away from us seven years after this event by the very sea whose future, peace and tranquillity he had struggled for.

Freedom to fish

A third occasion of learning and unlearning came to me in Cambodia in 2005.

Cambodia was a country with a torturous and violent past. Just a reminder of the ‘Killing Fields’ of Pol Pot is adequate to revive the memories of the horrendous suffering of the Khmer people. In his effort to create a ‘primitive communist society’ as many as two million Cambodians were uprooted from their homes and perished due to starvation and torture.

At the heart of Cambodia is the highly productive lake Tonle Sap which teems with fish. These waters were cordoned off by huge areas of bamboo fencing and nets called fishing lots which were controlled by rich, well-connected and influential individuals who took possession of these areas at

government sponsored auctions. In 2000, the government earned as much as USD 2 million from these royalties. There had been a long history of frequently violent conflict between the lot owners and several hundreds of small-scale fishers who lived on the fringes of the lake over the issue of access to fish. Village folk were being harassed, harmed and even killed when accessing even those areas assigned to them by law.

Sensing a political bonanza for his unstable government, in 2000, the prime minister of Cambodia took the initiative of appropriating the individual property rights of a few hundred individual owners who had the exclusive rights to almost 50 per cent of the Tonle Sap. He ordered that these areas be converted to realms where the riparian communities could have the full freedom of exclusive community rights to fish by forming community fisheries organisations. But they would only be allowed to fish using very simple fishing nets and traps. This action of the prime minister later came to be called ‘the First Fishery Reform’.⁴

I was visiting Cambodia for the first time in 2005 for a short stint in its inland fisheries research institute to help in reframing its research priorities in the context of the interesting and radical fishery reforms which had been put in place by the government. My first request at the institute was to go to a village where the community had created a community fisheries organisation and try to get first-hand from the community what they perceived to be the benefits they have received five years after the reforms.

A two-hour drive from Phnom Penh got us to the village of Kampong Tralach Leu. I was accompanied by a researcher from the institute and a fisheries officer who was to be my translator.

A small gathering of about 30 persons had arrived at the pagoda where we had agreed to meet. There was a mutual exchange of introductions between us and the chief of the community fisheries organisation, the village headman and other men, women and children who were members of the organisation. On one of the pillars of the hall, a map which designated the official area of the community fisheries organisation was prominently displayed.

After the initial pleasantries, I took the opportunity to eagerly hear from the members about their experience of working together and the benefits they had obtained from access to the resources.

Pointing to the map, I posed my question thus, “Having taken collective control over this fairly large area, with considerable fishery and other resources, what concrete benefits do you have today compared to the years when you were denied access to all this by the lot owners?” A rather typical question from a keen researcher!

There was a stony silence.

I interjected to clarify, allowing more time for translations: “Maybe you now have more fish for consumption; perhaps you feel the family is better fed; maybe you have a little more cash income from sale of the surplus from your daily harvest; maybe you use this money to buy small assets – like a

cycle, a TV set; maybe now when someone is sick you have the money to buy medicines; perhaps it is not any more a problem to buy text books for the children; maybe . . . what do you consider are the big benefits?"

Still no one answered. I was beginning to think the silence resulted from the memory of the Pol Pot days – suspicion of outsiders!

Then rather abruptly Kim Soeun, the village headman stood up and spoke in a very passionate manner. One word which he repeated several times in the end of his long intervention sounded like “*Sir-i-pee-up*”, “*Sir-i-pee-up*”.

When I got the translation, I was astonished at his gentle rebuke to the social scientist in me! Apparently, he said: “Sir, you have mentioned several benefits and to some degree we have enjoyed a bit of each of them. We certainly eat more fish now. We do get a little more cash income. Children go to school more regularly and so on. But you did not mention the main benefit we have obtained from the reforms. Freedom! Freedom! [*Sir-i-pee-up*] Freedom to access resources of nature around us without fear. Everything else you mentioned arises from this freedom.”

I was completely taken aback. Did this man read Amartya Sen? Or perhaps more appropriately, did Amartya Sen get his inspiration from people like this?

I realised that as social researchers, more often than not, we very mistakenly think that the poor perceive benefits only in material terms of the market. We assume arrogantly that other attributes like freedom, dignity and self-respect have a much lower priority in their lives. How grossly we underestimate the deep concerns which people who relate so closely with natural resources have about the intrinsic relationships and bonds between humans and the environment.

Hope and trust even in disaster

The fourth occasion of learning and unlearning came in Indonesia.

I was visiting the province of Aceh in 2007 after it had been devastated by the 2004 tsunami. I had heard about the separatist Free Aceh Movement and their bitter fight for the control of their natural resources and the new law for total provincial autonomy which they received almost like a ‘gift of the tsunami’. I was intending to take on an assignment with the UN and this visit was part of an exploratory inception mission.

We were in the village of Patek in the district of Aceh Jaya which suffered the biggest loss of human life. It was just about 100 km from the epicentre of the gigantic (9 points on the Richter scale) underwater earthquake which triggered the massive tsunami. Practically the whole of Patek was wiped out. The greatest loss was among women, children and the elderly who were going about their daily morning chores on that fateful Sunday morning of 26 December 2004. Only the few fishers who were at sea on their boats survived. Pak Shaiffudin was one of them.

We met at the wayside family-run coffee shop – called the *kadai kopi* (coffee shop). Interestingly, I later came to know, this was the first establishment that was revived after a disaster in most villages. The *kadai kopi* is the main social institution, albeit a male-dominated one, where the newspaper is read aloud; where politics is heatedly discussed; where notes are compared on matters of the fishery; where economic and social deals are made.

I introduced myself to the fishers and followed the customary practice of shaking hands with every person seated in the coffee shop. The atmosphere was laden with cigarette smoke – a major weakness of Acehnese men. Being from India gave me preferential access to the group for two reasons: First, coastal Acehnese affirm they are all originally from India (Gujarat, West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu) and second, their inordinate love of Bollywood.

We entered into discussions on a wide range of topics – the latest of Bollywood movies and Shahrukh Khan’s future; the fishery recovery and the flood of aid for rehabilitation; the 30-year war of the Free Aceh Movement with the brutal Indonesian army; and finally the details of that fateful day of the tsunami when about 180,000 people perished in a matter of 30 minutes.

I was surprised that the discussion on the 30-year war of Aceh was rife with such strong bitterness against the Indonesian armed forces and the majority ethnic communities’ attitude to the Acehnese people. They were shocked at the brutality and injustice of fellow Indonesians towards them, leading to a loss of about 200,000 lives over the three decades.

And to my surprise, when we discussed the 30 minutes of the tsunami there was no special sense of grief or remorse. Some did seem very grieved while talking about lost loved ones. It seemed to me that for this group of survivors the universality of the losses became a source of mutual consolation.

I asked if in the wake of the terrible tragedy wrought on them by Nature the huge international aid effort had come as solace for their loss. A few of the fishers gave brief answers.

At the end Pak Shaiffudin spoke up. He said he had not yet decided what to do with his new home which was built for him by an aid agency. He had started to go back fishing over a year before. But the catches were not very good. The sea had changed radically. It was not giving up its wealth as it had done before at the depths and over the terrains that they were familiar with. There was a sense of magnanimous calmness in his manner of speaking. He concluded with this momentous statement, “The tsunami was not God’s punishment but God’s training”.

I was so totally humbled by his indomitable faith and hope. My admiration and respect for him grew when I was later told that he was the one who suffered the greatest personal loss in the village – his wife, two children, parents, home and pets were devoured by the giant wave. This gave me the prime motivation to accept a four-year assignment in Aceh, which in UN

terminology was a high-risk, insecure, hardship station. And Pak Shaiffudin became my great friend.

Here we are, scientists and climate activists meeting in big international conferences discussing the effects of climate change and the implications of the 1 metre rise in sea level with fear of the future, and Pak Shaiffudin talks about a 15-metre wave which devoured all that he could call his own as God's training – without remorse or bitterness! For fishers like Pak Shaiffudin, living in Aceh where earthquakes and tsunami threats are a regular phenomenon, the casualties of extreme events are intrinsically integrated into the expectations of a life made from living by and from the sea. Alluding to the armed conflict in Aceh, what they found more unpredictable and fearful were the unreasonable attitudes of their own fellow humans towards them!

Reflections

I am sure you perceive from the these encounters how very differently the fishers think about natural resources, the aquatic environment and their intrinsic relationship with them.

For sociologists, social scientists and reluctant academics like me, the challenge is to discover, in this alternate discourse of ecosystem people, new meanings and alternative ways of knowing and relating to Nature, which often come from people at the margins.

I am sure there are a variety of meanings which one can attribute to each of my narratives. Therefore, I make no claim that the reflections I make about them are unique or the only ones possible.

Consider the following:

All the sayings have a certain directness and 'first person' approach. Undoubtedly the statements and questions are both excitingly poetic and deeply philosophical. The perspectives implied in these wise sayings arise from an intense lived experience, embodied meaning, material exchange and subjectivity. They are almost bursting at the seams pronouncing that however we look at it, we humans are always an integral part and parcel of Nature – whether Nature gives or takes away.

The narratives resoundingly echo the collective voice of individuals and communities who are generally 'invisible' to the neoliberal ideology because they may not be active consumers but just silent producers. It highlights their refusal to embrace discourses, goals and worldviews that are not innately their own. It points to their refusal to be cowed down by promises that everything will be okay if only they conform to the invisible hand of the market or the visible fist of the state.

I have four specific reflections about my narratives:

- 1 Pathrose Gomez's rhetorical question taught me that the degree of our connectedness with natural resources and the environment alters the way we view the *risks* of our relationship to them.
- 2 Joyachen Antony's quiet determination showed me that the degree to which our future is intertwined with resources and the environment determines the forthrightness of *resistance* we are willing to exert to protect it.
- 3 Kim Soeun's gentle rebuke highlighted how we tend to assess the gains from nature largely on the value of materials and services obtained from it. But it is the *rights and freedom of access* to natural resources without fear which are the *real* benefit.
- 4 Pak Shaifuddin's tranquil courage reminded me that Nature always surprises us. The way we accept this *innate uncertainty* is a function of our cognitive, affective and behavioural relationship with it.

In my limited understanding, I find these reflections and learnings from an ecosystem community counter-intuitive to the logic and rationale of the neo-liberal agenda that is increasingly ordering our lives.

Their closeness to Nature and their intimate dependence on natural resources create the abiding faith in Nature's bounty. This faith provides ecosystem communities the courage to resist with fortitude the ill-conceived actions by biosphere communities that threaten to disrupt the flow of resources and the equilibrium of the environment. Much of the latter actions happen due to use of inappropriate technology and extracting excessive throughputs. Only such unambiguous assertion by ecosystem communities will ensure that they can obtain the unhampered freedom of access to resources and the environment which form the basis of their ability to lead a wholesome and sustainable livelihood. This is a state of affairs which many communities are striving not to lose, and few have even regained after bitter struggles. However, those who still have mastery over their resources and environment are acutely aware of the innate and totally unpredictable vicissitudes of Nature over which they have no control.

On the other side, we as 'biosphere' people are encouraged to detach ourselves and look at Nature 'dispassionately', to view it as 'separate from ourselves' and 'as the realm for natural capital resources and services' which enhance our luxury and lifestyles. We are assured that as individuals, we can reduce the risks and uncertainty associated with Nature if we can make a proper valuation, have the right technology and appropriate time perspective and credible information. Once this state is achieved we can take total control of Nature and use its resources to fashion a future of our own reckoning.

Is not the concrete evidence from around the world, of the way the environment is 'responding' to such a mainstream approach that is practised

by the forces which control our lives today, enough to prove that we may indeed be dangerously wrong?

Perhaps then there is prescience in the voices of the many ecosystem people around the world who are increasingly speaking in one collective voice and challenging us 'biosphere' people to change our relationship with Nature and between ourselves.

I personally experienced hope in their voices.

But in the Vaclav Havelian sense where "Hope is an orientation of the spirit, and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons . . . it is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out" (Havel 1990).

Notes

- 1 The term 'ecosystem people' – those who depend primarily on Nature for life and livelihood – and later in the text, the term 'biosphere people' – those who depend on all the resources of the planet – were first introduced by Dasmann (1976).
- 2 These are artisanal fishing boats made by tying logs of wood together.
- 3 For an elaboration of this 'outlier thesis' see Kurien (2000).
- 4 For details of this radical action see Kurien et al. (2006).

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