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Building Consensus on Climate Change through Stories

By: Arundhuti Dasgupta

A nuanced ecological sensitivity resides in the collective legacy of myths, folk tales, and belief systems of all ancient civilisations. Could that be used to influence contemporary attitudes and policy-making around the environment?

Across the world, climate change, loss of biodiversity, species extinction, and burning fossil fuels are contentious topics. Talks have stumbled and negotiations tied up in knots in almost every global summit, even though there is a consensus that the problems are real and need to be tackled. Even the UN biodiversity pact signed in Montreal in December 2022, which has been declared historic because 190 countries have agreed to protect 30% of the world’s biodiversity, is simply an agreement on a to-do list. Similar treaties have earlier barely achieved a fraction of the targets set and there is nothing to say that it will be any different this time.

Action on the environment is caught in a gridlock, between a near universal understanding on the need to act and an unwillingness to move forward. Alarmist predictions and polarised positions have barely moved the needle on environmental issues and an increasingly vociferous band of climate deniers is busy convincing people that the universe is a bottomless pit of precious resources.

To cut through the red lines that are rapidly forming around issues, could we dig into the numerous micro narratives around nature that exist in the mythology and folklore of all cultures?

The stories that talk about the birth of the universe and of all life on it, of animal-headed gods that control the movements of the sun and the moon, and of feathered divinities that guard the nectar of immortality—these are more than fantastical tales to spend an evening with. The stories spin a spider’s web of ideas around the relationships that human beings have with the earth and the sky, with animals and birds and the principal elements of life.

To be fair, the idea that folklore can serve up sustainable models of living is not new. Several organisations and independent researchers have pointed to the big role such stories and beliefs play in influencing attitudes and finding solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Rich in metaphor and meaning, these stories are not moral fables. Instead, they show us ways in which early cultures dealt with the complexity of nature, of the conflicts that arose between the natural world and human beings. They are not glib and would not play well into the prescriptive mindset that much of the climate talks are all about. But these stories are powerful because they speak to a cultural context and they are considered sacred by the societies they belong to.

To be fair, the idea that folklore can serve up sustainable models of living is not new. Several organisations and independent researchers have pointed to the big role such stories and beliefs play in influencing attitudes and finding solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Yet, there is no place for cultural nuance in climate change negotiations.

Indigenous stories and storytelling traditions are at best used as ice-breakers during international conferences and as “soft” sidebars in the ecological reports that are being churned out faster than one can read them. Is there a bigger role for such tales and could we scoop out more meaning from them to drive meaningful change on environment protection?

What Do the Stories Tell Us?

Everything is related to everything in the universe. Myths and folktales carry variants of this idea to lay open the potential dangers of exploitation, hubris, and indiscriminate plunder of the world’s resources, among other things.

In a story from the Sundarbans—the world’s largest contiguous mangrove forest that stretches between India and Bangladesh—the complicated relationship between human habitation, the treacherous landscape, and the fragile ecological balance that keeps the region afloat is embodied in the figure of a goddess. Bon Bibi, worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in the region, is feared and revered; she stands between life and death for the locals, who see themselves as her children.

The folk myths around Bon Bibi explore the idea of kinship between the jungle, the tiger, and human beings. The jungle is home to the shape-shifting tiger king Dokkhin Rai who has promised to leave Bon Bibi’s worshippers alone (they belong to the poorest sections of society—honey and wax collectors, fisher folk, wood and grass harvesters, shrimp farmers, and other such communities) as long as they leave enough for him in the forest. Although the tiger is a dangerous enemy that the people have to watch out for, he is also, like them, under the protection of the goddess. She is a mother to him as she is to the people of the Sundarbans. No one goes into the jungle without offering up a prayer to her, and a promise to not let greed get the better of their need.

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There are many myths and legends around Bon Bibi and most of them are recorded in a small booklet called the *Bon Bibirjournama*. Written in Bengali script that has been read in Arabic style from right to left, the *journama* consists of three texts, all written between 1284 and 1305 CE. In these stories, Bon Bibi clashes with Dokkhin Rai on several occasions, but she always emerges victorious. Victory, however, does not mean decimation of the tiger or defeat of the people. It is instead a peace pact between the tiger and the people, which stipulates that the forest belongs to both.

The myth of Bon Bibi was born hundreds of years ago but it has people in thrall even today. She has become a part of the local identity as a protector, a dispenser of justice, and the ultimate recourse in times of need. Bon Bibi shields tigers and humans from a hostile environment and from the hostility of outsiders who want to plunder the resource-rich region in the name of tourism and development. She helps people rationalise the harsh choices they have to make on earning a livelihood and staying alive, and builds a moral responsibility into their interactions with the world around them.

As we see in the story of Bon Bibi, human beings, animals, trees, plants, and the sky and seas are all inhabitants of the same world. Nature is not framed as the “other” as is being done today, both in conversations around development and conservation. It is bound in a web of relationships with the human species, as mother, wife, brother, and sister and also as a powerful divine elder endowed with superhuman powers.

Among the Khoisan of South Africa, the human race is believed to come from the praying mantis, which was the first living creature on earth. Certain Mesoamerican traditions talk about *nahual*—a state of being where every human has an animal double. A common motif found in cultures around the world is the animal consort; the Gaelic folk tales of Scotland have stories about seals who can take the shape of humans and have human families, and in North America there are stories about deer turning into men to marry beautiful women and also of men turning into deer to marry does.

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Trees are imagined as a connection between heaven and earth, like the Yggdrasil in Norse mythology. The Kalpavriksha in Indian mythology represents nature itself as an inexhaustible source of wealth and prosperity. Sacred groves have presiding goddesses such as Waghjai and Brahmanimaya among others, in the Konkan region. The Lamet from Northern Laos believe there is a common life-giving principle that is shared by humans and rice plants.

Trees and animals fall prey to the same emotions as human beings. For example, there is a myth that says the Parijata tree was born as a beautiful princess. She fell in love with the sun god Surya, who at first promised her a life of happiness but soon abandoned her for his home in the sky. The young princess died heartbroken. She was cremated and from her ashes grew a tree with drooping branches whose flowers have deep orange hearts and cannot bear the sight of the sun.

Read Meaning into These Stories

By personifying trees, vesting huge power in the elements, creating divinities out of fire, mountains, and oceans, what do these stories want to tell us? They trace the early animistic origins of humankind, and they lay open the ideas that human beings dredged up to understand the nature of the universe. For many, the stories are a valuable national heritage that needs protecting. For others, they represent a set of fantastic bedtime tales.

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There is a need to find many meanings in these stories because they are open ended, they exist in multiple versions, and they deal with problems that are rooted in local geographies and cultural contexts. The stories bring home the impermanence of things around us and the need for balance. They also vividly illustrate how all actions have consequences. The Mesopotamian epic saga of Gilgamesh, for instance, clearly links the destruction of cedar forests with the death of Gilgamesh’s closest friend. It tells us how a great king hailed for his heroic deeds was blind to the destruction he brought about until the gods decided to compensate for the loss of the forest with the life of his friend.

Myths and folk tales have helped people make meaning out of their existence. They are not glib morality tales but stories that create spaces for conversations around the big questions that matter—about life, love, responsibility, power, and glory. Karen Armstrong (2006), who writes on comparative religion and mythology, believes that mythology points to what is timeless in human existence, “helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality”.

The stories also reflect a complex worldview where [all things, animate and inanimate, have agency](#). This gives everyone a point of view and the world is a place where multiple perspectives reside together, which is useful when arguing about the need for oceans and rivers to have rights, or when raising public opinion against over-mining or over-fishing. That all cultures have similar stories also helps people find a common language to talk about the environment.

The Stories and Policy Making

There have been recommendations on the need to make policy frameworks more inclusive of indigenous narratives. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel report, also known as the Madhav Gadgil report, suggests that stories do help change the way people think. In the Western Ghats, where diversity has been in steady decline, the report found that many conservation practices that are found in local myths and folk tales continue to effectively protect many elements of biodiversity to this day.

The report points out that many such age-old practices are unfortunately under threat because of policies that exclude the people of the region from the process of conservation and environment protection. One of the many examples it cites is that of the Soliga tribe in the Biligirirangana Hills and Tiger Reserve in Karnataka. The tribal community were hunter-gatherers to begin with and in later years took up farming on the edges of the forest. When this area was declared a wildlife sanctuary, the Soligas had to abandon their old ways.

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They then turned to other sources of livelihood and with the help of a few non-governmental organisations, began gathering honey and medicinal plants from the forest. However, a new forest department rule has forced them into destitution, the report states, because they are no longer allowed to market the forest produce. For the Soligas, this is a devastating blow, especially given that they have been looking after the forest all these years and that it is through their efforts that one of the largest sacred groves in the region has been protected.

Alienating the people who have protected the environment all these years and whose identities are linked to the rivers and the trees around them is not only unfair but also short sighted. Very few will disagree with the statement that nothing will change on the ground without the participation of local communities. No amount of target setting or funding breakthroughs can create lasting, impactful change.

However, there are also dangers in using the old narratives. It means ascribing logic and rationality to stories that possess neither. It also asks for a greater understanding of the rituals of faith and religious belief systems, which could open up a rather messy can of worms.

The predicament is best illustrated [by an ongoing case in the US state of Pennsylvania](#). A group of nuns, who have been called green nuns in the media but belong to a small order called the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, are fighting against the Federal Energy

Regulatory Commission (FERC) to keep their land safe from a 295-kilometre gas pipeline. The pipeline will use fracking to draw gas and the Adorers, an order of 2,000 nuns across the world, have said that this is an assault on their religious beliefs. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, a spokesperson said they “believe in the sustenance of all creation” and the pipeline violates that principle.

Their stand presents a difficult situation. Climate change and ecological devastation are also difficult issues and it is only in uncomfortable situations such as the one that the green nuns have initiated that there is a chance for meaningful conversations and change.

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