

# Chapter 26

## From the Environmentalism of the Poor and the Indigenous Toward Decolonial Environmental Justice



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Academic articles and textbook on origins of environmental justice and evolution of environmentalism describe the three main varieties of environmentalism:<sup>1</sup> the cult of wilderness, the gospel of eco-efficiency and the environmentalism of the poor (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997). Of these three, the term “environmentalism of the poor” was analyzed and popularized by Joan Martinez-Alier and Ramachandra Guha, who started using the phrase since their first meeting in 1988 in Bangalore, India (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Born within the discipline of social history, the term centers on social justice, including claims to recognition and participation, builds on the premise that the fights for human rights and environment are inseparable (Martinez-Alier, 2002, p. 514). It refers to the multiple environmental justice movements where the impoverished, marginalized, and Indigenous communities resist

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<sup>1</sup>This is not to say that there are no other concepts to understand different forms of environmental struggles in different parts of the world: resigned activism to denote China’s quiet environmentalism (Lora-Wainwright, 2017), subaltern environmentalism in the United States (Egan, 2002; Simonian & Pulido, 1996), bourgeois environmentalism that analyzes the role of the heterogenous middle class as actors of environmental justice concerns in India (Baviskar & Ray, 2011; Mawdsley et al., 2009), among others.

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against state and businesses carrying out projects of resource extraction, waste disposal, and big infrastructure.

However, with mounting evidence of the disproportional impacts of environmental injustices on Indigenous communities around the world, recent writings by Joan Martinez-Alier incorporated a more comprehensive phrasing of the concept, referring to it as environmentalism of the poor and the Indigenous (Martinez-Alier et al., 2016).

Both environmentalism of the poor and the Indigenous and environmental justice are frameworks to understand unjust and unequal distribution of environmental benefits and harms, more often than not, at the expense of historically subaltern communities, such as Indigenous, Women, Peasants, Romani, African and Latin American people. In this regard, the Atlas of Environmental Justice Movements – the EJAtlas – was a tool cocreated with activist–academic collaboration to document and study such movements against socio-environmental injustices.

Mapping such struggles is certainly a first step toward understanding movements against socio-environmental injustices. But is it enough? In this chapter, further, we push forward the decolonial understanding of environmental justice research and what it entails. We do so by providing insights from India and the Arctic as two examples of the Global South. According to de Sousa Santos (2016, pp. 18–19), the South is not a geographical definition but “*rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level... and speaks of a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations...*”. This is the definition we follow throughout this chapter.

## 26.1 Our Positionalities

Brototi grew up as an expatriate Bengali Hindu in the state of Jharkhand, from an upper caste, middle class family and currently lives as a precarious person of color in Europe. Ksenija’s lived reality is a “label” as Eastern European, as her home country, Croatia, is situated at the periphery of the Western European economic core (Roncevic, 2002) and subordinate by Western way of being, thinking, and knowing (de Sousa Santos, 2016). At the time of writing this chapter, we were both young immigrant women based in Barcelona and navigating between the multiple identities, languages, ideas, and positionalities (Smith, 2012). By the time it will be published, though we would be in Vienna and Helsinki, respectively, pursuing fixed-term post-doc positions. We offer the analytical and empirical insights in this chapter as junior foreign scholars navigating these multiple social relations and ideological agendas, which is often challenging, sometimes contradictory but always profoundly fulfilling.

## 26.2 New Directions in Environmental Justice Scholarship: Engagement with Decoloniality

In recent years, there has been a distinct interest in environmental justice scholarship to recognize and analyze multiple forms and phases of injustices (Malin & Ryder, 2018). The four pillars of critical environmental justice scholarship as proposed by Pellow (2016) include intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), multi-scalarity, anti-authoritarianism, and indispensability, aims to provide a framework to do so. Furthermore, the hegemonic theories of Western environmental justice scholarship have been challenged by proposing newer ones from the margins as an important intent to resist continuous coloniality (Quijano, 2007) of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2002; Parra Romero, 2016). For example, in Central America, resistances are not only against climate injustices but also against violence of patriarchy and coloniality. In India, the resistances of the marginalized Indigenous and Dalit communities are manifestations of a longer struggle against both external and internal colonialism and/or caste-based discrimination (Martinez-Alier & Roy, 2019). Similarly, the working class, Indigenous population and Romani people have been the racial subjects of dispossession, colonialism, and domination within Europe and can be understood as the subalterns in the North. This in no way diminishes overseas slavery and exploitation in the majority world (Latin America, Africa, and Asia) but rather recognizes the continuous racial othering and domination of some Europeans by other Europeans as well (Robinson, 2000).

Yet, there remains a lack of meaningful engagement with complexities of theories and experiences of environmental injustices as well as engagement with decolonial thought in environmental justice scholarship across geographies (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2018). A welcomed exception in recent years has been scholarship from South America, which has been putting forward the need of decolonial environmental justice by examining intercultural communication (Escobar, 2011; Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018), the politics of ontology (Blaser, 2013; Escobar, 2016), and decolonization of knowledges and acceptance of multiple worldviews (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). This scholarship is establishing an emerging decolonial thinking, which is crucial when conducting research on environmental conflicts and injustices.

The main arguments revolve around colonial imposition as a violent way of invading the earth, subjugating lands, humans, and non-humans to maintain colonial relations in the so-called “post-colonial” present (Escobar, 2011; Quijano, 2007). A colonial worldview that invented a hierarchy between races and different lands of the globe transposing Western ideas and approaches in case studies of Global South without understanding the context and the multiple marginalities that communities face causes a “coloniality of justice” (Álvarez & Coolsaet, 2018; Ferdinand, 2019). Imposition of such concepts and frameworks without contextualization, even if it is well-intended, could be counterproductive and lead to further inequalities and injustices (Mawdsley et al., 2009). That is to say, diverse subaltern environmental struggles must be acknowledged (Pulido & De Lara, 2018).

This is explained using the concepts of the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2008). A decolonial “switch” against such colonial assumptions of environmental justice combines with critical thinking about race, gender, and class as a contribution to the radical epistemological traditions (Pulido & De Lara, 2018) against the dominant Western World-System (Grosfoguel & Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002).

This “switch” toward decolonizing environmental justice aims to explore other ways of understanding human–nature relationships, different methodologies involved, processes of resistances, and acknowledgment of multiple lived experiences and worldviews. Because colonial silence separates environmental and colonial thinking and excludes a whole swath of people, a decolonial environmental justice recognizes people’s need for justice based on historical and structural injustices related to environment, but functioning within a broader structure of colonialism, racism, casteism, communalism, and patriarchy (Sultana, 2020; Sultana & Loftus, 2012).

The long-lasting history of colonial environmental extraction against communities’ well-being is opposed by people who are at the core of social, environmental, and cultural injustices in different geographies and, who call for the decolonization (Escobar, 2008; Maldonado-Torres, 2008) of socio-ecological distribution conflicts (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Temper, 2019), with or without using those words. Their opposition to the continuous domination of modern, colonial, capitalist, and extractive tendencies (Escobar, 2001; Grosfoguel & Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002; Svampa, 2015), which stem from racial/ethnic marginalization, poverty, gendered discrimination, ageism, rural/urban divides, and many other dynamics, are at the heart of many motivations for resistance against environmental injustices (Kojola & Pellow, 2020).

The domination of Western cultural imaginaries through development and extractive logics explains social and environmental injustices as arising from the project of modernity and economic growth. The decolonization of knowledge, culture, and social relations is one of the key challenges for overcoming the history of oppression and marginalization in development and contributes to decolonizing structures, relations, and ways of being (Grosfoguel & Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002). Scholars must play a role in decolonizing environmental injustices through a commitment to engage with the structural and historical forces that create marginalization and exclusion in the use of natural resources and territories (Mar & Edmonds, 2010).

Decolonial environmental justice addresses socio-cultural environmental dimensions and responsibilities of a given place, such as traditional knowledge (*knowing*), spirituality, identities (*being*), and different ways of struggles (*transformative power*) (Grosfoguel & Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002). Many conflicts are experienced with extractive industries such as mining, infrastructure, and intensive agriculture as they involve enormous physical transformation of traditional landscapes, leaving behind the intangible way of feeling about the environment, being part of the environment and knowing about the environment. As Fernández-Giménez and Arturo (2015) and Parra Romero (2016) argue, decolonial shift in the analysis of

environmental conflicts includes cultural, economic, and political dynamics as continuous colonial heredities.

In the rest of the chapter, we provide two examples of how and why decolonizing environmental justice is relevant for the Global South, providing evidence from Indigenous communities in India and the Arctic. We finally conclude with some potential research directions toward decolonial environmental justice.

### 26.3 Indian Adivasi Thinking

The Indigenous population of India, officially called “Scheduled Tribes,” comprises more than 700 different communities. According to the last census data in 2011, 8.6% of India’s total population (more than 100 million people) are made up of *adivasis*, literally translated as first inhabitants or original dwellers, and are the world’s largest population of Indigenous people (Faizi & Nair, 2016). There are different sets of laws depending on the geographical location of the communities in peninsular India or north-eastern India, as fifth and sixth schedules respectively. According to the EJAtlas, more than half of the environmental justice movements in India (57%) have Indigenous people mobilizing, and estimates show that more than 40% of the people affected or displaced as a result of ecological distribution conflicts are *adivasis* (Shrivastava & Kothari, 2012).

Many of the early grassroot resistance to colonial rule in India such as the *Santhal* revolt of 1855 had clear environmental undertones. If we understand environmentalism of the poor and the Indigenous as movements of people fighting for issues beyond environmental safeguard, but protection of a way of life, culture and traditions, and livelihoods, it would not be too much a stretch to see the early *adivasi* resistances much different from present-day environment of the poor. Similarly, although Birsa Munda is remembered as a tribal hero for the freedom fight against colonialism in the late 1800s, in today’s context, his fight for the safeguard of the forests and their resources, as well as Indigenous autonomy over those forests and resources, can be understood also from the lens of environmental justice struggles. Many Indigenous struggles today remember and invoke Birsa’s bravery and persistence of fighting against extraction and injustices.

Yet, despite such a rich tradition of fighting for socio-ecological equality, *adivasi* thinkers are quite marginalized, both in India and globally. In recent years, young *adivasi* leaders are critical of this position that they are historically put in, “as bodies for the protests, and not minds for the movement” (interview with JK). According to Jacinta Kerketta, an Indigenous poet, journalist, and social activist from the central Indian state of Jharkhand, and belonging to the *Oraon* tribe, this is a form of epistemological (knowing) injustice (as she explains in her words): “*The first fundamental thing to question is this very concept of how one individual or a group of individuals can claim to ‘develop’ another individual or society. Development for me implies a life of dignity. And that necessarily implies respect and understanding of the Indigenous way of life. You can’t develop someone if you consider yourself*

*superior to them, that only leads to oppression.*” Jacinta has grown up witnessing and participating in the struggle of the vast adivasi society to preserve their land, forests, rivers, languages, and heritage and culture, which she expresses in her poetry.

Her concerns and frustrations are neither new nor surprising. It resonates completely with the claims of Archana Soreng (AS), who is an Indigenous activist and researcher from the *Khadia adivasi* community in the Eastern Indian state of Odisha, and one of the seven members of the UN Secretary General’s Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. She says it is crucial for incorporation of Indigenous practices and worldviews for issues of biodiversity conservation and climate justice, since for centuries, Indigenous communities have remained the responsible stewards for biodiversity protection, yet they have very little decision-making power, and instead have been faced with forcible displacement and nonconsensual relocation due to large-scale mining and infrastructure projects by states and private corporations (interview with AS).

## 26.4 Resistance to Coloniality In and Around the Arctic

The Arctic is a colonized territory (Cameron, 2012; Josephson, 2014; Kuokkanen, 2019; Stuhl, 2016) and so are livelihoods, cultures, traditions, languages, and identities of Indigenous peoples. In that regard, Indigenous lands and culture have been fragmented by oil fields, wind-power parks, and mining projects, among others (Naykanchina, 2012). Extractive and industrial activities on traditional Indigenous Arctic lands are both the consequence of colonization including rising global commodity extraction frontiers (Hanaček et al., 2022; John, 2016; Naykanchina, 2012; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009). Extractive and industrial colonization of the Arctic are commonly perceived as justified, because states acquire the land and hand it for extractive and industrial purposes (Gritsenko, 2018; Muller-Wille, 1987). Yet, these activities jeopardize and, therefore, continue to marginalize Indigenous people, their lands, identities, and worldviews (Lassila, 2020).

In the process, there is also discrimination and racial prejudice against Indigenous people of the Circumpolar North, which continue to persist in both the private and public sectors in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Russian Federation, Canada, and the United States (Kumpula et al., 2011). The prejudice constrains the opportunities and the rights of people to express their own concerns regarding cultural identity and their colonized lands. This, for example, includes recognizing reindeer herders’ use and management of grazing land by identifying cultural practices for Indigenous land use (Naykanchina, 2012). However, marginalization and oppression of Indigenous herders are common when the herders do not follow “modern” industrial development logic, or when they prioritize traditional cultural values and worldviews (Huntington, 2016; Nuttall, 1998). The state ignores the fact that these activities, identities, and human nature relationships are the foundation of local economies and livelihoods (Naykanchina, 2012).

As of January 2022, there are 1913 cases in the EJAtlas, which reports loss of traditional knowledge, practices, and cultures as one of the social impacts of divergent extractive projects around the world. Given the fact that Indigenous peoples of the Arctic and beyond call for the need of socio-cultural dimensions in environmental questions, and that is, the spiritual foundations of their cultural identities along their (physical) lands (Dorough, 2014). Thus, cultures related to the environment are fundamental in environmental conflicts and injustices studies, which deepen in power relations and coloniality (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). By focusing on stories of those on the frontline is important to envision decolonial justice and sustainable future paths (Wiebe, 2019) As Indigenous people put it in the “Our Cultures Our Rights” video for the Cultural Survival (2017) movement, which advocates for Indigenous peoples’ rights and supports Indigenous communities’ self-determination, cultures, and political resilience:

We draw upon knowledge given to us by our ancestors to be in spiritual relationship with Mother Earth and all living things, and to appropriately honor and steward the land. We protect, defend, resist, renew with our art and traditions.

Similarly, Indigenous Buryat<sup>2</sup> woman explains in an interview for the Cultural Survival (2019):

I come from the Buryat Peoples who have lived in Siberia for millennia, on both sides of Lake Baikal, the deepest and largest fresh-water lake. My grandmother would tell me stories which encapsulated the wisdom of our ancestors and have been passed down for generations. I participated in our traditional ceremonies. I still recall the fire, the chants, and the prayers of the women in my community. I grew up with a deep sense of understanding of our lifeways and belongingness to the land, to my people, and a deep love for my culture. It was not until I was 24 when I first encountered the term ‘Indigenous Peoples’. It took leaving and living far away to understand the degree of both external and internalized oppression, colonization, and paralysis that my people and other Indigenous Peoples in Russia currently face.

The above stated words by Indigenous peoples bring into focus spiritual and identity relationships as an important angle in decolonial environmental justice research, precisely because traditional cultural significance of the people and the environment in different places strongly oppose to the continuous domination of colonial relations embedded in extractive and industrial tendencies (Escobar, 2008; Maldonado-Torres, 2008). What is important to mention, however, is that these places and stories of marginalization must be seen as spaces of resistance (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

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<sup>2</sup>Buryat, northernmost of the major Mongol people, living south and east of Lake Baikal. By the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), their land was ceded by China to the Russian Empire, as an arrangement between the two empires (Chen, 1966); (“Buryat.” Encyclopaedia Britannica, December 5, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buryat>. Accessed 12 January 2022).



## 26.5 Conclusion and Prospects for Further Research

In this chapter, we have argued that there is an urgent need for decolonial environmental justice research both theoretically and methodologically. We claim that a future research agenda on environmental justice must include multiple drivers and forms of oppression across relevant historical and contemporary social contexts that intersect to control and dominate nature and the communities on the frontline while simultaneously privileging powerful actors in environmental distribution conflicts.

Methodologically, this research agenda must also explore pedagogical aspects for decolonial research. This is crucial for real transformations toward sustainability, and can be achieved when the answers and decisions come *from* the South itself – telling their own stories and theorizing as well as implementing their own alternatives to colonial extractivism, patriarchy, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression.

It is vital to engage and advance different forms of intersectional, interdisciplinary, and international decolonial and feminist inquiries to address ongoing socio-ecological crises. We conclude that the future path of critical political ecology must be paved by engaging with and valuing the scholarship that advances complexities of power, relational privileges, intersectional politics, and epistemological differences by fostering decolonized environmental politics, climate activism, and alliances and solidarities with Indigenous peoples (Sultana, 2020), including engagements with (inter)colonialism. We argued in this chapter that embracing decoloniality in environmental justice research is the way to go about it.

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