Infinite Reservoir of Agency

Abhayraj Naik

Amidst the lush rice fields of Andhra Pradesh, Abhayraj Naik reflects in an experiential essay on the interconnectedness between humans and the land, slipping through the cracks of urbanization, climate change, and agrarian crises. Naik observes a resilient "knowing" among farming communities: a deep, spiritual bond with the earth, expressed in their rituals, festivals, and resistance against ecological destruction. His visit to his ancestral home near Udupi rekindles this connection, revealing both the beauty of interspecies kinship and the shadows of historical injustices. The re-discovery of this rootedness unlocks an "infinite reservoir of agency" with the potential to reclaim environmental justice and rebuild a regenerative world.

The rice has been growing well. Like the famous Hindi film song from the 1960s goes, the land is gifting us gold, diamonds, and pearls through the food it produces. My current home, a modest university-provided fifth-floor apartment in a sleepy rural area in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, is surrounded these days by water-soaked lush green fields.

Herds of slow-moving domestic water buffalo, as well as visiting egrets and herons from the nearby Pulicat Lake, which is India's second-largest saltwater lagoon, add to the idyllic beauty of the rural countryside here.

Caption: Rice fields at sunset time in Tirupati district of Andhra Pradesh

The unrelenting daytime sun, however, makes the work of growing rice an arduous task. When I see men and women from the farming villages working in the fields, bent down for long hours to work with the soil and the young rice seedlings in the scorching heat, I marvel at their tenacity and endurance. Barefoot, with the standing water in the fields extending over their ankles, their hands tend to the earth and the plants. It is deep, slow, intentional, and backbreaking work. There is a quality of reverence and sacrifice in such intense bodily work to produce food. Gandhiji had famously advocated for sharirshrama,[1] bodily labor, as both a necessary sacrifice and a path to salvation for all.

The rice-farming will not continue for many more years here. Commercial residential development projects (such as the apartments in which I'm staying) and massive infrastructural projects (such as the industrial estate that contains the elite private university where I teach) have an enormous appetite for peri-urban land, including these rice fields. Heatwaves, cyclones, and other extreme weather events have become more frequent, and farming is an increasingly risky proposition. Many young people are no longer interested in farming and living in the villages, especially in the face of mounting challenges. Prospects of an easier and more secure life with greater opportunities in the big cities are tempting to many.

A serious agrarian crisis has been underway for a long time in India. The changing climate, poor market linkages, inadequate governmental support, and extractive neoliberal policies and predatory corporations that colonize agricultural land and sacrifice rural lifeworlds—all of these have taken a serious toll on farming communities across the country. Farmer suicides and the deeper agrarian crisis that they are symptomatic of, as meticulously documented by the eminent journalist P. Sainath,[2] are a recurring long-term manufactured phenomenon in India. Far away from the crises-ridden fields and villages, in state capitals and in New Delhi, duplicitous politicians distort the grim reality of the country's developmental story with fake stories of agricultural innovation, doubling of farmer incomes, rising gross domestic product, and India Shining.

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1 Tridip Suhrud, "Thinking with Hands: Work as Freedom for Gandhi", The India Forum, January 18, 2022

2 P. Sainath, "Agriculture in the age of inequality", People's Archive of Rural India, March 4, 2025

Despite all of this, the farmers around where I live now unmistakably know and are rooted to their place in the world. They have a connection with the land and with the life-giving sacredness of the earth that is missing in the profane ruins of our urban modernities. I have seen this same kind of knowing in the dignified resistances of agricultural and pastoralist communities displaced by infrastructure projects,[3] in the fearless protests of fishing communities even as they are beaten and imprisoned by violent state forces intent on promoting controversial coastal nuclear energy projects,[4] in the resilient leadership of Dalit communities that refuse to be poisoned by the toxic wastes of elite urban communities,[5] and in the interspecies connections between women and the trees that they worship and protect.[6]

It is a knowing that refuses complicity and silence in response to a diseased modernity's harmful habits, practices, and processes. And it is this knowing of one's place in the world that is going to allow us to properly reclaim our agency in a world of climate anxiety, ecological breakdown, runaway technological change, and increasing identity-based violence and conflict.

Caption: Women in Rishikesh offer prayers to a tree with the Ganges river flowing in the background

3 Amrit Mahal Kaval Conservation and Struggle Committee, "Beerappa's Angst" (39 min.), 2015

4 Amirtharaj Stephen, "Coast Wars: The uprising against the Koodankulam nuclear power project", The Caravan, June 1, 2013

5 Waste and the City (28:41 min.), 2025, https://www.teepoi.com/waste-and-the-city

6 Vandana Shiva, "The Tree Saviors of Chipko Andolan: A Woman-led Movement in India", Kosmos, vol. 20, issue 3, 2020

It is difficult to describe exactly how this quality of knowing shows up in these farming communities around me, but I sense its presence in many of their patient expressions, in the ways that many of them dress and walk and talk in balance with the rhythm of the land and the seasons, and in the ways that they relate with their livestock, their crops, and their lands. It is present in their cultures of food, their festivals, and their songs and dances. It is a knowing that shows itself in the small shrines in the fields that honour snake deities and remember the original inhabitants and protectors of the land, long before we came here.

I felt this kind of connection to knowing my own place in the world when four years back, along with my mother, I visited my ancestral home in a small village near Udupi on the south-west coastline of India. My maternal grandparents and great-grandparents had lived there many decades ago, and my widowed aunt has been living there and maintaining the house and the surrounding fields for the past many years. Rice crop, coconut and arecanut trees, and a variety of other fruiting trees and flowering plants grow in the lands around the house.

The house was built with large quantities of wood from jackfruit trees that were perhaps harvested locally. It is one of those large traditional *zamindar* (landowner) houses with a tiled roof, wooden ceilings, red oxide floors, and a long veranda with elegant wooden pillars at the front of the house. There are two large rooms on either side of the veranda. Two more rooms in the upper floor are reached through a narrow and steep flight of wooden steps from a small inner hall with an ancient steel safe. The small hall itself is connected to two bedrooms, one on either side. The house includes a long communal room near the back for shared meals, an adjoining darkened kitchen with wood-burning earthen stoves and an ancient attic, an old-fashioned common bathroom with water heated by a wood-burning fire below a big copper vessel, and a couple of more recently installed western water closet toilets. An adjoining wing, built around a front courtyard with a deep water well and a raised stone structure specifically meant for growing the sacred *tulsi* (holy basil) plant, includes cattle sheds and a locked room devoted to ancestors. Some distance away from the main house there is another small shrine-like locked

structure devoted exclusively to ancestral spirits.

I had faint memories of visiting this family house a few times as a child with my parents and other relatives from Bengaluru city. On this visit with my mother in November 2021, however, I experienced something very different that had never happened before. The numbness and sadness that had been forming from the shock of the Covid pandemic instantly lifted. For perhaps the very first time in my life, I felt a deep connection to the land on which I stood. I felt deeply connected to my ancestors, to the plants and animals and spirits that dwelled on those lands, and to the beautiful Arabian Sea and the majestic Western Ghat mountains that flanked that land on either side.

Over the course of a few days spent there, each meal felt like a ceremonial celebration of the world's aliveness, and everyday words and actions were imbued with special meaning and significance. Climbing a tree, plucking fruit and collecting flowers, helping with the cooking of the food, drawing water from the well, waking up to sounds of peacocks, chasing away monkeys that had come for the fruit, spotting a rare toucan in the trees, trekking through neighboring woods, visiting the nearby family shrine and listening to stories of ancestral heroes and heroines...

Suddenly, there was a deep relationality and spiritual specialness to everything! Far from the din of urban life and the chains of techno-connectedness, I felt time slow down, and then, quite impossibly, spiral into itself. I remember that the earth felt very thin then, with worlds and times and lives coming together and connecting in mysterious ways that I still don't have words for. There was a profound aliveness from different ages, a clear remembrance of my integral connection with all life around me, and a renewed sense of stewarding something precious through my life and breath. An infinite reservoir of agency.

And in that moment of becoming there were the shadows and hauntings as well. Spectral traces of patriarchal violence, feudal and caste inequities, colonial and postcolonial dispossessions, familial feuds, my own woundedness and strained relationships with loved ones. The sadness of remembering that we lost many lives, human and more-than-human, due to greed and the conceit of difference.

Tremors of fear about the unfolding climate breakdown. Knowing my place in the world brought with it a conviction of the singular importance of staying with the trouble and repairing the damage that we humans have wrought upon this sacred world and on ourselves. An irrepressible demand from the earth and from life itself for justice, rematriation, remembrance, and regeneration had lodged itself deeply into my heart and soul.

Caption: Tulsi plant and well in courtyard of author's ancestral home near Udupi

As Joanna Macy, the dear recently-departed root teacher of the Work That Reconnects, reminds us: *"[w]hen we dare to face the cruel social and ecological realities we have been accustomed to, courage is born and powers within us are liberated to reimagine and even, perhaps one day, rebuild a world."*[7] Knowing one's place in the world creates courage and liberates these powers within us to reimagine and rebuild the world.

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7 Joanna Macy, "Entering the Bardo", Emergence Magazine, July 20, 2020

There is an infinite reservoir of agency waiting within us and in our sacred connection with each other and with the world we are blessed to be alive in. What new and regenerative laws, policies, institutions, and systems might we design and implement with this kind of agency propelling us forward?

Remember the first oceanic being that ventured bravely forward from the primordial waters onto unknown lands. Courage, curiosity, conviction, and fulfilment of an evolutionary agency. Remember who you are. A new world awaits us.

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