

“From climate and environmental justice in India to indigenous rights in Sápmi”

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Narratives and stories are powerful things. We use them in our everyday life, we use them professionally whether in academia, politics, business, or in the civil society. They can be used to create meaning and context, to analyze complexities or to raise awareness and push for change by creating alternative futures. My own story, as all narratives, is constantly evolving and its meaning often created in retrospect. Some components have nonetheless been relatively fixed and have played a significant part as my journey has slowly unfolded: a curious student has become an equally curious researcher and lecturer. Justice and fairness are two examples of values that have always remained significant and which have in one way or another defined my interests and path. Even today, few things provoke me as much as injustice or ill treatment.

Where did it all start, the beginning of where I am today? Already in high school I developed a particular interest in environmental justice, environmental degradation, and sustainability. I soon realized that the key to environmental degradation and hence to environmental problems, injustices, and loss of both ecosystems and livelihoods is more than anything a product of social and political processes. Consequently, I enrolled in political science at the university with a “green” conviction, a choice I have never regretted. The study of political science, together with a range of courses in, for example, ecology, geography, sociology, and law, gave me a platform from which to address the questions that really lay close to my heart, such as natural resource management, environmental governance, and climate change. As a master’s student I had the good fortune to be able to travel to Gujarat, India, to



work together with rural communities. My thesis work sought to understand how adaptation to climate extremes was conditioned by political and social structures, rather than by mere access to technologies and aid. I found that certain social constructions, based on gender, class, and caste, effectively limited individuals' action opportunities with the most tangible consequences. While emergency centres were being built, lives were nevertheless being lost. It was not practical access to shelters that was the major issue, but access of the socio-political kind. Global environmental change, and meeting face to face those suffering its most severe consequences, had never before been so real to me.

On my return I applied for positions and projects related to the work I had done on climate adaptation in India, but without much luck. In 2008, when I accepted the offer to become a PhD student in Political Science at Umeå University, in a project on climate impacts and adaptation in reindeer herding, I thought my story was taking a definitive new turn. Except it did not, not really. Even though the contexts were worlds apart, many experiences were in fact similar. I was once again reminded of the significance of power and how relations are (unequally) structured. Once more, it became obvious how differentiated the impacts of global environmental change processes are and how they tend to aggravate already existing imbalances. Whether a Sami reindeer herder or a rural farmer in India, the abilities to deal with externally induced change and extreme events is profoundly dependent on the socio-political context in which they are embedded, how relationships are structured and how rights to participate, influence, and have a say in matters impacting their lives are formulated and can be realised. In other words, being able to adapt has much to do with how governance is structured and plays out. In the current situation in Sweden, governance structures are not working favourably for the position of Sami reindeer herders. Their rights are in many aspects violated. This was one of the key conclusions from my PhD thesis.

After six years of working in the field of reindeer herding, I of course bring with me many other lessons and insights. In a way, the world now feels both smaller and larger. I did not need to go to India to work with issues that are meaningful. Much research can be done on topics many people in the Baltic region have limited knowledge about. One of the most valuable experiences has been my close collaboration with the Vilhelmina North reindeer herding community in Västerbotten County. Even though I have always been inclined to collaborative forms of research, I am now even more convinced that collaborating throughout the research process is invaluable for making research worthwhile and useful and for developing an understanding of the challenges confronting the people whose lives we take an interest in.

After defending my PhD I have started yet another chapter of my story. I have continued working with Sami and indigenous rights, examining self-determination, land, and cultural rights. The more I work with these issues, the more I realise that Sweden has a long way to go before our image as human rights defender is matched by government action on Sami indigenous people. Most Swedes know little about Sápmi and the Sami people, or what it means to be a people living as a minority among a majority society. They know little of Sami rights and what struggles play out every day in protecting these rights. Paradoxically, with an increasing interest in Sápmi or the Sami traditional homeland, its natural resources, lands, and the Sami culture, these challenges are becoming greater rather than mitigated. This was showcased, when Umeå was appointed European Cultural Capital in 2014, largely thanks to the Sami presence. However, the Sami cultural expressions of the official inauguration were followed by a fierce and at times racist debate. Many of Umeå's locals questioned what the Sami had to do with Umeå, ignorant of the fact that Umeå lies right in Sápmi.

This short text and introductory profile on my research background and current interest tells not only my own story, but also another that I see unfolding but which is rarely publicly acknowledged. It shows that while worlds apart, worlds can also be close together. It demonstrates the massive challenge before us, right here at home too, if we are to move towards more just and fair development. In my role as researcher, I find that my personal conviction and passion are among my greatest capital. Being passionate about what we do in research, and aware of why we do it, is not at odds with doing good research. On the contrary, if we seek out the fixed signifiers in our own stories, perhaps we thereby can contribute to the meaning-making of grander narratives as well.

