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Debajyoti Biswas
John C. Ryan *Editors*

Environmental Humanities in India

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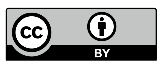

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Chapter 1
Environmental Humanities in India: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Debajyoti Biswas

Abstract The Environmental Humanities, or EH, is a multifaceted, relatively new, and swiftly evolving field of scholarship that integrates the theories and approaches of various disciplines—from anthropology, art, communications, cultural studies, philosophy and ecology to history, literature, media, music, performance, politics, sociology, theology and theatre. Practitioners of this markedly integrative field aim to address and, even, confront today's urgent ecological and cultural challenges, namely climate change, urban sustainability, biodiversity conservation, species decline, energy policy, the exigencies of the Anthropocene, environmental activism and Indigenous peoples' justice. Recent developments in the Environmental Humanities foreground its topicality as scholar-activists-artists from a wide range of disciplines turn increasingly to human-nature relational issues in the Anthropocene epoch. As a discrete field, EH has emerged principally from North American, European and Australian academic institutions and, more specifically, from English, history, geography and anthropology departments. Although the Environmental Humanities has been relatively slow to gain traction in South Asia, the overall momentum towards transdisciplinary approaches to ecology and sustainability is intensifying in India. This contributed volume highlights current research in the Environmental Humanities in India through four thematic sections: (i) Indigenous Perspectives: Conservation, Spirituality and Language; (ii) Theoretical Grounding: Education, Law and Ethics; (iii) Literary Formulations: Memoir, Parable and Storyworlds; (iv) Popular Narratives: Myth, Travel and Music.

Keywords Animal studies · Ecocriticism · Ecomedia studies · Environmental humanities · India · Plant studies · Postcolonial critique · Sustainability discourse · Transdisciplinary ecological research

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1.1 Introduction

In the brief trajectory of Environmental Humanities (EH), all works begin by addressing the effect of human activity on ecology either in the European or the American context. Since the locus of discussion is environmental degradation emanating from the increase in pollutants in the biosphere, its remedy is also sought in the deceleration and retardation of the causes as understood from the Western gaze. Theorising Ecocriticism, an important aspect of EH, William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" posits the issue of ecological crisis in the following words: "The problem now…is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it, the human community…the conceptual and the practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural- can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere" (Rueckert, 1978, 73). Rueckert was conscious of the apparent absurdity of handling a planetary crisis with literary tools, therefore he proposed the role of ecological vision through the medium of rhetoric in creative literature, which could help in articulating ecological concerns. By using the metaphor of the sun, Rueckert explains the function of poets and poetry as an immense source of vitality and energy that could be used by mankind to stymie the "continued growth economy" with a "sustainable state economy" (Rueckert, 1978, 73). In much the same way Greg Garrard differentiates between "problems in ecology" and "ecological problems" (Garrard, 2012, 6) to argue that the latter is a cultural analysis of the problems that arise due to "our dealings with nature" (Garrard, 2012, 6). Garrard discusses Rachel Carson's polemical text *The Silent Spring* which has forayed into the cultural, political and economic zones of American society in particular and the neo-capitalist frontiers of the contemporary globalised world. However, Garrard limits his study to British and North American Literature. Likewise, Jonathan Bate's (Bate, 1991) *The Song of the Earth* broaches the issue of man's alienation from nature and the role of the literature in restoring that severed connection by alluding to works from the Global South. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* is limited to the inception of nature writings and the formation of American Culture. Timothy Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* begins by citing the anthropocentric journey of Western society that has been responsible for present-day climate change and global warming. Consequently, the mitigation response is also sought in Western interventionist measures. Although Clark includes in his study the erstwhile colonies and their contemporary understanding of climate change and its impact on society, he broaches the ecological issues from a postcolonial perspective as the contemporary realities and histories of these erstwhile colonies are shaped by the colonial experience. Therefore, it is not only impossible but also inconceivable to disengage the effects of colonial modernity on the postcolonial societies while discussing climate change and Anthropocene within the rubrics of EH.

1.2 EH in Postcolonial India

Eminent postcolonial Environmentalist Ramachandra Guha points out that "In the West, environmental movement stemmed from a desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats. In India, however, it arose out of the imperative of human survival" (Guha, 2014, xi–xii). Environmentalists like Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil are mainly concerned with the social dimension of environmental movements. With the introduction of Five-Year Plans, nationalisation of institutions, and liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s in postcolonial India, a series of developmental activities like the construction of dams, extraction of resources, and use of coal-based industries was on the rise. Subsequently, these activities came to be seen as anti-environment and detrimental to the poor and tribal people, thereby triggering mass movements at various places in India. Movements beginning from the 1950s (see Gadgil and Guha, 1992, 194), including Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan (and a host of other anti-dam movements, see Gadgil and Guha, 1995), came to be regarded as the beginning of Environmentalism in India. Strong voices like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Medha Patkar and Vandana Shiva emerged as leaders of non-violent resistance against environmental destruction. By resisting the rhetoric of progress and development, these activists argued in favour of a lifestyle which is eco-friendly and sustainable for the poor of the country from a postdevelopmental perspective. On the other hand, ecological thinkers from the field of humanities, and social sciences like Ghosh (2016, 2021) and Chakrabarty (2019), respectively, engage with environmental concerns by referring to the period of "great acceleration" and colonial entanglements (see Karmakar & Chetty, 2023). Swarnalatha Rangarajan while writing about Environmental ethics in *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* refers to philosophers and thinkers like Richard Routley, J. Baird Callicott, Arne Naess, Plato, Spinoza, Emerson, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold to argue that the works of these writers constitute the foundational corpus. What transpires from the discourse is that the field of EH has been shaped by a lopsided presumption of Western epistemological superiority over the Orient in addressing environmental concerns. The reason for this, as pointed out by Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano, is that the epistemic foundation of modernity was rooted in colonialism. Karen Armstrong states that Europeans "achieved a scientific revolution that gave them greater control over the environment than anybody had achieved before" (Armstrong, 2002, 142). The domination of nature by human beings and the nature/culture binary was made possible by the Western concept of nature, where nature indicated natural resources (Mignolo, 2011, 11–12). Quijano states:

> In the beginning, colonialism was a product of systematic repression, not only of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination, while at the same time, the colonisers were expropriating from the colonised their knowledge, especially in mining, agriculture, engineering, as well as their products and work. The repression fell, above all, over modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalised and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual (Quijano, 2007, 169).

Quijano further points out that Cultural Europeanisation, i.e. the European idea of conquering nature and equating it with development, became a universal cultural model to be emulated by other nations. Consequently, "the legacy of this transformation" is that nature came to be conceived as a commodity in the West and this "was a sign of progress and modernisation and at the same time a sign that other civilisations stagnated and were falling behind the West" (Mignolo, 2011, 13). This regional imbalance (Global North and South) in engaging with the concerns of EH is due to the continuum of the colonial experience and its residual postcolonial entanglement. The fundamental question is while discussing EH in erstwhile colonised nations, why do we study it only through the frame of postcoloniality? By referring to the postcolonial dimension are we not negating the possibilities of connecting to a past consciousness that homes the eco-cultural sensibility in pre-colonial societies as reflected in the cultural matrix of social practices prevalent in those societies? Ghosh in his *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) refers to the vitalist politics in ethnic worlds where the shamans like Davi Kopenawa (206) play a crucial role in connecting to the spirit of nature. Much like the Shamans, storytellers and creative writers are blessed with the power of logos. However, from an Ecocritical perspective, Ghosh laments the dearth of fictional works from India that could respond to the "great derangement." Ghosh has constantly tried to bring out the presence of uncanny effects of climate change through his fictional writings. Borrowing James Lovelock's conception of Gaia, Ghosh foregrounds the importance of shamans and storytellers who are well aware of the vitality of the earth. This vitalist movement or politics can also be witnessed in several countries including India which is referred to as "livelihood environmentalism" by Ramachandra Guha.

Therefore, we can argue that the discourse of EH can be broached in two distinct ways in a postcolonial context: one that is revivalist and deals with the relation between man and nature as existed in ethnic societies (see Chaps. 2, 3, 4 and 5); the other deals with colonial entanglements, hubris of modernity and western theories (see Chaps. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). This is to argue that both these perspectives are integral in understanding the complexity of the problem that exists in various societies and that different communities may contribute to solving this planetary crisis through their traditional knowledge systems. Obviously in real life, a one-man army (Like a *Rambo* or a *Terminator*) or a handful of people (like in *Interstellar* or *Sunshine*) saving the world all by themselves is more than a happy myth and a cruel joke. Addressing a crisis of such gargantuan magnitude needs more holistic effort and an inclusive approach where "broad cooperation at the level of collective action and common principles, with innovation and unique solutions at policy and local personal levels" (Drengson, 2008), should be encouraged. Arne Naess while explaining deep ecology stresses that interdependence underscores the "unity of all life" (Naess, 2008, 131). As a Gandhian, Naess followed the principle of non-violence in his life and work. Naess asks a pertinent question that seems to be the hallmark of the capitalist regimes across the world: "How can the poor nations eliminate the kind of poverty that has hurt the quality of life…?" (Naess, 2008, 121). When such a yardstick is set by Western pacemakers of development to measure prosperity, it undermines the intrinsic value of non-hegemonic cultures where prosperity may have

different significance. The struggle to raise the quality of life, therefore, is premised on a consumerist ideology that differentiates between developed and underdeveloped nations. Such a narrative is thereby sustained by excessive resource extraction and exploitation. Naess turns our attention towards the impossibility of this farfetched and self-annihilating idea of being developed: "If the majority of humans tried to live the same way as the average person in the rich industrial societies, the doomsday prophecy might come true" (Naess, 2008, 121). This is to say that the omnicidal greed of mankind can only lead us to the extinction of all forms of life.

Two Indian thinkers, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, have contributed to a sustainable way of life which has often been overlooked by Western academia. Tagore's lectures on nationalism delivered during his tour to Japan and the US encapsulate much of what Arne Naess has tried to put into praxis. Tagore writes: "…in the economic world our appetites follow no other restrictions but those of supply and demand which can be artificially fostered, affording individuals opportunities for indulgence in an endless feast of grossness" (Tagore, 2015,107). Tagore's concern was moral and spiritual over material advancement. He appealed to the masses for spiritual regeneration and strength to overcome the weakness of material greed. In much the same way differentiating between Western and Indian civilisation, Gandhi observes in his *Hind Swaraj* that "Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures…the tendency of Indian Civilisation is to elevate the moral being, that of the western civilisation is to propagate immorality" (Tagore, 2015, 50–51). Gandhi's contention was to develop a sustainable system with the help of a rural economy and Basic education. This may sound trivial in today's globalised world because Gandhi's approach was based on moral principles and the power to suffer for the cause of truth. He had immense faith in the traditional values that sustained India as a civilisation although he admitted that social evils persisted in Indian societies and must be purged. Since Western civilisation seeks material achievement and bodily comfort, it "takes note neither of morality nor of religion" (Tagore, 2015, 29). Therefore, Gandhi wanted the "ancient schools and courts to be restored" in India (Tagore, 2015, 80). Gandhian non-violent thoughts have influenced many environmentalists like Maneka Gandhi, an animal rights activist and sitting Member of Parliament, Baba Amte, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sunder Lal Bahuguna, Medha Patkar and many more (Tiwari, 2019). Citing Gandhi, Ramachandra Guha writes that Gandhi's vision of "free India was a rural one" and Gandhi worked for the "renewal of its villages, in defiance of the worldwide trend towards industrialisation and urbanization" (Guha, 2014, 30). Today the ideals of Gandhi are practised by Anna Hazare, who with collective efforts has created a self-sustaining model village (see Gadgil and Guha, 1995, 104; Biswas, 2022).

1.3 Rebounding EH

Linking up Gandhi's and Tagore's thoughts, one can clearly understand the allegorical implication of Ghosh's recent work *The Living Mountain.* Ghosh transmutes the history of the colonisation process through an allegorical representation of Mahaparbat, the Great Mountain. The forceful taking over of the Great Mountain, symbolic of vital forces of nature that sustain life, by the Anthropoi was further validated by their supposed superiority over the natives:

> Next they imprisoned our Adepts, and
>
> Forbade all our ceremonies and songs,
>
> Stories and dances. They were all worthless,
>
> They said; our ancestral lore, they said, had
>
> Brought nothing but doom upon us, which
>
> Was why we were now reduced to this state of
>
> degradation and despair. (Ghosh, 2022, 16–17)

Analogous to this is the minute of J. Farish in the context of British India: "The Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could possibly have" (Quoted in Viswanathan, 1998, 2). Commenting on this trend Surendranath Banarjea observed that everything English was treated as good and anything Indian was seen suspiciously. The Indians were so captivated by the novelty and strangeness of Western culture and civilization that they forsook their tradition and customs so much so that eventually "this temperament had concealed in it the seeds of its own decay and eventual extinction" (Banarjea, 1927, 203). This has severely ruptured the old world with a new sensibility of domination and exploitation to contend that the present Anthropocene has been accelerated by the rise of modernity and colonial industry in the colonised nations.

When Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* exposed the ill effects of DDT and pesticides on non-human, human and soil health, the government was forced to intervene and change the agricultural policy relating to the use of those chemicals in the United States in the 1960s. Ironically, despite knowing the harmful effects of the use of pesticides and DDT on human and non-human health, its use was encouraged in India by American agronomist Norman E Borlaug, who later on went on to bag the Noble Peace Prize for his contribution to the Green Revolution (Swaminathan, 2009). In countering Rachel Carson's polemical text, Borlaug states

> This poignant, powerful book -written by the talented scientist Rachel Carson- sowed the seeds for the propaganda whirlwind and the press, radio and television circuses that are being sponsored in the name of conservation today, but which are to the detriment of the world society, by the various organizations making up the environmentalist movement…It was a

> diabolic, vitriolic bitter one-sided attack on the use of pesticides, especially insecticides and weed killers. She made no mention of the importance of DDT in protecting our food and fibre production… Silent Spring has become the Holy Writ of the environmentalist movement. This distorted, oversimplified book of biological half-truths is now required reading in many high schools, thanks to the 'influence of our environmentalist organizations. Rachel Carson has become a martyr (Borlaug, 1971, 45).

Critiquing Borlaug's work Vandana Shiva, an Indian environmentalist, writes that the use of DDT and pesticides had an adverse effect on the agricultural industry, economy and society in Punjab (Shiva, 1991). Recent studies have revealed that the use of pesticides has led to a rise in cancer incidents in the districts where such chemicals have been used (Singh, 2008; Thakur et al., 2008). The numbers have inflated so much that a special train, nicknamed Cancer Express, has been running between Bathinda and Bikaner to take the patients to Bikaner Hospital every day (Pandey, 2015).

1.4 Resurgence

After disillusionment with modernity and modern technology, India and many other nations across the world are now opting for greener alternatives in energy and food production. While doing so, an exclusive Western theoretical approach may not be commensurate with the local conditions for mitigation. This is why a localized approach that takes into cognizance the Western discourse and ethnic environmentalism shall be the need of the hour. With the rising demand for organic food production in India, states like Sikkim have gone on to win the prestigious Future Policy Gold Award from the UN Food and Agriculture (FAO) for being a 100% organic state. India's ambitious role in leading the International Solar Alliance (ISA) with 121 nations as signatories, headquartered in Gurugram, is designed to reduce fossil fuel dependence. The new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is a strategy to revamp the pre-colonial knowledge system along with the aid of modern science and technology. India is trying to realize the potential of spiritual rejuvenation while balancing scientific temperament as well. By promoting indigenous and traditional knowledge systems across various Indian states, the Indian government is giving leverage to indigenous communities. Lokmanthan is one such platform as well as a methodology that is used to decolonize the Indian mind.

This volume has been curated to bring forth such Indian perspectives on EH. Without being a reductionist, this volume shall add to the ongoing discourse in the discipline of EH across the world. While the strong influence of Western theories and studies is visible in Indian academia, this volume specifically begins with ethnic-ecological sensibilities that exist among the ethnic communities living in peripheral regions like India's northeast. Such societies hinge on their traditional knowledge system and are less affected by colonial modernity. India's northeast has remained neglected for a long time within the various discourses within India, and therefore, a

special section on this area will enrich the volume. Comparing Northeast India with Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*, Jyotirmoy Prodhani writes

> The story of Northeast is quite similar to that of the abiding fable by Amitav Ghosh, *The Living Mountain* (2022). Quite significantly, the book resonates with the geo-cultural history of the Northeast too, for the region has gone through similar crises and turbulences like that of the Elderpeople and the Adepts, the indigenous men and women, of the Great Mountain, the Mahaparbat, where they were reduced by the imperialist Anthropois into Varvarois as they were rendered culturally inadequate and subjected to brutal dislocations. But finally, it was the resurgence of the native pedagogy that had redeemed indigenous inhabitants. Northeast too is a metaphoric Mahaparbat (Prodhani, 2022, 2).

Other theoretical approaches like Ecomusicology, Deep Ecology, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism and Vedic Ecology have been used by the contributors in their respective chapters. This edited volume is neither a counter-text to the studies on postcolonial EH in India nor Western approaches on EH, but a complementary addition to the existing discourse on EH in general. As a discrete field, EH has emerged largely from European, North American and Australian academic institutions and, more specifically, from English, history, geography and anthropology departments. Although the environmental humanities have been relatively slow to gain traction in South Asia, an increasing momentum towards transdisciplinary approaches to ecology and sustainability is palpable in India as can be evinced from this volume. Comprising fourteen chapters, this contributed volume is the first major publication to call attention to current work in the environmental humanities in India. The volume aims to foreground particular eco-humanist theories and methodologies evolving from Indian biocultural contexts. Towards this aim, the book consists of four thematic sections: (i) Indigenous Perspectives: Conservation and Spirituality (Chaps. 2–5); (ii) Theoretical Grounding: Law, and Ethics (Chaps. 6 and 7); (iii) Literary Formulations: Memoir, Parable and Storyworlds (Chaps. 8–11); and (iv) Popular Narratives: Myth, Travel and Music (Chaps. 12–14). True to its interdisciplinary nature, EH integrates the theories and approaches of various disciplines—from anthropology, art, communications, cultural studies, philosophy and ecology to history, literature, media, music, performance, politics, sociology, theology and theatre. As such, this volume also takes an intersectional approach to examine the various contours of eco-sensibility in India. Practitioners of this considerably integrative and widely ranging field aim to address and, in certain cases, confront today's urgent ecological and cultural challenges, namely climate change, urban sustainability, biodiversity conservation, species decline, energy policy, the exigencies of the Anthropocene, environmental activism and Indigenous peoples' justice. Recent developments in the environmental humanities foreground its topicality as scholar-activists-artists from multiple disciplines turn increasingly to human-nature intersectional issues in the Anthropocene epoch.

1.5 Structure of the Book

As argued before, if we are to trace the knowledge system about environmental consciousness that existed before the advent of colonial modernity and the industrial revolution, we need to revisit the texts, oral traditions, and cultures as potential sites of residue practised or preserved in India. While certain practices have evolved or changed over time due to the impact of colonization (see Chap. 8), many practices persist in residual forms while others remain embedded in texts and living consciousness. The first section of the book, entitled Indigenous Perspectives includes four chapters. These chapters highlight the environmental consciousness among the Indian communities including Caste Hindu, Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes. Although many Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes have converted either to Buddhism or Christianity, certain practices have persisted as a part of their culture. Furthermore, some of the practices among the caste Hindu have evolved because of the influence of Adivasi and other indigenous communities. In much the same way, the animistic culture of the tribes and the Adivasis have been strongly Sanskritised. These intercultural exchanges have diluted much of the cultural distinction among these communities in the matter of their ethnic-cosmological consciousness about creation and nature. This volume does not discuss the political differences among these communities but focuses on the environmental consciousness of some communities that are considered indigenous. Stefano Beggiora's chapter entitled "Indigenous Native Epistemology as a Model in Environmental Humanities in India" is an interesting take on the environmental consciousness of the Adivasi communities living in the Chhota Nagpur Plateau in India. The intrinsic connection that these people share with various elements of nature erases the distinction between the self and nature, making the self a part of nature. The nature/culture binary does not exist as such among the Adivasis as their practices are meant for the propitiation of natural forces in the form of worshipping. While many of the practices of the Adivasis and the nomenclatures used by them show their cultural affinity with caste Hindu practices, the following chapter entitled "Environment in Hindu Consciousness" by Susheel Kumar Sharma and Debajyoti Biswas takes us to the roots of such consciousness. By citing Vedas Upanishads, and the Indian epic Mahabharata, this chapter shows the cosmic constitution in Hindu sacred texts. The importance of the trees, waterbodies and celestial bodies highlighted in these texts show that nature is an extension of the theocentric universe, where men can realise the divine presence through a spiritual journey. This chapter delineates pre-colonial knowledge about the natural world as the consciousness is derived from the Hindu sacred texts. Namrata Pathak & Rustam Brahma's chapter "Cultural Practices and Indigenous Traditions of the Garo and Bodo: Reinterpreting 'Man-Nature' Convergences in Wangala and Bathou" highlights the performative aspects of nature among the two indigenous tribes (Garo and Bodo) from India's northeast. Srijani Bhattacharjee's chapter "Indigenous Nature Conservation in Meghalaya: Environmental and Religious Dimensions of Tribal Land Ownership Among the Khasi Community of The Region" deals with the Khasi community's land practices and the function of sacred

groves. Although the Khasis converted to Christianity in the early part of the nineteenth century, they retained their consciousness of the forest deity and spirit world by protecting the sacred groves. These four chapters are crucial in understanding how Indian communities have retained their relationship with nature despite the onslaught of capitalism and colonial modernity. The second section entitled Theoretical Grounding philosophically addresses issues related to environmental laws and the Anthropocene. The third section has four chapters on literary analysis of texts that deal with the effect of colonial modernity and the Anthropocene epoch. The concluding section has three chapters dealing with myth, folklore and music. These chapters highlight how ecological consciousness pervades and continues to live among the people through popular mediums like the retelling of myths and songs.

The fourteen chapters in this volume have been curated to provide a critical perspective on the environmental consciousness in India from ancient times to the present. Such perspectives remain crucial in understanding how various literary genres and forms, cultural practices and traditions, law and philosophy have allowed space for the retention of indigenous forms of knowledge, despite the incursion of capitalism, colonialism and cultural imperialism from the West.

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Part I
Indigenous Perspectives: Conservation and Spirituality

Chapter 2
Indigenous Native Epistemology as a Model in Environmental Humanities in India

Stefano Beggiora

Abstract The article proposes a reflection on the contribution of the *ādivāsī* issue in the broader debate on Environmental Humanities in India. The theme of indigeneity on the one hand and the ontological turn in anthropology on the other have highlighted the centrality and importance of the ecological message in the theoretical approach of these disciplines. However, the paper investigates a possible originality of Indian thought in a debate that too often, even in postcolonial studies, has been manipulated by the West. Through the case study of some indigenous cultures of central-eastern India, the paper proposes some original examples of indigenous ontologies and shamanism conveying an idea of respect and consubstantiality of man with other non-humans and with an earth that is mother for everyone. The essay concludes by mentioning the pioneering vision of two of the first Indian anthropologists who understood the importance of the man-spirits-nature connection and of a holistic vision of the cosmos among the native cultures of the Subcontinent.

Keywords Indigeneity · *ādivāsī* · Environmental humanities · Ecology · Munda · Santal · Chhota Nagpur · Ontological turn · Personhood · Shamanism · Baidyanath Saraswati · Sarna · Kalahari debate

2.1 Premise: A Still Open Issue

The question of indigenous people in South Asia today appears extremely complex. In fact, each of the features that the Indian government recognizes as fundamental for the recognition in the categorization of the so-called Scheduled Tribes—such as geographical isolation, backwardness, distinctive culture, marginalization—deserves a separate discussion. A troubled history has characterized these minorities, who constitute just under a tenth of the Indian population. This significant social entity of more than a hundred million people interface regularly with problems such as

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inclusion, development, and respect for human rights. Since the years of Indian independence, the so-called Ghurye-Elwin debate (Guha, 1996; Srivatsan, 2005), which only on the surface concerned opposing positions between integration and isolationism, in depth implied a much more complex question on the degree of diversity and/or cultural continuity of these communities with the Hindu background (Tewari, 2002). In contemporary times, this fits into the broader debate on cultural diversity and Indigeneity, which in recent decades has animated the debate both in anthropology and at international institutions such as the United Nations forum and UNESCO (Friedlander, 2022).

The concept of being an original inhabitant of a place, an idea perfectly expressed by the neologism *ādivāsī* applied today to Indian tribes, soon proved problematic according to a dogmatically scientific approach. Excellent scholars such as the sociologist Béteille (1998) and the historian Guha (1999) have deliberately abstained from designating the Ādivāsīs as aborigines precisely because in many well-known and specific cases an idea of prior settlement in the Subcontinent is at least vague, questionable, and not historically provable. While for other groups, such as some communities in the Northeast, there is even a certain historical memory of ancient migrations making them inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent certainly not *ab origine*. The question fades into the broader political rather than scientific debate on the degree of autochthony of the ancient Arya, or other Asian populations who settled in the Indian Subcontinent in historical times and on their real cultural contribution to Indian civilization. In the rest of the world, the watershed of European colonialism becomes decisive in the attempt to provide a more precise definition of indigeneity. Here we clearly allude to the processes of conquest, expropriation of territories, exploitation of resources, marginalization or forced assimilation of previous inhabitants occurring in the modern world, particularly in Africa and the Americas. It is clear that in this regard the Indian framework is much more complex. In this regard, Barnard (2006) had emphasized the fact that the definitions of “first comer” and “cultural difference” should probably not be the most decisive criteria for determining indigeneity: rather he considered it more appropriate to emphasize the concepts of “non-dominance” and “self-attribution”.[1] Going into more detail, the Canadian anthropologist Lee (2006: 134) proposed two different notions of indigeneity: one for peoples subject to European colonial invasion and another for peoples not directly involved in processes of colonial domination, but equally subjected to oppression within local agrarian policies. The *ādivāsī* scenario fits perfectly into this definition, also including processes of marginalization and repression, as well as ruthless industrialization practices (Behera, 2013; Padel, 2008). These phenomena are typical of contemporary neocolonial practices and of the dynamics of globalization itself: Barnard and Lee’s descriptions take us in this same direction. Although they are known for their studies in Africa and in particular for the so-called Kalahari Debate,[2] they also adapt very well to the Indian scenario.

[1] See also Devy et al. (2009).

[2] This is a heated debate among scholars regarding the social dynamics of hunter-gatherer groups in this area of South Africa. On one side, there are supporters of the geographical and cultural

2.2 Ādivāsīs and Environmental Humanities

Assuming a long insurrectionist tradition against colonial rule, India's indigenous peoples have been protagonists of revolts aimed at claiming land rights and against economic exploitation. This sort of resilience remained, in a certain sense, constant even in the period following Indian Independence. After 50 years of hesitation on the development and integration policies of these minorities, the Indian Government found that to support a constantly growing economy it would be necessary to get its hands on the natural resources of the soil and subsoil of the indigenous territories. And to do this it is necessary either to accelerate the forced process of assimilation of distinctive cultural minorities that would have deserved to be preserved instead, or even to resort to the brutal method of displacement with the risk of violating the human rights of the Ādivāsīs. Paradoxically, on the other hand, the strenuous struggle of indigenous peoples to defend their ancestral territories and their most basic rights takes on the characteristics of a struggle against capitalism, multinationals, the indiscriminate exploitation of the territory, in which the ecological discourse today acquires a paramount significance. Precisely because they lived for centuries in close contact with the forests or in the most impervious Himalayan valleys, the Indian tribals today seem to be the last custodians of the secrets of nature and of a territory with which contemporary people seem to have now lost real contact. Furthermore, indigenous religiosity, often characterized by forms of animism or shamanism, seems in a certain sense to still be able to "dialogue" respectfully with the non-human dimensions of the surrounding flora and fauna. In a somewhat romanticized vision, we tend to think that a pillar of that indigenous resilience is a notion of sustainability that the rest of the planet has lost. But is this really so?

Some authors[3] disagree, asserting that in the Anthropocene, thinking that the earth, or part of the planet, rightfully belongs to a minority, however indigenous, is absurd. Banerjee (2016: 140) emphasizes that Ādivāsīs appear to enjoy a kind of political hyper-visibility today. A more than incipient notoriety, capable of impacting the political debate, but quite disproportionate compared to their number. In any case, the success of the term *ādivāsī*, where it has been adopted, is today radicalizing among indigenous communities the image of a "native self" as opposed to the rest of Indian citizenship, understood as "colonizers," or descendants of the same. In this chapter, I would therefore like to investigate some questions that are not easy to resolve. Is there a pure ecological thought (i.e. free from idealization) in indigenous India? What value does indigenous culture (also explored through the tools of anthropology and ethnography) have in Environmental Humanities and in rethinking the concepts

isolationism of the indigenous populations, while others argue that they played an important role in the exchange economy with neighboring communities, although over time they were increasingly marginalized and driven out of their lands. The debate involves different disciplinary approaches such as ethnography, anthropology, archaeology and history and in a certain sense it can be paradigmatic, given the necessary distinctions, also of Indian discourse.

[3] See Ingold (2022) on a possible global paradox; see Jairath (2020) for a reference specifically to the Jharkhand debate.

of sustainability? Is there an ecocritical approach to these disciplines that is part of a unique intellectual Indian tradition, and not merely derivative of Euro-American environmental ideas?

Even just the first of these questions is abstruse. In the current debate, many have emphasized that *ādivāsī* lifestyles could have been considered sustainable in the past, but it is realistic to think that they are no longer so today. The classic example is *jhum* cultivation, or the proto-agricultural technique of slash and burn. While many indigenous spokespersons accuse the government of wanting to replace these basic subsistence techniques with more productive but high-impact mining activities, it is nevertheless undeniable that the *jhum* method, yielding little fruit and requiring a great deal of energy, worked in the past for semi-sedentary microcommunities, but following the demographic boom in many villages it does not meet today the sustainability requirements at all (Ranjan & Upadhyay, 1999).

But it is precisely in the Indian ecological movements and in the effort to protect the environment that short circuits with indigenous lifestyles have often occurred. During the colonial era, aware of the importance of the Indian jungle as a resource, the state arrogated to itself absolute control over the forests, which was then aimed largely at satisfying the demand for timber. The Indian Forest Act of 1927 provided a legal framework for such control, but the exclusive production of a certain type of wood proved detrimental to biodiversity, which gradually came into crisis. After independence the situation has not changed much: but both the government and the Indian ecological movements seem to have forgotten that the forest was a significant source of subsistence for the Ādivāsīs over the centuries (Munshi, 2015). In addition to food, animal fodder, and fuel, the forest has also been the source of medicine, building materials, materials for making agricultural tools, etc. It has been forgotten that due to this dependence, Ādivāsīs have generally always protected the forest and its biodiversity: the consequence of this misrepresentation of the indigenous role is that they have now become increasingly vulnerable. To rebalance the neglected forest management rights and land tenure to the forest-dwelling communities, the Indian government passed the famous recognition of Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006 which, however, is not free of criticism, or skepticism on the results obtained (Jha & Upadhyay, 2023; Singh, 2021). In the Northeast, for example, there are many indigenous movements that oppose institutional projects for the control and development of water resources. In the Mishmi Hills, locals are protesting against the establishment of national parks for the protection of wildlife and big cats. The paradox lies in the fact that they consider themselves the ancestral protectors of the territory and its beasts, by virtue of an ancient totemic bond and kinship with some animals, such as tigers or leopards; but they find themselves actually excluded from all this today (Agarwala, 2023). I could give examples ad libitum, without coming to terms with any theory: therefore, I believe it is necessary to look for a common philosophy among the indigenous people of India, in which to possibly find the root of a concept of sustainability.

My 25-year experience of research into the religiosity of tribal India leads me to positive considerations. Almost everywhere, with the necessary regional cultural differences, in indigenous thought, I have found the idea that collective and individual

well-being depends on the propensity for relationships, collaboration and reciprocity between human beings and the environment. I therefore believe that in the study of ecology and Environmental Humanities, supported of course by ethnographic and anthropological tools, it is fundamental to configure an ecological-relational network and its concrete effects on the present. There is an element common to many native knowledge systems: the sense of trust towards the environment, which allows them to act and react to changes and in interaction with other organisms producing variable and negotiated responses. This disposition translates into a sense of respect and sacredness of places, even geographically understood. Custodians of the past, they are at the same time an expression of the present and paths towards imagined futures. In the shamanism of the *ādivāsī* cults, where it has survived, there are not only dialogues with non-humans, understood as the complexity of flora and fauna, but there is a lively relationship with rivers, hills, paths and subtle channels of energies becoming cosmic in a holistic and non-anthropocentric vision of the world (Beggiora, 2003). For this reason, in native knowledges a series of prescriptions and taboos are often handed down: in addition to their varied narrative and practical motivation, they essentially seem to center the environmental discourse on the responsibilities of communities towards places and nature in general. It is a sort of ontology that Guzy (2021) have defined as indigenous eco-cosmology. Or rather eco-cosmologies, considering the plurality of the *ādivāsī* cultural kaleidoscope however often merging with this principle.

In the following paragraphs, after a clarification on the importance of the notion of person beyond the ontological turn and towards the ecocritical debate, I will try to answer the remaining questions using a case study among the indigenous populations of the Chhota Nagpur plateau in India. Also called Ranchi Plateau—since a large part of it extends around the capital of the same name in the state of Jharkhand—it is characterized by a dry tropical and subtropical broad-leaved forest, as well as gorges and peculiar hilly reliefs. The latter are mainly made up of schists and metamorphic rocks of ancient orogeny: personified as archaic deities and guardians of the territory, since the dawn of time their ancient presence has contributed to shaping the myths and religiosity of the numerous indigenous ethnic groups. Expression of a wild nature, which is also mother earth, hills and mountains are actually considered as ‘people’, or deities, by local populations. However, the vegetation, caves, springs, every particular rocky conformation of this landscape is populated by a number of subtle entities and spirits with which local shamans are still able today to communicate. Like a child who does not perceive the difference between his body and that of his mother, in the same way, the nature surrounding the villages can be metonymically understood here as a sort of maternal womb, for which the community has a profound sensorial—even more than emotional—bond. And yet a hard and daily struggle for survival also requires consideration of the ‘wild’ aspect, that is, not tamed, chaotic, dangerous, of that same nature.

2.3 Territoriality and Agency in Indigenous Cultures: Turning Points in the History of Studies

The overview that we outlined in the *incipit* aims to emphasize the fact that, despite the diversity of visions and past definitions, much of the previous anthropological studies would seem to have denied the recognition of an epistemological dignity to indigenous Indian cultures. Indigenous metaphysics, visions of the cosmos and ritual practices would therefore appear not to have been able to enjoy their rightful autonomy, forced—at least until the last century—into epistemological paradigms delimited and constructed by a univocal apparatus of social, relational and psychological sciences. A construct with which the European culture has generally measured itself and the otherness of other subjects. If this were true, this would mean that a certain good part of the sciences of our era has tragically missed the objectives of post-colonial theory, in particular by blunting the gap between contemporaneity and what was the civilizing, evangelizing modern world that developed starting from the "discovery" of the Americas and the new commercial and colonial routes to Asia.

For this reason, those scholars who have tried to break this pattern are extremely important, because they are trying to restore dignity—to the extent of an ontological and epistemological specificity—to the perspectives of indigenous populations. In this sense, shamanism stands out precisely for its cosmological gaze. Indeed, the work of Hallowell (1960)[4] was crucial: through a conversation with an elderly Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was the first to question the different forms that the concept of person took in indigenous thought and on the consequences that this different conception revealed for the understanding of the way in which reality was perceived and valued in the native culture. It is no coincidence, however, that his considerations remained on the margins of anthropological reflection for much of the twentieth century, until the concepts of "person/personhood" became central. It was almost a starting point, including the perspectives on materiality and rationality, for the various authors of the various so-called "ontological turns": primarily for the research carried out in the Amazonian field by authors considered in turn to be milestones of the genre, such as Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2005) and Descola (2005). The theorizations of Hallowell—and probably of other authors of the last century which it is necessary to overlook only for reasons of space—are undoubtedly at the basis of that idea of the specific physiognomy of Amerindian cosmologies, which we know today under the definition of perspectivism (*perspectivismo amerindio*), suggested by Viveiros de Castro (Harvey, 2017: 481–497).

As is known, it is a multi-naturalist system, where a unity based on the concept of culture is accompanied by a diversity of bodies and material substances of the different categories of existence. What emerges from this ethnographic research, carried out mainly in South America, is a general tendency of Amazonian indigenous

[4] See also the previous work (Hallowell, 1955) and the most recent volume (Hallowell, 2010) collecting most of the works on the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes, published during his work as professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania.

groups to see the world as inhabited by different types of people, human and non-human: what is interesting in this is the perception of reality and the way in which they observe each other. In essence, spirits and animals see themselves as human, live in human-like homes and have a social organization with leaders, councils of elders, shamans, rituals and marriages. Their food is perceived as human food: the example of the jaguar which perceives blood as manioc beer is particularly well-known and cited. Along this same line, the bodily attributes of animals are seen as ornaments or cultural instruments: skins, feathers, claws are seen as parts of costumes and clothing, or sometimes as masks. All the theoretical developments that start from the multi-naturalist assumption have therefore fundamentally had the advantage of undermining the dominant epistemological model in previous scientific thought based on the nature-culture distinction, with all its annexes and connections, and above all of providing infinite alternatives to the anthropocentric cosmological perspective. The discussion of shamanism in this perspective is of great importance because, thanks to trance and altered states of consciousness, the shaman can be considered a special, trans-specific being. As such, he is able to break down that perceptive boundary between different genres, going beyond the visible form of each species which, like a sort of wrapping or dress, hides a collective internal form that in turn is invisible to the common person. However well-known this form may be, it becomes explicit only through the knowledge, vision and ability of the shaman (Viveiros de Castro, 2005: 42). Consequently, shamanism in general (not only the Amazonian one) can be defined as the ability of certain individuals to cross bodily boundaries and adopt the perspective of specific other subjects, in such a way as to weave complex relationships between these non-human beings and their human community. In other words, they are active interlocutors in trans-specific dialogues, precisely because they are able to interface with these other non-human people, grasping the similar perception that they have of themselves.

Salmond (2014: 167) suggests an excellent development of that ontological turn which, however necessary, has been fashionable in academies all over the world for too long in the past 20 years and proposes overcoming it by leveraging the concept of person and his perception. The appropriate subject of ethnographic analysis should therefore not necessarily concern people, or rather not only them. But it could unexpectedly concern all sorts of entities, relationships or beings. For example, artifacts might be included here that we might intuitively think are simple objects, only to later discover that they perform the roles and functions of subjects. The scholar cites as an example wooden idols representing the ancestors; but also relics or collections of objects giving meaning to catastrophes or dramatic moments of change.

Therefore, on the basis of a certain relational physicality, not only plants, animals and spirits can form relationships with humans, but also some apparently inanimate objects. The theme of physicality could be very important in future studies, at least to dissuade scholars from interpreting, through abstract concepts or overly theoretical visions, indigenous metaphysics which—at least as far as our field experience is concerned—translate instead ontological perspectives: although articulated, these are often very concrete in theorizing both the material and the immaterial.

2.4 A Journey Through the Hills in Ranchi Plateau

What we have explained so far finds an interesting field of application in the tradition of the indigenous communities of the Chhota Nagpur plateau, where we recently carried out research, near the city of Ranchi in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Among the best-known indigenous groups, Oraon, Munda, Santal, Ho, etc. is venerated a multifaceted "pantheon" of ancestral entities, moving the manifestations of nature as well as the cyclical alternation of the seasons. At the same time, the idea of a superior divinity remains in a certain sense latent, abstract: a more theoretical concept materialises itself in a differentiated multitude of spirits, or "people," each with their own characteristics, presiding over sacred places in the forest, along the waterways and paths, and making explicit with their presence the mapping of the villages and the surrounding nature. This idea, at least quite widespread in many indigenous cultures, is intertwined with a feeling of profound intimacy and belonging to the territory that the different Ādivāsī groups celebrate as a traditional value. On the one hand, the question is authentic; it is not a stretch or generalization: making the necessary distinctions regarding local regional cultures, the link with the land of origin expresses an ancestral relationship with it, often expressed through the cult of the ancestors who inhabited it for generations. On the other hand, the entire area is now affected by projects of land speculation and economic exploitation of underground resources: therefore, the indigenous presence in the territory could be a break in this sense. For indigenous communities, therefore, recovering, or in some cases reinterpreting, or reinventing, a symbiotic relationship with the sacredness of the territory is today extremely profitable in the processes of resilience and affirmation of the rights of local micro-identities (Ghosh, 2020: 93–104; Carrin, 2015: 21–31).

As regards the world of spirits or more commonly the dimension of everything that populates the subtle world, or the extra human, there is a precise terminology whose meaning goes far beyond the simple etymology of the terms. Definitions in common use such as Mahādeo (Śiva), Iśvara or Bhagvān (Lord, God), Śakti (Goddess, feminine power of the divine), *bhūt/bhūto* (spirit), testify to a linguistic process of simplification of the complexity of indigenous religiosity, the fruit of a centuries-old dialogue with the wider Hindu background. But moving into the linguistic context of Mundari, spoken here mainly by the Santal and Munda groups (there are indeed many dialect variants spoken by different groups), the most used term returns to being *bonga*. This is an umbrella definition which, in ancient times as today, indicates the deities of the hills dotting the plateau and characterizing each place with their specificity. Also known by the theonyms of Buru/Maran Buru, or widely Buru Bonga, equally indicating one or more hills, the mountains, the reliefs, are understood as the personification of the deities presiding over nature and its manifestations. From this, it follows that the Santal worldviews and cosmology reflect a *bonga*-based awareness of the universe. To give an example, in not too ancient times when there was a certain flexibility in the permanence of settlements, a certain science was handed down regarding the foundation of a new village, considered the more crucial moment for the community. A suitable space was identified through shamanic practices aimed

at exploring the territory and having an exact perception of it both from a physical and a subtle point of view. Therefore, on the one hand, a geomantic tradition also implied the careful evaluation of materials and resources available in the area, in order to have a clear awareness of the potential of the land. On the other hand, rituals and sacrifices have always been celebrated to appease the spirits of the places with a view to converting them into guardians and protectors of the new settlement. This process is repeated in the construction of individual huts or houses, where the correct use of local resources becomes for these reasons an integral part of the ritual act. There is therefore a sort of symbolic architecture, expressed through the Santal cultural matrix, articulating the human-nature-spirits complex that is at the basis of the village structure (Mitra & Jha, 2015: 47–58). It seems to be an ecological thought *ante litteram*, in reality, everything revolves around the functional and relational sphere of the settlement. The foundation of the village, therefore the good of the community, is superior to the good of the individual; similarly, brotherhood, mutual support and respect for elders, much praised in many old ethnographies as a romantic paradigm of tribal life, should instead be read as group survival strategies. The relationship with the environment and related plants, animals and other invisible forces is fundamental. In the songs and nursery rhymes that I also had the opportunity to record (Beggiora, 2014), a sense of authentic passion and emotion emerges, personifying the surrounding space and the entities inhabiting it.

Although today a large percentage of Santal groups define themselves as Hindu, even among those who live closer to large urban centers a local form of shamanism is still widespread. As elsewhere, also in Chhota Nagpur this relational, empathic form between human beings and the sacredness of the surrounding environment culminates in the phenomenology of trance, which is a known and commonly accepted fact almost everywhere, although specifically elective in society. Alongside an ordinary type of ritualism officiated by the village priest (*pahan* or *pūjārī*), figures capable of fulfilling that function which we have defined as interlocutors of trans-specific dialogues are traditionally recognized: among the Santal, the shamans, known as *ojha* (or *mati*), are chosen by the spirits, and enjoy great charisma among their communities. Incidentally, we will observe that in the past the other Hindu castes in the area recognized the Santal *ojhas* as having great knowledge in the field of magic and witchcraft. This was due to their reputation as healers: they administered various herbal medicines to treat illnesses or wounds. This ethno-medical/botanical learning occurred during apprenticeship, which in various sources took place through intermittent expeditions into the forest, a probable allusion to shamanic abduction. In fact, the old *ojhas* I met always reported learning traditional “indigenous forest knowledge” directly from the *bongas*.

Precisely in Chhota Nagpur, formerly at the beginning of the past century, the Norwegian folklorist, linguist and missionary Paul Olaf Bodding (1865–1938) had collected from Santal shamans a list of more than three hundred pathologies with related traditional medicinal remedies (Bodding, 1925). It is interesting to note that they did not only treat human beings, but also farm animals, such as cattle, goats and sheep. This non-ordinary interaction with men, spirits, and animals, which could in some cases turn evil, contributed to creating an aura of mystery and ambiguity

around them: the ability among the *ojhas* to instigate some *bongas* against a potential enemy is known, interpreted as a sort of evil eye, if not a practice of magical death. In common language (such as Hindi), in fact, the term *ojha* refers to the exorcist, but also to the magician, the sorcerer, often in a negative sense. This meaning is not absent in the Santali language: these potential abilities were however recognized in these operators, but the original meaning of the term was precisely that of shaman, who actually as an exorcist and medicine man, is the intermediary of the balance between the community of humans and that of *bongas*.

Coming to the phenomenology of trance, known here as *rum* (*rumuh* or *rumok* depending on the area), this is locally interpreted as a case of possession and, consequently, as the elitist way of communication with the subtle world. The theme of possession, also understood as the incorporation of different agents of a non-human otherness, can be understood as the opposite of the well-known process of shamanic dismemberment (Eliade, 1964: 53–66). Much historical ethnography, in particular from Siberia and North America, has brought us the paradigm of shamanic initiatory death, experienced as an ordeal of dismemberment and re-composition of the body. It is a subtle metaphor for a decomposition of the cosmos (represented here by the shaman's body) into the minimal alchemical constituent elements. Its rebirth is a re-composition of the shamanic universe, or better a sort of palingenesis, just to use analogically a characteristic expression of European ancient classical thought. Returning to analyze the question in terms of perspectivism, the shaman, by virtue of his initiatory experience, is the one who is even able to incorporate the many "natures" making up those multiple worlds theorized by scholars of the ontological turn.

After several years of field studies, particularly in South Asia, we can affirm that this metaphor of dismemberment (and re-composition) is perhaps expressed with greater force in the Himalayan area, while in sub-continental India, as among the Santals, an analogy all in all more nuanced is certainly not absent. In fact, there is a sort of overlap between indigenous traditions and many myths widespread in the major Asian religious traditions about the sacrifice of cosmic man, of a primaeval form of the divine, of a giantess, etc. (one for all: the famous hymn X, 90 of the Rigveda, also called *Puruṣasūkta* of the Hindu tradition). The well-known Hindu myth of the dismemberment of Satī/Pārvatī, the consort of the god Śiva, seems in turn to echo some aspects in which the Santal tradition has been able to recognize itself (Rahmann, 1959: 681–760). Beyond the consequent formation of the places of the sacred power of the goddess (*śakti pīṭhas*), precisely marking the sacred geography of the Indian territory with the fragments of her body, the myth can be considered of a cosmological type in a tantric perspective. The dismantling of the boundaries of the body, which paradoxically constitute its apparent entirety, is here a process of pluralization. In philosophical terms, the fragments of the goddess' body actually imply the vibratory expansion of the primordial energy which is represented by Satī in Hindu religiosity. In ordinary life then, the scope of the body as a means of expression is clearly limited by its very nature, as well as by the controls exercised by the social system. But through the initiatory experience, the shaman is able to transcend it,

going beyond, or calling to himself, through the knowledge of the *bongas*, every element of the cosmos.

In many groups of Chhota Nagpur, the myth of the first *ojha* who was dismembered so that his power was then fragmented and distributed among his disciples returns, with some slight local differences. This legend is not only widespread among the Santal, but is also found among other communities: it is evidently a narrative topos. More in detail, the various fragments of the *ojha*'s body are ingested by fish or various other animals, which—after being fished or hunted—will in turn be swallowed and assimilated by the initiates into the shamanic secrets (Murmu & Pramanik, 2018: 39–44). Furthermore, the important festival of Dasae Daran marks the end of the apprenticeship of one or more shaman initiates and their formal presentation to the community by one or more elderly *ojhas*. Among the Santals, the name derives from the month in which it occurs, coinciding in the Hindu calendar with the months of *kārtik* (October–November).[5] The celebration over time overlapped with the festivity of Durgā Pūjā, one of the major recurrences in Hinduism. The celebrating *ojha* and his group move from forest to village, or from village to village, and the older shaman is typically dressed as a woman (with a sari knotted backwards) because in some way he embodies the power of Chala Pachho or Sarna Devī, a sort of mother earth. Following the master, as in the aforementioned myth, the initiates enter a state of trance. I was told that the shaman should be able to metaphorically dismember the disciple's body, recomposing it in heaven and bringing out his sensitivity, his empathy or that particular strength of the self which is commonly understood as feminine, in particular linked to the earth. The ascent to heaven is experienced by the initiate as a metamorphosis in the form of a spider: the theme recalls the myth of the first shaman who managed to ascend to the other dimensions of the cosmos by weaving a web as thin as a spider's. This sort of introspective journey coincides in the community with a well-defined set of sublimated gestures and ritual symbols in which, once again, body, person and cosmos take on a crucial value. In fact, during the celebration, various animals are represented through trance: the monkey, the leopard, the deer, the crocodile, the vulture, etc. The mimetic process of the attitudes and movements of each animal during trance translates into Santal culture as a process of incorporation of what are already defined in Hinduism as "vehicles" (*vahana*) of the *bongas*. Overall I find these narrative and ritual representations extremely interesting, since they illustrate the motifs of shamanic initiation, the dismemberment and re-composition of the body, the importance of nature and the entities populating it. And, last but not least, the theme of ancestral knowledge transmitted by spirits is also mediated at the same time by a human master.

[5] Santali: *dasāyn* (October–November).

2.5 Return to Mother Earth

It seems appropriate now to move on to the analysis of the local cult of the mother goddess which we previously called Sarna or Chala-Paccho. It is necessary to start by saying that among the major deities of the indigenous groups of Chhota Nagpur, the Sun—known as *Sin*, *Sing* or *Singa Bonga*[6]—is considered to be the supreme deity. He created the universe in many local cosmogonies, however almost in parallel with the tantric and śākta visions of the Indian tradition his qualities of absoluteness seem to abstract him—like a *deus otiosus*—from the play of the creative and destructive power of his female counterpart, who is goddess/nature and mother of all manifestation, including the beings and *bongas* of each species. She is also known by the name of Sarna Devī (or Sarna Bhuria/Sarna Maa), or even Chala-Paccho in some areas: she is the protector goddess of villages, associated with the sacred grove of *sal* trees (*Shorea robusta*), like many of the *bongas* that are considered her hypostases. Only white animals (goats, chickens, etc.) or, frequently, gifts of the same color (sugar, milk, flowers, fabrics, etc.) are offered to her as sacrifices. Together with her consort Darmesh/Sing Bonga, she is venerated in the spring festivals and in celebrations of renewal of time through the cycle of seasons and harvests (*sarhul*, *khaddī*, etc.). But ultimately Sarna, a benevolent deity who embodies the feminine power of the divine (*śakti*), is both a sort of protective mother-goddess, and in her wrathful form keeps ghosts and negative entities at bay. In this, there is a limpid mirroring of the function of the *ojha*, of which the goddess is clearly the guide. What by extension we could define as the *sancta sanctorum* of the divinity, known as Sarna *śtal* or *jaher*, is not found inside a temple or a building, but rather outdoors, in nature: it is a magical place, a small forest of natural *sal* (sometimes grown for this purpose), which becomes the place of collective worship for the villagers. Almost all the most important socio-religious ceremonies take place here; the shamans enter into communication with the spirits, and animals are sacrificed (often even buffaloes) in honor of the goddess and to propitiate well-being and abundance in the coming season.

Due to her importance in the Ranchi district, especially among the Oraon groups, Sarna/Chala-Paccho is considered the village goddess (*gramdevī*) par excellence. *Sarnaism* indeed (a term translating the expression “Sarna Dhorom” or Sarna *dharma*) is recognized here as the religion of the indigenous populations, who in particular intend to distinguish themselves from Hinduism and Christianity. The symbol of this new religious movement, which in reality is a revival of ancient traditions, takes the form of the numerous red and white striped flags (Sarna *jhaṇḍi*) fluttering festively over the sacred places in the area, at the entrances to the villages and during public holidays. The white and red color is inspired not only by Sarna, but in particular by traditional Oraon clothing. It is interesting to note that the Oraon belongs to a Dravidian linguistic group, profoundly different from the context of the languages spoken in the Ranchi area, namely Munda and substantially Hindi-Bihari.

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[6] In the same area, it is known as Dharam among the Kharia, Bhagvān among the Korwa, Sin Cando (counterpart of Ninda Cando, the Moon) among other Santal subgroups; in the Kurukh language, among the Oraon, he is known as Dharmesh, or the Lord of *dharma* (Beggiora 2014: 24).

Nevertheless, they contributed to creating a certain continuity in the Jharkhandi identity, which tends to culturally consolidate the indigenous populations of the place. The issue is very complex and would imply deciphering the intricate network of relationships in the fragmented socio-political reality of local ethnic minorities, so much so that it requires a separate discussion. For the moment it is enough to say that the image of Sarna, as the ideal of Mother Earth, is here an important element of attraction also in the identity discourse.

The contemporary iconography of the goddess depicts her as an elderly woman with flowing white hair, standing on the riverbank or at the edge of a village with a young man prostrate before her. The image is inspired by a series of traditions describing Chala-Paccho as a form of the same goddess, while Sarna would be the corresponding abstract principle of the divine feminine. A legend has it that Chala-Paccho was the intermediary and mediator of the union between Sarna and Darmesh/Sing Bonga and is therefore venerated as a goddess of the environment (Xalxo, 2007). Another version reports Chala-Paccho as the hypostasis of Sarna, in the form of the spirit of a widow who welcomed Darmesh/Sing Bonga into her home in the form of a boy, who arrived there exhausted and wounded, after the cosmic battle against the *asuras* (a sort of anti-gods as in the Hindu tradition). The sexual union between the two, seen as a marriage between heaven and earth, provides the basis for the growth of woods and forests (Baa, 2017: 84–117). In addition to the myth, pictorially represented by modern artists, it is interesting to note that in the cult Sarna, like the other *bongas*, has always been aniconic, symbolized at most by the wooden pole or the red-white banner.[7] In this case, the Hindu iconographic taste has also influenced tribal traditions, but is also absorbed by them, including Sarna in the pantheon of the multiple Indian deities here crowding sacred places, temples, stalls, and shops.

As we mentioned earlier, these types of cult flexibility and hybridization phenomena are important in the resilience processes of local communities, seeking to form a common front against a state that, on the one hand, has always neglected the rights and development of ethnic minorities. On the other hand, today it seems to revalue the entire territory, especially for the mineral resources it contains (Beggiora, 2015: 163–174). The paradox lies in the fact that shamanism and animism have always been fluid, flexible religious apparatuses, multifaceted in their forms, refractory to any paradigmatic theorization. However, today Sarnaism seems to have taken on an institutional structure: supported by various local indigenous associations and movements, it has become for many the banner of the identity of the Ādivāsī communities of Jharkhand and Chhota Nagpur. At the same time, we had the opportunity to document the rise of new local movements, flowing into the broader scenario of Indian eco-feminism. Starting from the assumption that Jharkhandi society, whether

[7] The *śtal* where she is believed to live. My informants reported that she also resides in the winnowing fan used to hull cereals. This agricultural instrument is widely used in South and Southeast Asia as an idiophone musical instrument with shaking internal indirect percussion, generally with the aid of rice, wheat or other cereal grains or seeds. The sound produced when the fan is shaken induces the *ojha* into a state of trance: in summary we could consider it a ritual substitute for the Siberian or Himalayan shamanic drum.

indigenous or otherwise, despite venerating various forms of mother goddesses, has always been strongly patriarchal, predominantly in the past the accusations of witchcraft almost always fell on women who had tried to make their voices heard or had tried to break the rigid social patterns of the villages. Today, however, the phenomenon of groups of women going alone to the *śtal* or *jaher,* experiencing phenomena of trance and spontaneous possession by the goddess, is increasingly frequent. There is no shortage of shamans among them called to the *ojha* function and protected in particular by Sarna. This is a particular case because in the past, while admitting the possibility of female shamanism, even in local tribal traditions the presence of women in sacred places had begun to be less accepted or even a taboo. Therefore, the female voice rising from these ecstatic gatherings is that of Sarna/Chala-Paccho and the *bongas*, who first of all lament the degradation of the social scene: the values and lifestyles of the rural societies of the past have been forgotten, as well as the fundamental position of women in their indigenous communities. This discussion is part of the revival of a tradition that re-emerges in an ecological key: as in other environmental movements of the past, the ancestral bond between women and Mother Earth becomes the key to rethinking today's crucial issues such as the exploitation of the territory. In the defense of the sacred forests by Santal and Oraon women, it is, therefore, possible to read a very broad discourse including the themes of emancipation, equality, human rights, environmental protection, and sustainable development. It is extraordinary to think that a reflection on these themes, so important and crucial for the entire planet, reaches us through shamanic dynamics, having their roots in indigenous cults and based on processes of communication, identification, incorporation of the multiplicity of "people" inhabiting the multiple worlds of our universe.

2.6 *Prakṛtiḥ Rakṣati Rakṣitā:* An Indian Paradigm?

In conclusion, it is interesting to observe that in anthropology the ontological turn is, for many, outdated today (Argyrou, 2017). Some have criticized the "scholars of the turn" for being too generalizing or for having replaced old theories with new ones, but always from the same point of view, or essentially for not having really emerged from the dilemma of ethnocentrism. But having at least moved the center of gravity of our analysis from a certain anthropocentrism of modern science towards a position more in line with indigenous visions is an important goal that will bear future fruit. In a recent article, I tried to demonstrate how the Indian contribution to environmental humanities becomes more intriguing the more 'native' it is, i.e. the more directed to the rereading and reanalysis of the sacred literature of Hindu doctrines (Beggiora, 2021). Indigenous cultures are also involved in this debate in various ways: for example, the Ādivāsī is often considered the topos of the inhabitant of the forest or mountains (*vanavāsin*, *girijan*) and, therefore, protector and knower of its secrets. His holistic vision of nature has been interpreted, more or less questionably, as a sort of non-duality (*advaita*) in its local declination. This perspective is summarized today in

an ecological slogan taken from Hindu scriptures and which is becoming increasingly popular: *prakṛtiḥ rakṣati rakṣitā*, or literally 'nature, protected, protects'. It is in truth a sort of alteration (*vikṛti*) of a more well-known reference of the Manusmṛti, which in turn was previously mentioned in the Mahābhārata,[8] but which today stands as a common platform for those who recognize themselves in an ecological thought in which indigenous cultures have a key space.

The topic is sensitive because it is vulnerable to political exploitation: a certain inclusive discourse of Ādivāsīs in the Hindu substratum is propagated today by the Indian right. But ultimately a certain continuity between the concepts of caste and tribe (Nathan, 1998), and a certain degree of cultural permeability between groups was also theorized by anthropologists with a Gandhian perspective. Among the many scholars I want to mention here Baidyanath Saraswati,[9] who was a disciple of Nirmal K. Bose, considered the father of Indian anthropology. He emphasized how through non-linear discourses, ecological, and climatic vocabularies, the Ādivāsīs handed down an ontological vision of multiple worlds whose values today are not at all distant from the famous goals of sustainable development (Saraswati, 1995, 2004; Saraswati & Kapila, 1998). His teaching is not too far from the path traced by Vidhyarti (1963) who rejected certain European preconceptions, mainly relating to religious sentiment in India, but above all he defined the interdependent and mutually complementary complex of spirits-human-nature in the Dravidian tribal communities. And all this happened well before the French ontological turn or the theorization of Amerindian perspectivism. But even by accepting to validate the absolutely unique and distinctive character of the oral culture of the Ādivāsīs or the aforementioned communities of Jharkhand, I hope to have managed to explain how a theoretical root and discourse typically Indian can be found here. South Asia is not just a scenario on which to attempt the application of already known academic paradigms, but, vice versa, it is a mine that can inspire the global ecological debate.

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[8] *Dharmo rakśati rakśitaḥ*: Dharma, when protected, protects; Manusmṛti 8.15 (Jha, 1932); Mahābhārata 3.313.128 (Pandey, 1994); Mahābhārata 3.312.128, 13.145.2 (Dutt, 2008).

[9] I had the honor of having him as co-supervisor of my Ph.D. thesis.

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Chapter 3
The Environment in Hindu Consciousness: Revisiting the Sacred Texts

Susheel Kumar Sharma and Debajyoti Biswas

Abstract To understand the Hindu consciousness of the environment, one will have to understand the essence of Hinduness. While Hindu is a term derived from Sindhu, a term of reference by the invaders for the people living on the banks of the Sindhu River, the people preferred calling themselves Sanatani, which implies an eternal and all-encompassing form of life. It will not be too far-fetched to refer to the practices of the Hindus as syncretic and ever-evolving because of the plurality of practices, symbiotic relationships, and tolerance towards human and non-human forms of life. There is no binary opposition between the self and the other in Sanatani life because all forms of life emanate from the same source and go back to the same. Furthermore, human life itself is constituted of the five elements (*Pancha Bhuta*): *Prithvi* (earth), *Jal* (water), *Agni* (fire), *Vayu* (air), and *Akasha* (Space). While Nature is constituted of these five elements, the human body is also constituted of the same. The implication is that what is external is also internal and because of this there is no binary of the self and the other. Since such faith is embedded in the practice and function of the life system in India, the question of any external consciousness does not arise. In other words, human and non-human forms of life are integral to nature. Sanatani understanding of nature is a clear mark of departure from Western thought where nature is to be dominated and exploited (see Francis Bacon's Novum Organum). In this chapter we undertake to explain this relation and explore the way scriptural and traditional practices among the Hindus could offer a sustainable future for mankind in the Anthropocene epoch.

Keywords Hindu · Sanatani · Pancha Bhuta (Five elements) · Mahabharata · Vedas · Indian knowledge system · Puranas · Bhagavad Gita

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3.1 Introduction: Understanding Hindu Consciousness

The word 'Hindu' gives many identities to the land and its people based on collective, demographic, geographical and behavioural characteristics. Nonetheless, the word "Hindu" is largely considered to be an exonym and an umbrella term.[1] The Hindus, however, prefer the term *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal way) to describe their way of life. Haldane writes, "Hinduism is not a religion as this term is understood by the adherents of proselytizing religions" (Haldane, 1959, 357). Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) defies all the narrow traditional features of any religion or creed (see Biswas, 2021). It has been accepted as the oldest surviving religion in the world, has multiple books, prophets (*avatar*), gods, prayers and prayer rituals, rites or performances, images (*vigraha*) for worship and reverence, philosophical concepts, paths to liberation (*Moksha*) and the like. Maria Wirth writes, "Hinduism is an ideal way of life which helps realise one's oneness with the Supreme Being. This ideal way of life is not based on a dogmatic belief system, but on experiential wisdom" (Wirth, 2023). Haldane calls Hinduism an attitude (see Supra, 1998). Vidyaniwas Mishra puts it differently when he says: "Hindu dharma propels one to live in the present; it is a combination/wedlock of truth and cosmic order/divine law (*ṛta*)" (Mishra, 1979 [2016] 11). What these three scholars are saying is that Hinduism explores the relationship between *Vyashti* (the particularised thing, *अपरा प्रकृति*) and *Samashti* (the generalised and the abstract universal whole, *परा प्रकृति*). It is, therefore, imperative to identify the parameters of the Hindu ways of life. It will not be too far-fetched to refer to the practices of the Hindus as syncretic and ever-evolving because of the plurality of practices, symbiotic relationships, and tolerance towards human and non-human forms of life (Tiwari, 2010). There is no binary opposition between the self and the other in Sanatani life because all forms of life emanate from the same source and go back to the same. Furthermore, like Nature, human life itself is constituted of the five elements (*Pancha Bhuta*): *Prithvi* (earth), *Jal* (water), *Agni* (fire), *Vayu* (air), and *Akasha* (Space). Therefore, the binary between the interiority and the exteriority is ruled out. Since such faith is embedded in the practice and function of the life system in India, the question of any external consciousness does not arise. In other words, human and non-human forms of life are integral to nature. Sanatani understanding of nature is a clear mark of departure from Western thought where nature is seen as "other" and is to be dominated and exploited (see Quijano, 2007; Mignolo 2011). In this chapter, we undertake to explain this relation and explore the way scriptural and traditional practices among the Hindus could offer a sustainable future for mankind in

[1] "The very word Hinduism is misleading. The word was coined by the British as an umbrella term, referring to any and all forms of religion in India, many of which share few if any common features. It was used to describe all sorts of beliefs and practices, from simple nature worship to the most highly sophisticated ritual and philosophical systems. Hinduism is a vast religious tradition, encompassing various and contradictory strands and ideas. It has usually defied all the usual strategies for categorization and classification. There is no founder, no definitive scripture, no centralized authority, no single supreme god, no creed of essential beliefs, and no heresy. Thus, it would be more accurate to think of the religion as Hinduisms rather than Hinduism, since this would reflect the rich diversity one encounters" (Lochtefeld, 2002, vii).

the Anthropocene epoch. In the following sections, we shall explore the Vedic scriptures and texts sacred to Hindu life to highlight how environment/nature is revered as an equal entity and how human life is shaped by such philosophy.

3.2 Ecology in Hindu Philosophical Texts

Environment consists of two components namely living organisms (biotic) and non-living materials (abiotic). In the *Atharvaveda*, words such as *Vritavrita* (12.1.52), *Abhivāraḥ* (1.32.4), *Āvṛtāḥ* (10.1.30), *Parivṛtā* (10.8.31) have been used for the environment (*Paryāvaraṇa).* The Vedic literature, considered to be the foundational text of Hindu practices, provides glimpses of environmental protection, ecological balance, weather cycles, hydrologic cycles, rainfall phenomena and related subjects through hymns and rituals. In the Hindu consciousness, there is no duality between the environment and man. For example, it has been proclaimed that all the entities proceed forth from Brahma and return to the same.[2] This idea has been explained using a simile of fire and sparks in the *Mundaka Upanishad*: "This is true; as from the flaming fire issue forth, by thousands, sparks of the same form, so from the immortal proceed, good youth, diverse *jivas* and they find their way back into it" (Sastri, 1905, 2.1.1). The *Rig Veda,* the oldest of the Vedas, contains several verses that highlight the interconnectedness of humans and nature. This connectedness operates at two levels. First, since all creatures and plants are the manifestations of Brahma/God himself there is a filial tie amongst all; the metaphor of river and sea is used to explain this relationship in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (Patrick, 1998, 253, 6.10.1). Secondly, *Chandogya Upanishad* (Patrick, 1998, 253, 6.10.2) says in very explicit terms that Brahma alone is not responsible for the creation of a particular *jīva* (the microcosm), the individual soul contributes to the creation through their own *karmas*. The pure Existence thus binds all karmas of a *jīva*/soul to give it a physical shape. That trees have life on account of a spirit (*jīva*) is made clear in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.11.1-2). A tree will not die, like a human being, till the spirit/soul (*jīva*) leaves the tree/body. The conversation between Gargya and Ajatashartu (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.1.1-12) reveals that one may meditate on numerous phenomena (like lightning, shadow) or the objects of nature (like space, air, fire, water, mirror, sound, and directions) which are to be meditated as Brahman (see Patrick, 1998). But one must transcend one's awareness to higher planes of consciousness. The objects of nature here signify worldly riches. If one meditates upon them only, at some stage, their exploitation will take place. On the contrary, if one meditates on Brahma, one's identification with all (*sarvātmabhāva*) takes place and the exploitation of nature does not take place. This conversation not only highlights the spiritual accent of the soul to merge with Brahma but also underscores the need to conserve nature.

[2] It is very explicit in the following pronouncements of Lord Krishna: "Earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect, and ego—these are eight components of My material energy." (*Bhagavad Gita* 7.4.) and "I am the source of the entire creation, and into Me it again dissolves" (*Bhagavad Gita* 7.6).

The Vedic seers do not see the earth, fire, cloud and food as independent units but conceive them as dependent elements on one another. For example, in the *Atharvaveda*, the three coverings of our surroundings are referred to as *Chandamsi*:

> Sages and scholars of Shastra and Vedas study and foster three joyous gifts of nature and divinity, versatile in form, sensitively satisfying and universally illuminative for body, sense and mind and the soul. For this purpose, they are waters for taste and sweetness, winds for energy of prana, and herbs for strength and alleviation of pain. All these three are vested and concentrated in the same source, Nature (Ram, 2013, 509, verses 18.1.17).

In *Yajurveda* (3.5) the fire element is said to be present in the earth, sky and heaven (cloud) (Griffith, 1899). The Vedic literature often portrays nature as sacred and divine. For example, the *Aitareya Upanishad* (3.3) proclaims that the Universe consists of five elements representing the states of matter in nature often called the "*Panch Mahabhoot*" (the macrocosm): Earth (Bhumi), Water (Jal), Light (Prakash), Air (Vayu) and Ether (Aakash). In *Prashna Upanishad* these elements are considered manifestations of one divine energy: "He created Prana; from Prana faith, akasa, air, fire, water, earth, senses, mind and food; and from food, strength, contemplation, mantras, karma and worlds; and in worlds name also" (Sastri, 1928, 6.4). The *Rig Veda* venerates deities that are responsible for maintaining the requisite balance in the functioning of all entities of Nature whether the *Bhumi*/earth (plains including mountains), *Jal*/water (lakes/rivers), *Aakash*/Ether (heaven), *Vayu*/Air, *Prakash*/Light and the *aranya*/forests (Griffith, 1896). Again, the Hindus believe that God pervades everywhere and in every being: "All this is Brahman. Everything comes from Brahman, everything goes back to Brahman, and everything is sustained by Brahman" (Lokeswarananda, 1998, 3.14.1). Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* refers to two types of his (Brahma's) energy: the material energy (*prakṛitiḥ*) which consists of the following eight components: earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect, and ego, and the soul energy (*jīva śhakti*) which is manifested in all the living beings. Lord Krishna proclaims very clearly that he is the source of the entire creation, and into him, it again dissolves (Swarupananda, 2000, 165–166, verses 7.4-6).

In this philosophical background, it is no wonder that from the earliest days of the Sanatan civilization, reverence for the environment has been an integral part of Hindu society. The Hindus feel God's presence around them through nature; they consider all the natural forces to be the manifestations of the Supreme Being or God named Brahman. This perspective encourages humans to treat nature with reverence and respect. Hindus, therefore, worship/revere stars (like Sun, Moon, Jupiter, Saturn, etc.), mountains (like Govardhan, Kailash, Kamadgiri, Nanda Devi, etc.), trees (like Vat, Peepal, Neem, Tulsi, etc.), oceans (like Kshirasagara, Samudra Devta, etc.), lakes (Panch Sarovar like Mansarovar, Narayan Sarovar, Brahma Sarovar, etc.), rivers (like Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada, Brahmaputra, etc.), water bodies (like a Well or a *Stepwell,* etc.), animals (like Nandi, Elephant, Cow, Snake, etc.), birds (like Garuda, Peacock, Swan, Crow, etc.), and insects (like Black Ants, Spider and Honey Bees, etc.).

As mentioned earlier the "Panch Mahabhoot" (five elements) in different proportions are responsible for the creation of different objects including the human body.

For example, the human body consists of 72% water, 12% earth, 6% air, 4% fire and the rest is ether. Each element is responsible for different structures in the body. Usually, the percentages of the first four elements remain constant but the percentage of ether can be enhanced. The source of chronic (self-manifested) diseases is the impurity of any of the elements or if the elements are out of balance with another element in the body. Similarly, a disturbance in the percentage of any constituent of the environment beyond certain limits disturbs the natural balance and any change in the natural balance causes problems for the living creatures in the universe. The *Rig Veda* venerates deities that are responsible for maintaining the requisite balance in the functioning of all entities of Nature whether the mountains, lakes, heaven and earth, the forests, or the waters (Griffith, 1896). Rigvedic hymns are largely devoted to the deities/gods (*devta*) like Indra, Adityas, Agni, Apas, Aśvins, Brhaspati, Dyáuṣ Pitŕ̥, Maruts, Mitra Aditi, Parjanya (Rain), Pṛthvī Mātŕ̥, Pushan, the Rbhus, Sarasvati River, Savitr (Sun), Soma, Vayu, Varuna, Ushas and many others who are just the geological aspects of nature. They are the presiding deities of the respective natural phenomena. If the natural devastation is an expression of their wrath, the natural benevolence in the form of wind, rain, sun, etc. is an expression of their kindness. Collectively these gods are called Vasus (8), Rudras (11) and Adityas (12), they are by their nature—donors/givers (hence *devta*) (see Oldenberg, 1988 & MacDonell, 1897). Along with the heaven and earth the Vasus, Rudras and the Adityas constitute the 33 Devas. The hymns of the *Rig Veda* glorify the gods to appease them; they are regarded as the rulers who protect men and dispense happiness (Griffith, 1896). Similarly, many hymns are meant to seek the blessings of these gods. People in Vedic days, therefore, were careful to refrain from activities that could cause harm to Nature's bounties. It was understood that the well-being of Mother Earth depended on the preservation and sustenance of the environment.

In *Rig Veda* (1.89.4) the earth has been described as our mother and Dyau/sky (heaven) as the father who is being requested to send proper medicines (Griffith, 1896). This indicates that the Vedic rishis considered human beings to be sustained by them and the humans were not the masters of the earth but were expected to receive the fruits with gratefulness. In *Rig Veda* (4.1.10) Dyauṣ (the Ṛigvedic sky deity) is identified as the begetter, and it is said that he as "Heaven, the father" showers true blessings (Griffith, 1896). Dyauṣ appears in the verses dedicated to the Visvadevaś, who are a regiment of gods dedicated to multiple universal functions, including—time, speech, dawn, and winds. In the *Rig Veda*, the blissful nature of the environment has been noted. It provides bliss to people leading their lives perfectly. The winds bring sweetness (rewards); the rivers bliss us with sweet water and provide us health, night, morning, and vegetation. The sun blesses us with a peaceful life and the cows provide us with milk (*Rig Veda*, 1.90.6) (Griffith, 1896). In the *Rig Veda, Pṛthivī* is invoked in hymns dedicated to Heaven and Earth. *Pṛthivī* often called Bhūmi or the Earth is personified as a loving, caring and all-powerful goddess in the Vedic literature. There is only one sukta in *Rig Veda* (V. 84) addressed to Prithvi/ Earth (Griffith, 1896). In this *sukta,* the strength and might of the earth as the bearer of the mountains and sustainer of the forest and as the cause of clouds/rains has been

described. Earth as a female deity enjoys an exalted position in the *Atharvaveda*; she is the dispenser of every sort of good.

The Hindus do not view the earth as an inanimate or non-living thing; rather they view it as a living entity which is efficient, effective and self-sustaining. The earth is viewed as a mother; without a mother, creation and procreation come to a standstill. These ideas have very well been documented in The *Bhumi Sukta* or *Prithvi Sukta* of the *Atharva Veda* (12.1-63). It describes the beauty of the earth in poetic, mystical and very realistic terms. It is unquestionably the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. It holds the ethical position that material prosperity is not an end in itself. The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature in all forms of life is expressed at its best; the ecological theme in the sixty-three verses dedicated to Mother Earth is so clear in this Sukta. The hymns to Mother Earth in the Sukta present a striking cosmogonic sequence.

The earth is the source and dwelling place of all creatures, not for the different races of men alone (*Atharva Veda* 12. 15). It is composed of mountains and plains, snow-clad peaks, deserts, oceans and rivers, lakes and streams, trees and plants, rocks and stones (*Atharva Veda* 12. 26–27). She is called *Vasudha* for containing all wealth and *Hiranyavaksha* for having a golden bosom. However, the vitals of the earth are not for excavation with a craving, rather her gifts are to be used with all care. We are cautioned in the very first mantra of the *sukta* (12.1.1) which states—that the Earth sustains truth, cosmic order, initiation, penance, Brahman and sacrifice. The *Prithvi Sukta* (12.1-63) depicts the importance, nature, and remarkable features of the universal Mother Earth—considered to be not only a devi but also a living body.[3] This is a wide earth which supports varieties of herbs, oceans, rivers, mountains, hills, etc. She gives us water as a mother gives milk to her son (12.1.10). She has at places different colours as dark, tawny and white. She is raised in some places and lowered in some places. She is the representative of the universe and holds everything. The seer suggests the principle of replenishment: “And whatever is wanted of you for such growth, Prajapati, first self-manifest Divinity and father creator and sustainer of life forms, in the course of creative evolution and the Law of Mutability, replenishes and fulfils” (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.61). It has also been suggested to look at every entity of Nature with the eyes of a friend and sympathiser: “Let all the creatures of the world see us with friendly eyes, And we should also look at all the living beings with a friendly attitude. Lord! Please give us such a *sadmegha*, May the eye of a

[3] In the 1970s, a British scientist named James Lovelock put forth a hypothesis that viewed the Earth as a single organism and suggested that living organisms on Earth interact with their physical and chemical surroundings to form a synergizing and self-regulating complex system that co-evolves life on Earth. He named it the Gaia Hypothesis—Gaia being the Goddess Mother Earth in Greek Mythology and popularized ‘geophysiology’ (Lovelock, 1979). According to Lovelock, the evolution of Earth and the life forms on Earth was a tightly coupled process and not separate parallel processes. The Earth’s habitability, the global temperature, its oxygen-rich atmosphere, the ocean salinity, and its relatively stable climate are maintained in a state of homeostasis not just by abiotic processes but regulated by the beings on her and by Gaia herself, as a superorganism. ‘Gaia Theory’ is supported and backed by numerous scientific experiments and the theory is being researched further in the multidisciplinary fields of Earth science, evolutionary biology, and biogeochemistry (Lovelock, 1979).

friend awaken, God bless us" (*Yajur Veda* 36.18). It is she who diversifies men's speech into different languages. Hence, she is addressed as the mother of all and the human beings as children, *mata bhumih putro ham prithivyah* (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.12). Therefore, a Hindu seeks forgiveness before digging the land and promises not to injure her vitals or her heart (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.34–35): "Whatever I may dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again; let me not hit thy vitals nor thy heart, O cleansing one" (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.35). This is also a sort of injunction for stopping mankind from over-exploiting the earth by means of digging.

3.3 Plants in Indian Life

The Indian approach to plants can be perceived through Indian texts and people's attitudes and practices. The importance of trees in human life can be gauged from the fact that the service of one tree to mankind is told to be equal to that of ten sons in *Matsya Purana* (154.511-512) (Oudh, 1916). It is a common tradition that in one's lifetime, a Hindu is supposed to plant at least five trees, popularly known as *Panchvati*: Banyan (*Vata*, Ficus benghalensis), *Ashvattha* (*Peepal*, Ficus religiosa), Bengal Quince (Bilva, Aegle marmelos), Indian Gooseberry (*Aonla*, Phyllanthus emblica) and Ashoka (Saraca asoca). In some texts the following three are also included in the *panchvati:* Cluster Fig (*Gular*, Ficus racemosa), Neem (Azadirachta indica) and Indian Mesquite (*Shami*, Prosopis spicigera); in *Varah Purana* (172.36) seven types of plants have been recommended. It may be noted that only two of these are fruit-bearing trees but all these trees are medicinal in nature. There is a full chapter entitled "In Praise of Planting Trees" (*Padma Purana, Sṛṣṭi-khaṇḍa*, Chapter 58) showering praises on the one who plants especially an *Ashvattha* (*Peepal*) tree on the bank of a tank/lake. Several benefits highlighting the conservation of nature in a sustainable manner have been counted in planting a tree. In the *Anushashan Parva* of *Mahabharata* (18.58.31) also it has been desired that trees should be planted near water tanks and they should be protected like a son (Ganguli, 1998). Louise Fowler-Smith in her book *Sacred Trees of India* (2022) has emphasised that cultural reverence towards trees can stop deforestation and commodification of nature. Based on her fieldwork in India, she has underpinned the Buddhist, Indian Muslim, Hindu, and Adivasi traditions of veneration towards nature and trees. In two of his seminal texts *Response in the Living and Non-Living* (1902) and *The Nervous Mechanism of Plants* (1926), Jagadis Chandra Bose (1858–1937) argued about the response mechanisms in plants (see Tandon, 2019), but a Sanatani-Hindu has never doubted the life in plants. The following six modifications of the body of a living being (life) have been indicated in Indian tradition in Yaska's *Nirukta*: *Asti* (existence), *Jayate* (birth), *Vardhate* (growth), *Viparinamate* (change), *Apakshiyate* (decay), *Vinasyati* (death) (Sarup, 1998). Since a plant undergoes all the six, it is a living being. In the 184th chapter of Shanti Parva of *Mahabharata* there is a detailed dialogue between Rishi Bhardwaj and Rishi Bhrigu to prove that a tree is not only a living being but also has all the five senses and can feel pain/sorrow and happiness. Rishi Bhrigu makes

the following statement based on his observation very convincingly: "When trees are cut, new shoots grow from them and they accept happiness and sorrow. From this I conclude that the trees too are living beings; they are not unconscious" (Ganguli, 1998, Ch 184. 17). In conformity with the above Hindus do not disturb the plants at night for they believe that a plant has gone to sleep. Hindus not only apologise but also pray to the plant before collecting some parts from it. They do not touch the Tulsi plant on Sundays. Simply planting certain trees is not sufficient for a Hindu; he is also expected to consecrate trees and gardens for their preservation. The entire process has been described in the *Agni Purana* (*vṛkṣa-pratiṣṭhā* 70.1-8) (Gangadharan, 1954).

The Rig Veda prays that forests should remain green and the trees may not be destroyed (*Rigveda*, 8.1.13) (Griffith, 1896). A verse in the *Yajur Veda* (6.22) prays to the Lord of Justice that things like water, refreshments, trees, herbs, and milk (cow) should also not be destroyed or polluted. Cutting down a part of a tree or uprooting one is a cognizable offence that attracts punishment in the *Puranas* and elsewhere. For example, the *Agni Purana* mentions that if branches, trunks, and roots of a shady trees like banyan, mango, etc. are cut, the offender should be awarded corporal punishment according to the standard scale: "The fine is forty (paṇas) for lopping the branches, trunk of the tree or the whole tree that is growing and providing sustenance" (258.25) (Gangadharan, 1954). The *Agni Purana* (152.3) states if a Brahmin cuts a tree, he is to perform a special Yagya and carry out certain religious rituals to get him freed from the sins (Gangadharan, 1954). It is further said that if branches, trunks, and roots of shady trees like Banyan, Mango, etc. are cut, the offender should be awarded corporal punishment according to the standard scale (258.25) (Gangadharan, 1954). In *Matsya Purana* (227. 91–94) too, the cutting and felling of plants without permission a punishable offence (Oudh, 1916). The Purana prescribes degrees of punishment commensurate with the gravity of the offence.

In different parts of the country, several religious festivals are celebrated to connect one with the trees. For example, *the Haryali* or *Harela* festival is celebrated in the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand. It is called Hariyali/Rihyali in Kangra, Shimla and Sirmour regions, and Dakhrain in Jubbal and Kinnaur regions of Himachal Pradesh. This festival is celebrated on the first day of Shravan-Maas (Shravan-Sankranti/ Kark-Sankranti), as per the Hindu Lunar calendar. Harela means "Day of Green" and Agriculture-based communities in the region consider it highly auspicious, as it marks the beginning of the sowing cycle in their fields. This symbolizes a new harvest and the rainy season. It has become a common practice to attribute the slogan—"Save The Environment" to Harela. Ten days before the due date, five or seven types of seeds are sown in buckets by the head of every family. Water is then sprinkled over them. After the due time, but before the actual celebration, a mock wedding is done by the young ones. This is followed by people worshipping the statues of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The harvested herbs (also called by the same name, harela) are taken as God's blessings. Elders of the home put harela on the heads of others, touching the harela from their head to feet. A blessing verse is also chanted while putting Harela. People also eat the seeds of the new harvest after heating them. In Chhattisgarh, a festival called *hareli* (हरेली) is celebrated on no moon day of Shrawan (Hariyali Amavasya). The agricultural implements are cleaned on this day. In rainy season,

there is a risk of different types of diseases in the crops. The farmers, therefore, pray that their crops should not suffer from any disease and that the environment should also remain safe. On the day, the farmers worship their fields and crops with incense, lamps and *Akshat*. In the puja, leaves, twigs and Dashmool (a type of thorny plant) of the Bhilwa tree are specially planted in the standing crop and worshipped. Farmers believe that this protects them from many types of harmful insects and diseases occurring in their crops. It will be pertinent to note that harvest festivals are a pan-India phenomenon. These festivals are thanksgiving to nature for blessing the communities with a good harvest. These festivals are known by different names in different parts of India (Magh Bihu (Assam), Pongal (Tamil Nadu), Lohri (Punjab), Tusu (Southwest of West Bengal, Southeast of Jharkhand, Northeastern Odisha as well in the Tea-State of Assam), and la Loi (Sindh province) etc.) because of linguistic and cultural variations. However, they exhibit gratefulness towards nature's blessing. Special mention may be made to Kati Bihu (also called Kongali Bihu, meaning poor), an agrarian festival celebrated by lighting an earthen lamp (saki/Akaxh Banti) on high bamboo poles in paddy fields and under Tulsi plants in the homestead. This ritual is performed so that the communities may be blessed with a good harvest. The subservient approach towards nature and worshipping the spirit in nature highlights the reverence of the Indian communities towards nature. In her book, *Sacred Trees of India* Louise Fowler-Smith rightfully shows that contemporary Indian tree-worship presents a powerful alternative to the Western capitalist commodification of nature that has contributed to the current ecological crisis.

Much like the trees, the Hindus also consider the animals as sacred. Hindus believe in the ten reincarnations (avatars) of Lord Vishnu who descended on this earth to restore cosmic order. The first six avatars need consideration here. In the order of their appearance, they are *Matsya* (fish, in *Sata Yuga*), *Kurma* (turtle), *Varaha* (boar), *Narasimha* (man-lion), *Vamana* (dwarf-god, *Treta Yuga*) and Parashurama (angry warrior). Haldane views these reincarnations in the light of Darwin's theory of evolution and finds a perfect synchrony between the two (Haldane, 1959). In his essay Haldane also mentions that many eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism "animals have rights and duties" (Haldane, 1959, 357). Indian art and religion depicted divinity in various animal forms. Kindness toward other species has long been an accepted tradition, at least in theory, if not always in practice, in India. Dronamraju notes, "There are no parallels in the traditions of Europe and North America" (Dronamraju, 2018, 8). The *Padma Purana* (Section 1—*Sṛṣṭi-khaṇḍa*) gives the details about the creation of the world as has been done in the Book of Genesis in the Bible. The only difference is that the Puranic descriptions are more detailed. While Chap. 3 of the section deals with the kinds of creation, Chap. 6 deals with the birth of *devas, daityas*, birds and serpents, etc. Creation of the movables like gods, demons, manes and human beings, spirits, goblins, *gandharvas* and groups of celestial nymphs, *siddhas*, *kinnaras*, demons, lions, birds, beasts and reptiles and the immovables like rice, barley, and wheat, *aṇu*, sesamum, long pepper, *kovidāra* (trees), *kodrava* (grains), beans, *masūra* (pulse), *niṣpāva*, *kulutthaka* (pulse), *aḍhaka* (grains), grams, hemp, priyaṅgu, *śyāmāka* grain, wild rice, peas, *gavedhu* (grass), bamboo-seeds and *markataka* grain are mentioned (*Padma*

Purana 1.3.145-150) (Deshpande, 1951). The killing of insects, worms and birds, is considered to be a defiling act (*mahapatak*) in *Agni Purana* (168.40). Harming or killing of a cow/animal on any account like keeping it bound, obstructing its movement, yoking it, the tying of the bell or ornament, some mishap (to the cow) in the forests, mountains, inaccessible (terrain) and (due to) sickness is also considered to be a sin for which expiation is needed (*Agni Purana* 169.5-10). If (a cow or ox) dies on account of taming (goading) or chaining or confining or yoking to a cart or (while being tied) to the pillar, chain or rope one has to do a certain kind of expiation (*Agni Purana* 169.5-11). The harm caused to the animal when the horn or the bone (of a cow) has been broken or the tail has been cut off also requires to be atoned (*Agni Purana* 169.5-12) Atonement is to be practised separately for every killing if a herd of cows has been killed accidentally (*Agni Purana* 169.5-13-14). The process of expiation for torturing and killing a cow/ox etc. has been mentioned in the *Agni Purana* (173.10-12). Even killing a cat or an alligator or a mongoose or a frog or a dog or a bird is considered a sin for which expiation is needed (*Agni Purana* 173.20).

3.4 Non-vegetarianism and Animal Sacrifice

A Hindu practices the religion of universal compassion; he keeps his lust, wrath, and cupidity under control; all these are not limited to the human world only but are extended to all creatures. The one who, for the motives of his happiness, harms other harmless creatures is condemned because the same Brahaman (Brahma), as manifests in human beings, dwells in animals too. In the *Mahabharata* (13.113.5) it is written that the person who regards all creatures as his self and behaves towards them as towards his self, laying aside the rod of chastisement and completely subjugating his wrath, succeeds in attaining happiness (Ganguli, 1998).

It may be argued that if the Hindus love the animals so much why the animals are sacrificed and why so many Hindus are non-vegetarians? Before answering the question, let us have a look at some of the verses in the *Vishnu Purana* that hint at the scriptural debate on the issue: “If, mighty demons, you cherish a desire either for heaven or for final repose, desist from the iniquitous massacre of animals (for sacrifice), and hear from me what you should do. Know that all that exists is composed of discriminative knowledge” (*Vishnu Purana* 3.18.15) (Wilson, 1840). In the same Purana, after a few verses, an argument against animal sacrifice is also presented though it is called the heretical argument of the foes of the gods (Asuras): “If an animal slaughtered in religious worship is thereby raised to heaven, would it not be expedient for a man who institutes a sacrifice to kill his own father for a victim?” (*Vishnu Purana* 3.18. 26) (Wilson, 1840). This to highlight that the debate between the proponents of animal sacrifice (or non-vegetarianism) and those who oppose it (i.e. the vegetarians) cuts across various philosophical systems. Those who are against animal sacrifice but do not dare to go against the authority of the Vedic texts advance a very weak argument saying: “sacrificial violence mentioned in the Vedic texts

is no violence" (*वैदिकी हिंसा, हिंसा न भवति, Vaidiki himsa na bhavati*). Acharya Shri Ram Sharma of Gayatri Parivar fame explains that there is no mention of sacrificial violence in the sacred Hindu texts and the meaning of certain words has wrongly been derived and deciphered because of which such a situation has occurred.

Non-violence is one of the five *dakshinas* in *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.17.4). It is one of the five restraints mentioned in *Yogasutra* (2.30) and the ten in *Shandliya Upanishada* (Chap. 1): *ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, daya, arjava, kshama, dhrti, mitahara and shaucha.* The meaning of non-violence is very wide in the Upanishads as it includes causing no pain to any living being at any time through the actions of one's mind, speech, or bodily actions. The thought continues even in the *Mahabharata* (13.114.4). At several places in the *Mahabharata* (13.116.28-29) it has been reiterated that non-violence is the ultimate dharma/cardinal duty. There are three chapters (nos. 114, 115 and 116) devoted to the condemnation of non-vegetarianism, drinking and violence in the *Anushasana Parva* of the *Mahabharata.* They highlight the love and respect that the Hindus have for the lives of animals and birds. The most common form of violence against animals daily is in the form of slaying them to obtain flesh which cannot be had from grass or wood or stone. The sage argues that if there were nobody who ate flesh there would then be nobody to kill the living creatures. The man, who slaughters living creatures, kills them for the sake of the person who eats flesh. If flesh were regarded as inedible, there would then be no slaughter of living creatures. It is for the sake of the eater that the slaughter of living creatures goes on in the world. Vyas concludes that the fault lies in eating meat. The *Mahabharata* (13.114.10) declares that men of wisdom who are endowed with penances never consume meat. Various kinds of demerits, ills, vices and punishments have been associated with eating meat (including taking honey) in the text. The question of why one eats meat has also been asked and Vyas spells out two reasons: to build muscles (13.115.12, 34, 13.116.7, 13.116.7) and to gratify the sense of taste. According to the taste, three types of meat are consumed: that cooked with all types of spices, that cooked with only salt and just saltless (13.114.14). As any action taken involves three steps, in the case of non-vegetarianism too three steps are there: desire (to eat meat), words (exhortation for eating meat) and taste (consuming meat); any person associated with any of these three is called a non-vegetarian and shall have retribution accordingly. Non-vegetarian food includes meat coming from a slain (by self or others) or dead animal/bird for free or by purchase; therefore, a vegetarian needs to discard meat in any form, irrespective of its source and in action, word and thought (*Mahabharata* 13.115.38-39). A person who is a vegetarian in his eating habits but helps in spreading non-vegetarianism by way of recommending meat or running a business that promotes non-vegetarianism (like running a piggery farm or running an abattoir etc., or cooks meat), is also ordained to be a sinner (*Mahabharata* 13.115.39, 42-43). The text also encourages a person to turn vegetarian at any stage of one's life (*Mahabharata* 13.115.44, 53, 55–57). However, some verses seem to make an exception for sacrificial meat, but all these verses can also be interpreted differently as has been done by Acharya Shi Ram Sharma. In contradistinction to such verses stands the following verse that condemns animal sacrifice in the name of

Vaidic rituals: "The flesh-greedy, foolish and wretched person who commits violence against living beings in the name of Vedic rituals like Yagya, Yaga etc. goes to hell" (*Mahabharata*, 13.115.43). This settles the matter and it can be said with authority that Hindus are all for seeing humans, animals, and birds as equals.

3.5 Conclusion

While these traditions had been very strongly followed in pre-colonial India, with the coming of colonial rule and the modern education system, these practices have slowly waned and now remain peripheral for a modernly educated Indian. The modern Indian mind has not only emulated the colonial structures of governance in India, but they have also otherised their image as "uncivilised." The colonial process of creation and sustenance of the image of the other through stereotyping has been explained by Bhabha:

> Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determination, guilt aggressivity; the masking and splitting of "official" and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse (Bhabha, 2015, 117).

Therefore, the creation of "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835, 8) not only exhibits an epistemic violence and injustice (see Karmakar & Chetty, 2023), but also the effectuation and retention of colonial domination through consent (see Viswanathan, 2015). Macaulay very subtly changed the Indian critical minds to copying/cramming minds. From his letter written to his father from Calcutta, his plan of converting India to a servile nation by tearing apart its culture and religion through the introduction of European education comes to the fore (See Trevelyan, 1876). As a result, the fertile Hindu mind has been rendered as fossilised. Sartre (1961) explains the process through which the European elites manufactured the native elites through Western cultures in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Therefore, it will not be surprising when one finds the uneducated (rather unlettered people) living according to the Indian philosophical tenets and the educated (products of the modern education system) considering their beliefs to be superstitions. One may wonder at this chasm. The modern education system in India continues to propagate colonial knowledge and has made no efforts to decolonise Indian minds through Indian Knowledge Systems. Everything Indian is looked at with suspicion and every idea is discarded as dated without any scrutiny. The present-day Indian ecological crisis in India is a creation of such a modern education system. The rampant felling of trees, the terraforming in critical areas causing landslides, erosion, artificial floods and cloudbursts, generating tons of plastic waste and utter disregard for non-human life forms have become an anathema of the modern education system. Therefore, a complete overhauling of

the education system is required so that the importance of indigenous knowledge systems may be included in the curriculum from the formative years of the child.

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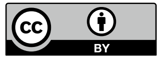

Chapter 4
Cultural Practices and Indigenous Traditions of the Garo and Bodo: Reinterpreting 'Man-Nature' Convergences in Wangala and Bathou

Namrata Pathak and Rustam Brahma

Abstract The chapter, by deviating from the current debates on the morbid and disastrous turn in Anthropocenic discourses, aims to create an 'alternative space' that invests in the porousness of 'man-nature' borders, the constant negotiations and exchanges between them by looking at Indigenous cultural forms of the Garo and Bodo as a meeting point of both agential power and 'naturalness' of ecospheres. By reading the different stages of the Wangala festival of the Garo and Bathou of the Bodo, this chapter analyzes how such cultural practices are embodied performances of a community rooted in the region's landscapes displaying a localized human-nature alignment that counters Western anthropocentricism. The discussion also considers how these cultural practices are connected to human production systems and in the process become a means to archive cultural conservation, patterns of shifting cultivation, and an Indigenous community's movement through various sociopolitical pathways. Moreover, the chapter places Wangala at the heart of agricultural activities related to tended landscapes such as clearing, planting, ritual activities, pruning, weeding, harvesting, and resource pooling, thus highlighting a symbiotic human-nature conjunction. Bathou is located in the Bodo Indigenous landscape that relies on the organic growth of the cosmic whole, a conceptual framework that takes into its fold an ecocentric worldview countering Western cultural practices.

Keywords Anthropocene · Bathou · Wangala · Indigeneity · The North East · Cultural performance

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4.1 Introduction

The Western narrative of Anthropocene totalizes "the entirety of human actions into a single 'human activity' generating a single human footprint on the Earth" (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2017, 45). In a geological unit of time, the Anthropos acts as a "protagonist" that excludes "the other, more differentiated perspectives on the causation of phenomena such as climate change" leading to the "marginalization of the nonhuman forms of agency and matter" (Durbeck & Hupkes, 2021, n.p). Also, we can contend that the Western "logics of the Anthropocene" are based on "ontologies of exploitation and extermination" (Giuliani, 2021, n.p). Concurrently, this "genealogy of modern fears" extends to a decadent future marked by death and debilitation, an adverse nature revolting against us and striking back through "climate change, ocean acidification, air pollution, toxic waste and devastated land" (Giuliani, 2021, 3). In this context, Gaia Giuliani opines that the present European and Western constructions of the narratives of disaster are linked to "white anxieties and moral panic over the migrant 'invasion', 'terrorism' and the ultimate catastrophe" (2021, 5). This terror is invariably contextualized in the Western apocalyptic (environmental) narratives on planetary crises. Exploring the lopsided relationship between man and nature in these narratives, Giuliani further mentions that, "the omen of planetary catastrophe reveals the impossible task of keeping the environment out of the political since human supremacy over nature is no longer a given" (2021, 3).

The "novelty" of the Anthropocene lies in the "planetary scale earth-systemic perspectives on the human–environment interactions" that carry "a capacity to amplify positive feedback loops between earth-systems" (Durbeck & Hupkes, 2021, n.p). The ethical question of human responsibility for the environment, therefore, is reoriented when the affirming correspondences between humans and nonhumans in local ecologies are considered. Further on, the complex and differentiated "terraforming assemblages" include a whole range of diverse spheres and processes ranging from microorganisms to media technologies (Woods, 2014, 134; Haraway, 2016; Parikka, 2015). Deviating from the current debates on the morbid and disastrous turn in Anthropocenic discourses, the chapter creates an 'alternative space' that invests in the porousness of 'man-nature' borders, the constant negotiations and exchanges between them by looking at Indigenous cultural forms of the Garo and Bodo as a meeting point of both agential power and 'naturalness' of ecospheres. In the community life of both the Garo and Bodo, the reconfiguration of the borders and boundaries between Life/Nonlife and Nature/Culture directs us to new visual imaginaries of "non-exploitative, caring and decolonized constellations" of thoughts and possibilities (Bettini, 2021, cited in Giuliani, 2021, n.p). This exhibits a heterogeneous mosaic of perspectives and ideas that critique Anthropocene as a "master narrative" of humanity that fails to embrace the pluralities of life and matter (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2017, 45).

The Indigenous traditions of the Garo and Bodo draw on an "ecologist epistemology" that conceptualizes nature as a "body politic," a provider of "a habitat or the resources that support life" (Giuliani, 2021, 4). Nature is not only a central propeller

of the cultural life of both the Garo and Bodo, but it is also a space characteristic of an interesting "trans-corporeality", "interactivity" and "interdependency of Life and Nonlife" (Giuliani, 2021, 6–7). Both Wangala and Bathou erase the spatial and symbolic distance between the 'given' and 'manufactured' by encapsulating an interesting mobility 'outside', 'within' and 'beyond', thus creating an organic whole that wipes off "the social, political, and cultural distinctions through which identities are constituted" (Nuzzo, 2013, 58). In the community life of the Garo and Bodo, we discern an interesting equivalence that goes beyond the arbitrary distinctions between the *bios* (social organisation) and *zoe* (biological structure of life) (Kant, 1756, cited in Clark, 2011, 90). Moreover, the chapter aims to go beyond the binaries of the 'manicured' and 'wild' by reading the cultural practices of the Garo and Bodo through a range of co-produced landscapes. By reading the different stages of the Wangala festival of the Garo and Bathou of the Bodo, this chapter analyzes how such cultural practices are embodied performances of a community rooted in the region's landscapes displaying a localized human-nature alignment that counters Western anthropocentricism. The discussion also considers how these cultural practices are connected to human production systems and in the process become a means to archive cultural conservation, patterns of shifting cultivation, and an Indigenous community's movement through various sociopolitical pathways. Moreover, the chapter places Wangala at the heart of agricultural activities related to tended landscapes such as clearing, planting, ritual activities, pruning, weeding, harvesting, and resource pooling, thus highlighting a symbiotic human-nature conjunction. Bathou is located in the Bodo Indigenous landscape that relies on the organic growth of the cosmic whole, a conceptual framework that takes into its fold an ecocentric worldview countering Western cultural practices.

4.2 North East India: Diverse Indigenous Ecological Traditions

North East India[1] exhibits a rich diversity of geography, flora and fauna, ethnicity, belief system, and tradition. It is home to many Indigenous communities. T. Raatan observes

> The area is characterized by rich biodiversity, heavy precipitation and high seismicity. It is endowed with forest wealth and is ideally suited to produce a whole range of plantation crops, spices, fruits and vegetables and flowers and herbs. The rich natural beauty, serenity and exotic flora and fauna of the area are invaluable resources for the development of eco-tourism. (2014, 9)

He further comments that "The North East is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in India" (Raatan, 2014, 10). Though colonial modernity has re-contoured the social, political, and cultural terrains of the North East

[1] North East India is a culturally and geographically different region from mainstream India that includes eight states located in the North Eastern region of the country.

after the British set foot into the region, the Indigenous traditions of the communities dwelling in the region are not lost. In this context, we can rope in Dan Smyer Yü's idea of "the Indigenous as an inclusive term" (Yü, 2017, 121). He defines Indigenous people as a group of people that possess place-specific but pan-humanly intelligible knowledge of the earth as a living being in ethical and spiritual terms. The definition also takes into its fold the dislocated people with ancestral memories of animated human-earth relationships. Indian constitution has recognized Indigenous people as tribes. Tribal communities like Bodo, Garo, Rabha, Khasi, Sonowal Kachary, Dimasa, Karbi, Tiwa, Adi, Dopla and many others from Assam and its neighbouring Indian states are enriched with their ancestral beliefs and traditions. Their ways of life show what Aldo Leopold calls "the biotic community" (Leopold, 1970). Yü observes that a marginal focus is given to Asian Indigenous ecological tradition and behaviour in the two founding texts of the study of the ecological tradition of Indigenous people of the world, *Indigenous Tradition and Ecology* (2001) and *This Sacred Earth* (2004). Similarly, Yü's essay "Asia: An Indigenous Cosmovisionary Turn in the Study of Religion and Ecology" (2017), which is concerned with Asian traditions has limited its focus to Tibetan tradition. A brief survey on the ancient beliefs and traditions of North East India would help in understanding the enriched diversity of the region and the cosmovision of the Indigenous people of the region. Many of the early Western scholars vaguely termed the Indigenous belief systems of the tribes of North East India as animism. But a close study of these traditions falsifies this Western prejudiced opinion because in polytheism a supreme God is also worshipped along with other gods and spirits/deities. The majority of these Indigenous communities believe in Supreme God along with numerous other domestic and wild deities. Hence, Saji Varghese argues that "If viewed with this definition in mind, one may be quick to brand some of the Indigenous religions as animistic, however, most tribes like the Khasis[2] of Meghalaya, the Nagas who live in Nagaland, and the Hmars, Zeliang of Manipur, Lushai of Mizoram, Borok of Tripura believe in the existence of one supreme being, God" (2014, xviii). Now, the world is looking for the ancient traditions for their ecocentric values. On a similar ground Dan Smyer Yü observes that "The modern world is only beginning to recognize that many Indigenous modes of being have preserved living knowledge that might prove to be invaluable in the current era confronted with problems that challenge the sustainability of sentient flourishing, ecological integrity, environmental health, and interspecies ethics" (Yü, 2017, 120).

Indigenous traditions of North East India are characterized by their syncretism. Mainstream Hindu ideologies have large-scale influences on them. Many historians opined that Siva and Shakti's cult practices largely influenced the beliefs and traditions of the tribes of the region since ancient times. In this regard, Archana Barua says that "The religious tradition of the Indo-Mongoloid tribal or semi-tribal areas links up with the Brahmanical religion connected with Siva and Shakti" (1996, 27). Indeed, an element of syncretism is visible in these Indigenous religious traditions.

[2] Khasi—an Indigenous community who are primarily found in Khasi hill in Meghalaya. They have rich folk narratives.

Different religious movements of mainstream India like Saivism, Buddhism, and Vaishnavism left marks of major influences on these traditional belief systems. This event preceded the arrival of Western religions (Islam and Christianity) on the land. Bakul C. Basumatary argues,

> Besides, being influenced by the principles of Buddhism, since Bodos are believed to owe their origin to the Mongoloid-Kirata race and Confucianism and Taoism were the primary religious thoughts of the Mongoloid people particularly those of China, South East Asia and South Asia, it is quite probable that the principles of Confucianism and Taoism too had influences on the principles of Bathou. (2018, 93)

In agrarian societies, cult-related rituals are associated with agricultural activities. Along with these Father-Gods and Mother-Goddesses, many self-styled gods and goddesses or deities are also worshipped. Hence, these traditions are very close to the earth. There exists an internal diversity in the religious beliefs and traditions of these Indigenous peoples but the locus of their belief lies in the Hindu tenet that 'everything is created by the God and guarded by gods and spirits', and hence humans have no rights to put things of nature to use without seeking permission from the concerned deity and thus, they have consciousness of these spiritual connections with nature. This Indigenous consciousness earned from their "Indigenous experiences and memories" is what Yü terms "Indigenous scientific cosmovision" (Yü, 2017, 124). This Indigenous knowledge would not only help combat Anthropocene because it also opposes the Western-based 'Man-nature dualism'. Asian beliefs and traditions can be well defined from a new materialistic perspective formulated by Bergmann, Rigby and Scott in their "Introduction" to *Religion, Materialism and Ecology* (2023). Conceptually, new materialism has a connection with Mircea Eliade's concept of hierophany, theophany, and cosmophany. To Eliade, hierophany is the manifestation of the divinity of/in nature. Many Indigenous deities/gods/goddesses are associated with natural objects like animals, plants, hills/mountains, rivers, and streams that are revered as divine and supreme. Basumatary views, "In a remote pre-Christian era, people realized their limitations and acknowledged the supremacy of nature including the sun, the moon, the water, the wind, the fire, sky, so forth and so on" (2018, 2). Bodos, Khasis, Nagas, Kacharies, and Tiwas have many such deities. Bodos, Khasis, and Nagas have the concept of forest gods and goddesses. The Khasi had a tradition of rearing and keeping the serpentine creature, *U Thlen*[3] (Nongbri, 2006). These three communities believe in the concept of sacred forests. There are many forests which are considered as abodes of deities and the entry of humans is strictly prohibited in Meghalaya. Khasis believe in the spirit of the mountain (*Lei-lum*), the spirit of rivers (*Lei-Wah*), and the spirit of the village (Lei-Shnong). Khasi deity U Basa lives in the Sacred grove of Mawphlang, Meghalaya (Nongbri,2006). Zeliangrong

[3] *U Thlen*-(myth) is a serpentine creature or monster in Khasi tradition that lives on blood whose keeping is shunned in Khasi society. It is similar to the Hindu god, Kubir. One who adopts *U Thlen,* his/her wealth multiplies. He symbolically stands for human greed and ambition. Once U Suidnoh killed the creature by his cunning trick, cooked the dead monster and served the people with joy, but a woman, despite strict instruction not to leave any part of it undevoured, secretly took a piece for her grandchild. Unfortunately, she forgot to give it to him and thus, the serpentine creature came into being again and privately stayed at that lady's house (https://www.jstor.org/stable/41920000).

Naga tribe has rites and rituals of feeding all beings and spirits before sowing and planting crops. *Laorunk-ra* is the spirit of water; *dui ra* is the water god, and there are many more. In Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC)[4] area of Assam, there are certain sacred forests/hill forests where hunting and littering are strictly prohibited as they are considered as shelters of deities and spirits. *Bathou* followers among the Bodo perform pujas and rituals in those forests and hills. Shikhnajhar, Baokhungri, Narzang Bwrai-Narzang Bwrai, Nandipur (Raimana), etc. are some of such forests. *Bathou* evolves with the anthropocosmic worldview of divine-human-nature relation. The belief is that there exists a spiritual power in nature that is more powerful than humans. That idea is well connected with their concept of sacred forests, rivers, pools, and hills where different spirits and deities dwell. Several forests and hills like Nou Nwgwr Shikhnajhar (forest), Parougura (hill), Baokhungri hajw (hill), Narjang Bwrai-Narjang Bwrai (hill), Na-bhandar (brook) in the district of Kokrajhar, Assam are believed to be sacred forests and hills, abodes of gods and deities, where *Bathou* puja and *Kherai* puja are performed annually. Usually, throwing impure things and engaging in unholy activities are prohibited in those places. In some specific parts of these places, people are prevented from excreting. The traditional followers believe that numerous deities reside in the forests and they should not be disturbed. *Bathou* and *Kherai* rituals are performed annually at Nou Nwgwr Shikhnajhar. *Bathou* as a concept and practice shows the idea of interconnectedness between man and nature. Most of the tribal communities of North East India that live quite close to nature practice nature-centric spiritual traditions and rituals. They never distinguish between man and objects of nature, and thus, they naturally inculcate a symbiotic bond. As Saji Varghese observes, “The cordiality between man and nature is a unique feature of tribal communities of North East India” (2014, xvii). He further says that “environmental degradation and the ways to prevent it, is an issue of universal significance. While we tackle this issue with an ethical response, probably the tribal societies may have an answer to this global phenomenon” (Varghese, 2014, xix).

4.3 Locating Wangala in the Sociocultural Landscapes of the Garo

People tend to “read” landscapes by gauging the strength of human signatures and most often by how a land is put to use. A fertile land is graded according to productivity and market value. Sussana B Hecht, however, refers to the precarious nature of “reading” landscapes based on human signatures as, for her, the scales in use are nothing but “epistemic blinders” that “problematically shape how these landscapes are represented” (Heise et al., 2017, 40). She cites examples of landscapes “read” as wild that have stronger human signatures and vice versa. Incidentally, what we

[4] BTC-Bodoland Territorial Council is an Autonomous Council created by the Indian Constitution on 2003, February 10 as a result of the triparty agreement among the Bodo liberation force (BLT-Bodo Liberation Tigers), Assam State and Indian governments.

understand, define, or see as agriculture is complex and layered "as the recent attention to nontimber forest products, successional management, forest tending, and an array of arboreal management has shown" (ibid). In Hecht's words,

> Problems of classifying subsistence strategies revolve around such invisibilities and hamper understanding of different paradigms of agriculture, especially when fundamentally dichotomous classifications hold sway, including those of wild versus domesticated, forest versus garden, and tended versus planted. These dichotomies obscure the complex management regimes spread over time and space that constitute the relations of people with landscapes at many scales and that construct agrodiversity in tropical livelihoods. (Heise et al., 2017, 40)

For the people of Garo Hills in Meghalaya who live close to nature, most of the colonial distinctions do not hold sway as 'landscape' is one, homogenous word that takes into its fold the symbolic, imaginary, abstract, and physical. The Indigenous belief systems of the Garo counter the colonial agenda of perceiving landscapes as "natural resources" as there are "multiple worldings" that reshape our conception of "human and nonhuman agency, change, materiality, and cosmopolitical, ecological, multispecies, and object relations" (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 26). One viable example in this regard is the conservation of specific landscapes, like the sacred groves, which is allied to the recovery and restoration of Indigenous world views through a "resurgence of interest in paleo-agriculture and early domestication" (Heise et al., 2017, 40). The Garo as a community takes collective steps to protect the sacred forests of Garo Hills by ensuring minimum human intervention in these areas. This not only leads to the reduction of carbon footprints but also the protection of endangered species and native plants.

Cultivation in the Jhum fields, according to Garo tradition, is primordial in understanding the Indigenous cultural framework of the land that connects the past to the present. Going by Garo legend, people cultivated in Jhum fields together with the spirits of the dead in Napak Hills, a place in the East Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Thus, the Jhum fields turn into spaces of dialogue and collective responsibility for both the living and dead in the arc of the everyday experience of the Garo. Moreover, the notion of environmental healing is interestingly tied to the legend of Napak Hill. As per the narrative, a woman of the Napak clan while cultivating in the Jhum fields, split the stump of a dead tree into two inviting the wrath of the ancestral spirits. In a rage, the spirits wailed that this reckless act of the woman had brought death to their mother and father. The "cosmopolitical" perception of the Garo that every object of nature has a life force including even a dead tree stump, bridges the "fissure in non-Indigenous ontologies between subject and object, human and the nonhuman" (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 28). Subsequently, the spirits decided that the land was no longer safe for inhabitation and it should be deserted by all. A mindless act of human intervention and tampering with the landscape led to unpredictable mishaps in Napak Hills. As a result, the spirits of the dead dwelling in Napak Hills ran away from the old terrain to find a new abode in Balpakram. The Garo's constant allegiance to the world of the spirits stems from the need to "build a variegated network" of human and non-human based on "resilience and sustainability" (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 36). The wider implication inherent here is the restoration of a fragmented ecological system that is interdependent on the healing of both human and

nonhuman communities (Smith 2012). This "ethic of care" at the heart of the Garo human and non-human continuum emphasizes a recursive ontology of ancient land use based on the "careful guardianship" of natural resources (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 36–37). The obligation of the Garo to a "multispecies genealogy" is powerful enough to counter the "narrative of massive anthropogenic ecological change" of present times (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 38). The "cosmogony of connection" for the Garo foregrounds the spiritual and non-human particularities of a place, calling into question colonial models of man-centric frames of knowledge (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 39).

Most of the cultural practices of the Garos revolve around different phases of Jhum cultivation. Landscapes and the changes associated with agrarian systems, therefore, not only reveal a shifting economy in the Garo Hills but also provide a perspective on Indigenous cultural practices marked by both continuity and disjuncture. The Garos' connection to their land discloses a transformational ecology that directly and indirectly depends on historical contexts—the region has seen changes of varied kinds—in the wake of colonial domination, mechanisms of modernization, and postcolonial resistance. The festival of Wangala is connected to myriad phases of Jhum cultivation in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and stands witness to the shifting dynamics of the sociocultural and political life of Garos. As one of the most prominent cultural practices of the Garos, Wangala connects land, ecology, and agriculture, serving as a constant indicator of intricately webbed human-nature relationships. Wangala performatively reflects changes in the agrarian community, as Jhum cultivation has emerged in response to the state's changing land policies, political charters, market agendas, and ecclesiastic missions. However, what remains unchanged is the human-nature convergences that Wangala embodies.

In Meghalaya, two distinct types of agricultural practices settled and shifting, are in use. Jhum cultivation, a type of cut-and-burn or burn-and-plant method of shift cultivation, is restricted in protected forests and sacred groves (Law Kyntang) and restricted forests (Law Adong). References to Jhum cultivation occur in old legends and folklore in Meghalaya. One narrative relates how a man named Bone-Neripa-Jane-Nitepa in Garo Hills cultivated rice and millet near a rock named Misi-Kokdok after clearing the land. He was responsible for spreading information about this method of cultivation. Soon, the local dwellers of the hilly regions and the villages started following in his footsteps. In the Khasi Hills, in contrast, the origin of Jhum cultivation is linked to a popular legend of the dispersal of rice seeds from a celestial tree. The wind god and the god of hail and storms acted as the forces behind this dispersal. Rice seeds were scattered and sown in neighbouring regions by the do'amik bird. Some of these seeds were also handed over to the chosen ones, the people residing in parts of Meghalaya, with detailed instructions on Jhum cultivation. From that time onward prevailed a practice of offering a portion of the harvest to the deity, Misi Saljong, as a symbolic act of paying obeisance to the powerful nurturer, protector, and guardian. These genealogical narratives not only concretize the community's allegiance to ancestor-beings, but they also bring to light how a landscape is invested with vitality and "agential matter" in the process (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 26).

The cultural practices and rituals of the Garo are linked to different phases of agricultural production. As one of the major agrarian festivals of the Garos, Wangala is held after the harvesting of the rice paddies. For the Garo, a bountiful harvest is a blessing of the deity Saljong, and the entire community must worship and pay obeisance to the deity. Through Wangala, a collective step is taken by a village or cluster of villages to satiate Saljong. This festival is celebrated with pomp, and the community's gaiety is marked by dances, songs, and feasting. After a day is set by the village head, the people prepare to celebrate Wangala. For the Ambeng Songsareks, the space of celebration, at first, is the house of the village head followed by two important initializing rituals: (1) a sacrifice to the deities and (2) the reading of an omen that suggests a healthy harvest. Then, a village shaman or priest chants the myth of creation. A significant aspect of the festival is the feeding of Songsarek deities with cooked rice. The dancers leave the village headman's house and gradually move into the courtyard outside. Wangala is performed in an open expanse, a move that unsettles the border between humans and nature. As a carrier of community knowledge and wisdom, the cultural practices of the Garo bind each member of the society to a world of renewal and plenitude.

4.4 Indigenous Corporeality and Ganna and Ambrey Dances of the Garo

Shea Murphy comments that Indigenous dancers' bodies in performance embody resistance to colonial power as they create an alternative discourse of nativism and Indigenous aesthetics. She further adds

> Indigenous dancers' bodies, despite the physical effects of colonization, are a location of ways of being and knowing, held in bodies and everyday movements. Movement practices—including contemporary movement practices—are a tool for locating and unearthing these ways of knowing. (2007, 9–10)

Dance as an "Indigenous action" not only binds the people of a community together but also acts against "the ubiquitous colonial tendencies of assimilation and erasure" by embodying an "engaged resistance" (Rader, 2011, 1). In Ganna and Ambrey's dances of the Garo, we discern an articulation of "a discourse of survivance" that generates a movement of Indigenous solidarity (ibid). As collective performances, Indigenous dances like Ambrey and Ganna actively construct a space that collapses the distinction between human and non-human by enabling the body's "persistence, and its right to persistence" which is in sync with nature (Butler, 2011, n.p).

Cultural anthropologist Erik De Maaker traces the historical trajectory of the Wangala dance, associating the performance with the Indigenous tribe residing in Garo Hills,

> Historically, Wangala dancing was but one element of the extensive social and religious life of the Ambeng Garo. The practitioners of this religion have become known as Songsareks.

> Going by the religious practices of present-day Ambeng Songsareks, as well as ethnographic sources […], Wangala was and is for the Ambeng in many ways the most important of a series of annual festivals—enabling people to advance the growth of swidden crops and to create the conditions in which they can reap and consume the harvest. (2013, 226)

However, De Maaker contends that, due to the onset of colonial modernity and the proselytizing of Christian missionaries, most of the Garo discarded their Indigenous faith through conversion to Christianity. As a result, in the present times, the Songsareks constitute only a small part of the Garo population. Christianity facilitated the spread of primary education in Meghalaya, and over the past couple of decades, a major segment of the Garo population has become Christian. Songsareks, "the ones who obey the deities (mitde manigipa) as they refer to themselves, only remain in a few rural pockets" (De Maaker, 2013, 226).

The Garos perform a medley of dances during festivals. The dance that is performed during the Wangala Festival is called Ganna Dance. Slow-paced with elegant movements, the dance reproduces certain agrarian activities such as harvesting rice. Young men intermittently kneel in step with traditional music, showing their engagement with different stages of Jhum cultivation, while women stoop low, swaying one arm backwards and forwards, thus evoking the act of harvesting in the hilly terrain. Men play the drums while dancers perform a series of stylized movements attuned to the rhythmic drum beats. These movements are unique in that they are either "inspired by particular animals (such as "doves pecking") or by agricultural techniques ("harvesting swidden rice")" (De Maaker, 2013, 231). De Maaker further maintains that

> Wangala dancing is primarily a group dance. It involves an equal number of men and women who, for most of the time, dance in rows next to each other. Each man carries a wooden drum (dama), which has two drumheads. The production of these drums used to be the prerogative of young men who, during their adolescence, stayed in a collective bachelor's house. The drums are made of hardwood, and I was told that their production, with fire and a chisel the only tools, involves many days of arduous labour. (2013, 231)

In the Ambrey Dance, performed during worship of the God, Churabudi, women's dance steps imitate the shape of a tree. A woman takes the posture of a fruit-bearing tree while another woman shakes her to show that she is collecting fruits. These dances not only explore the intersection of humans and nature in the Garo Hills but also performatively fuse life-worlds, ecosystems, and the biosphere. While embodying elemental forces, the dancers' postures symbolize the intimate association between the Garo people and the natural world surrounding them. In the Ambrey Dance, the tree as an emblem of the sprawling forest and rugged landscapes of the Garo defies the modern logic of property ownership and the allied desire to appropriate natural resources. The tree is also an antithesis to enclosed, private spaces of control engineered by colonial modernity. A woman 'becoming' a tree, therefore, can be interpreted as an investment in a community's collective memory, an avowal of the human's conjunction with the world of nature. The woman dancer collecting fruits from a bountiful tree with green foliage, a lush canopy, and broad branches celebrates nature's agency and represents a meaningful exchange between

humans and non-humans. The transformative functions of these Garo dances that fuse the human and non-human at times elude categorization and blur distinctions. The dancers viscerally become part of the environment, showcasing a human-nature interchange that spills into every aspect of the community life of the Garo. These dances preserve ecological cycles and the livelihoods of both human and non-human beings through "a practice of relationship or alliance building" (Recollet, 2015, 132). The dancers' bodies in conjunction with nature, produce "new geographies of resistance" by opening a "space" for "decolonial love [to] emerge" (Recollet, 2015, 129, 130). These Indigenous performances rooted in the cycles of nature and local belief systems blow away "colonial capital and accumulation" in pseudo-public spaces of global consumer exchange (Recollet, 2015, 136; Gaard, 2014).

4.5 Dani Doka in Wangala and the Significance of Local Architecture

A village elder sings Dani Doka during the incense burning ritual at the Nokma's house and courtyard during Wangala. There is a single lead singer accompanied by a choral group singing the refrain. The lead singer sings it precisely when cooked rice is thrown all over the place to appease Misi Saljong and Rokkime, the Wangala deities. The singing of Dani is confined to specific segments of Wangala only. Dani cannot be sung at any time throughout the festival but has specific slots assigned to it. The performance of Dani Doka follows certain rules. The elderly man who sings Dani has to put on the 'cloth soaked in blood' while singing. Dani Doka does not follow a written script. It is a part of the collective memory of the community and is orally transmitted from one generation to another. The songs carry stories of the origin of man, the creation of the universe and the customs, rituals and beliefs of the community. They also revolve around the significance of the plant and animal world in Garo's life. The first part of Dani Doka which narrates the myth of Wangala also dwells on the origin of the taboo of Asi-malja and the strips formed on the snake. During the performance of Dani Doka,

> Three other men put their hands on each other's shoulders and say 'Ahoia hoia' after the singer chants some lines. After chanting and dancing in circles inside the house, one elderly male takes out the burning incense dancing. The person who sings the dani puts his hand on the shoulder of one of the three men while coming out of the house after the man carrying the incense. All the males and females form a queue on either side carrying gongs, and drums and blowing the horns and (they) come out of the house dancing. In the courtyard, they dance around the Tilta or Mrong, a 'Y-shaped stump'. After Ajema roa, they once again sing the Dania and re-enter the house. Once again, they burn the incense and dance inside the house. Women pick up the rice grain from the small bamboo container and throw it behind their backs representing the sowing of paddy in the field. (Sangma, 2022, n.p)

During A·song Den·a Dani Doka is also sung. A·song Den·a is a ritual performed for the protection of land during which Dani Doka is sung in a local architecture called Nokpante, the bachelor's dormitory. In the courtyard of the Nokpante, the

men strain rice beer which is regarded as a collective gesture of camaraderie and merriment. Known as a place of leisure for the Garo youths, the Nokpante is an important architecture of the Garos, also known as a space of shared learning of art and craft. An outsider can also be accommodated in Alda, a separate house located in the precincts of Nokpante. Popular in the pre-British era, many Nokpantes were built in each village in the fifties of the last decade (Choudhury, 1969, cited in Deka, 2018, n.p). The Nokpante acts as an archive for the preservation of Indigenous cultural artefacts and expressions of the Garo as it houses public property like drums, gongs, Indigenous musical instruments, handicrafts, paintings, horns of cattle, feathers of birds, heads of animals, etc. (Deka, 2018). In the words of Marak, "Figures of man, woman, child, tiger, giant lizard, and other living objects adorn those panels, while the overhead beams have the figures of elephant, tiger, and wild goat carved into them" (Marak, 2018, cited in Deka, 2018, n.p). The entry of females is restricted to Nokpantes. They are allowed to enter the dormitory through the back door only on special occasions like community feasting (Choudhury, 1969, cited in Deka, 2018, n.p).

4.6 Cosmology of *Bathou* Tradition: An Anthropocosmic Worldview

Bathou, an Indigenous religion followed by the Bodos since time immemorial can be read as what John Grim calls "cosmovision" or "lifeway" which shows how they connect themselves with the world, the earth and nature. Grim defines, "Cosmovision refers to the narrative in which beings in the world tell their own stories, and telling make manifest the deeper meanings of the world and humans woven into it" (Grim, 2001, 107). *Bathou* stands as a text to interpret the "Indigenous way of being in the world" (ibid). The earth-centric perspective of *Bathou* is revealed in its philosophies and practices. This religion teaches the principles of worshipping holy soil (land), water, air, fire, and sky (invisible energy or power) as everything is an essential part of God's holy creation which is termed as "physical forms of divinity" (Haberman). It is believed that leading a truthful and sacred life with proper reverence to these holy elements provides prosperity and greater spirituality to humans. *Bathou* holds that the earth is a part of sacred divinity. David L. Haberman's four basic concepts of Hinduism 'sarvatma-bhava', 'svarupa', 'seva', and 'sambhanda' (Haberman,2017, 37) can be referred to in this context. *Bathou* tradition also shows that the act of 'seva' or 'puja' of the 'svarupa' (different physical forms of divinity) bridges humans with *Bathou*, the Supreme creator. This idea will be more apparent in the semiotic analysis of *Bathou*. *Bathou* consists of a cactus plant which is symbolically worshipped by Bodos as the Supreme Spirit or Soul. Etymologically, the term *Bathou* is derived from the two Bodo root words, 'ba' means 'five' and 'thou' means 'deep thought' or deep philosophy (Basumatary). It is a complex term referring to multiple signified—the Supreme Creator, Soul, Altar and philosophy. The *Bathou* altar is a circular

fencing structure made of a single bamboo, and it has a Sijou plant (euphorbia cactus) in the centre. It has ten cloven pillars and five strips or layers, and each strip consists of three smaller strips. The five stripes represent the five elements of creation (soil, water, fire, air, and sky or heavenly spirit/energy), five sense organs, and five holes of a Bodo traditional flute; it also implies five basic principles of creation and five natural laws to guide Bodo ways of life, and its ten pillars are representatives of ten different parts of a human body or another mammal (bone, nail, skin, joint, muscle, blood, fur, water, teeth, vein), ten excretions (*ripus*), ten purifications of bodies, ten directions of side, etc. (Brahmari Tirtha, 1968, 2). The second symbolic meaning of the altar of *Bathou* is that it represents a complete living body with its Spirit or Soul in the centre. The structural idea of *Bathou* represents the physical parts of a living body which has a Sijou plant in the centre representing soul, energy, or life. On the other hand, the three round bamboo strips (*Bathou*) imply heaven, earth, and hell. Thus, the whole formative structures of the *Bathou* symbolically represent the entire universe that is regulated from one centre, a source of energy or divinity. Hence, *Bathou* is a microcosmic element representing the larger cosmos or cosmophany.[5] It means there is a source of life to control and connect objects of the entire universe; the whole surroundings are connected to a particular centre. There is nothing in isolation. Nature, planets, stars, air, water space everything all is part of this central force. Human relation with this higher cosmos is established through the consecrated altar or hierophany.[6] Everything exists in association with other parts of this universe. According to the Bodo belief system, the creation of life and the world depends on the 'five' fundamental elements which God creates first—soil, water, fire, air, and sky (spiritual power, divinity, infinite), and then other things were created. This deep philosophy of *Bathou* is also revealed in the primary chanting of *Bathou* puja: "*Bathou*ni bandwa bandwba/Sijouni siria siriba/thaigirni khonga khongba/sifungni gudunga gudungba/Subungni asara asarba" (*Bathou* has five stripes/Sijou has five ridges/an elephant fruit has five petals/There are five common human laws) (Swargiary, 2011, 99). A notable point is that *Bathou* will always remain a nature-centric religion because it can never be established inside any temple or building by separating its Sijou, a living plant. Bodo's belief system shows that Bodos view nature as a part of the whole spiritual system which thus, contrasts the Western materialistic cultural practices.

[5] Cosmophany-the living art of opening ambient worlds.

[6] *Hierophany*-A term used by Mircea Eliade to define the designation of sacred or divinity in anything. It may be a stone, a tree, a tree, an idol, a person, invocation, which becomes a manifesting agent of the Sacred or heavenly truth in hierophany.

4.7 *Bathou* Sacralization as Environmental Ethics

Mircea Eliade's concept of "sacred and profane", two contrastive models of the world, one is heterogenous and the other is homogenous as he explains, can be used to study the problem of ecology. To Eliade sacred is divinity/eternity or cosmic order and a thing which manifests as sacred is termed as "hierophany" (Eliade). He says that anything, a piece of stone, a tree, an idol, a person, invocation, which becomes a manifesting agent of the Sacred or heavenly truth is hierophany. For traditional societies sacred may also be social/moral order/code which is to be followed to continue a system. Violation of these codes or norms distances humans from higher centres. In this context, the natural ecosystem can be considered as a natural cosmic order that is the 'Sacred' (higher eternal order), and violation of this system is 'profane' (pollution/Anthropocene). The primitives were serious about adhering to the sacred and putting themselves in social and natural order. Eliade observes, "The man in archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or near consecrated objects" (1961, 12). So, it is a fact that the Indigenous spiritual and ritualistic practices are based on the central goal of maintaining sacred in terms of body, spirit, action and space. In traditional Bodo society, physical purity must be maintained as *Bathou* worshippers live all-time with deities at home. Every household has an altar of *Bathou* and 'ishing', an interior room in the main house where the goddess Mainao (Lakshmi) is kept and worshipped every day. It is believed that if proper purity is spoiled/lost, goddesses/gods will be unhappy, and then, human suffering is bound. Impure acts like illicit relations, incest, violation of social norms or taboos, consumption of prohibited food, and killing holy animals, must be confessed and purified before Garja puja and *Kherai* puja or else the whole puja or ritual will be considered impure and an unholy puja, it is believed, is never accepted by gods and goddesses. Indeed, *Bathou* rituals are some processes of sacralization or purification of space, time, and mind. Garja and salami are such rituals. *Bathou* as a hierophany not only manifests divinity (sky) but also natural elements, soil, water, air, fire, and spirits. It means for a Bodo nature is also a sacred or divine manifestation. Dan Smyer Yü views, "The presence of the sacred is the centre of Eliade's inquiry into the cosmological meanings of these worlds in connection with the invisible world of gods, spirits, and supernatural beings" (2017, 121). Indigenous connection with the sacred is not only what Eliade discerns as communication with divinity or eternity but also harmony with the earth. *Bathou* as a hierophany reflects Tucker and Grim's idea of "The creative revisioning of mutually enhancing human-earth relation" (2001, xxii). Unlike other anthropocentric religions that reject nature as brute forces, *Bathou* embraces nature and the earth through which spiritual enlightenment is sought. The human-nature union will tend to better environmental sustainability. Hence, this Indigenous tradition does not approve of the modern consciousness and attitude of considering "physiological acts, eating, sex and so on" (Eliade, 1961, 13) merely as physiological phenomena (that lead to profanation) rather than sacred acts. So, proper principles must be observed while performing these activities and

behaving with nature. People in such society have the least experiences of mechanical life which Chellis Glendinning observes, "(Europeans) live with anxiety, anger, trauma and with a sense of loss or spiritual alienation; and this reunion would help them to abstain from the present 'Techno-Addition'" (1995, 39).

4.8 *Kherai* Ritual: A Bodo Environmental Imaginary

Kherai, the largest ceremonial *Bathou* ritual performed at the public arena to please the supreme God, *Bathou* and his accomplices, expresses the highest Bodo environmental imagination. It is performed in the open field. It is a synthesis of spirituality, magic, prophecy, music, and dance. *Kherai* is a public ritual of Bodos performed to appease their visible Gurus (human Gurus) and invisible Gurus (Deities) for their blessings, good fortune, and for anticipating prophecy. On the other hand, it is a festival for public entertainment accompanied by traditional rituals, performances, games, and sports. The hierophanic role of the *Bathou* altar is magnified in this ritual. Eliade's idea of the "organic cosmos" of living beings, higher beings, and the earth is reflected in the *Kherai* puja. The holy spot of *Kherai*'s function becomes a meeting point of mortals and immortals, divinity and the earth, humans and dead spirits, present and past. In this ritual hierophantic role is shifted to a spirit-possessed woman, *Doudini*[7] (*hierophant*[8]) who transforms into an agent of communication between humans and divine power, *Bathou* and His lower-ranked eighteen pairs of Gurus, past disciples in the forms of dead spirits. The eighteen pairs of Gurus, male and female deities, are entrusted with nurturing and protecting the biotic and abiotic elements of the world. The idea is that besides *Bathou*, the supreme God, different deities of rivers, hills, and forests and eighteen pairs of Gurus, accomplices of *Bathou* are invoked in every normal *Bathou* and *Kherai* puja. In the ritual spirits of Divinity, Gurus and departed souls come down to the earth through *Doudini* and interact with humans. In this ritualistic context, the whole cosmos is looked at as a symmetrical organism. An ecocentric significance is found in the chanting of *Bathou* rituals where deities of rivers, hills, mountains and temples of India are invoked. The intrinsic moral values of "interconnectedness sensibility" (George, 2014, 250) of man and nature are underscored in this performance. For its meaning and values, *Kherai* has a connection with the natural setting because it is performed in the open field. *Kherai* performance cannot be shifted from the natural context to the artificial context. If it loses its natural setting, its entire meaning will be lost. The ritual is performed in the open field, and its associated beliefs and ideology teach the traditional cultural values of natural harmony and pastoral aesthetics. Its main tenet is the worship of nature or the divine spirit of nature. Indeed, it is a ritualistic acknowledgement and showing

[7] *Doudini*-a spirit-possessed woman who plays a central role in *the Kherai* ritual. She becomes an agent of communication between mortals and immortals. It is she who speaks to humans on behalf of God, gods and goddesses and dead spirits.

[8] *Hierophant*-a person, especially, a priest who interprets/represents the mysteries or divinity.

gratitude to the 18 pairs of Gurus and other household deities for their valuable care for humans and other creatures. Hence, traditional Bodos maintain a healthy and holy relationship with their surroundings. While they go hunting and community fishing, they offer puja to the concerned deities of river/water and wood before beginning their actions. They invoke deities and they beg pardon for their probable mistakes and faults they might commit during their actions and thus, they first try to pacify spirits, owners/guardians of the creatures of those places. They perform puja before climbing hills and mountains. Even before climbing a tree, they first worship it. Similarly, Mainao (Lakshmi) is adorned before every paddy harvesting season. The main lady of the family, wife or daughter-in-law goes to the corn field, performs a puja carries a sample of the crops as a symbol of Mainao (Lakshmi), and keeps it in the interior part of the main house called “ishing”. This process is called “maini äg lainai” (pre-harvesting collection, a form of ritual of adorning deity-Lakshmi). Moreover, while paddy starts blooming flowers, a natural lamp[9] is burnt in the field as a symbolic welcome of Mainao (Lakshmi), the Goddess of wealth. Especially, before and after harvesting, they invoke and worship Mainao (Lakshmi), the goddess of wealth, and invite her to visit their paddy fields and home thereby helping them cherish better crops. So, objects of nature have their order and values of existence. For example, they invoke and pray to Buliburi (goddess of water) before fishing and to Song Raja (god of forest and animals) before hunting. This traditional practice is an ethical performance of the morality that humans do not have the right to corrupt or destroy other lives or things without reason and prior information to the concerned deities or the protectors. Thus, it is apparent how Bodos recognize “the intrinsic values of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life” (Capra, 1995, 19) and thus, the community does not encourage the implementation of what Tucker and Grim call “a utilitarian-based worldview” (Tucker et al., 2017, 3)

A notable ecocentric aspect of *Kherai* is that its dances and games are completely natural as they are derived from natural phenomena. It shows a proximity to nature. The various dance forms represent different symbolic meanings to different practitioners. *Doudini*’s various performances have different meanings. It involves different forms of dances and sports which are sources of many community dance/game forms like Baisagu dance, marriage dance, Bagurumba dance, dahal-thungrisibnai dance, rwnswndri dance, etc. Bagurumba, a Bodo national dance is derived/imitated from a butterfly’s flapping. However, the main logic of the complete performance lies in revealing the connection between mortals and immortals through the agency of *Doudini*. The whole ritual ends with the adoration of Mainao (Lakshmi) who gives moral advice to strictly observe principles of maintaining peace and harmony with nature and spirits, gods and goddesses. *Bathou* worshipers believe that if anyone misbehaves with fellow beings or God/Goddesses, or breaks any social norm, misfortune would befall upon humans.

[9] For burning lamp petals of elephant fruits are used in this ritual.

4.9 Indigenous Cultural Performances and Future Possibilities

Social anthropologist Zoe Todd criticizes the conceptualizations of "the (neo)colonial time-lag" by non-Indigenous academics and warns us to be conscious of how,

> the Ontological Turn—with its breathless "realizations" animals, the climate, water, "atmospheres," and nonhuman presences like ancestors and spirits are sentient and possess agency, that "nature" and "culture", "human" and "animal" may not be so separate after all—is itself perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. (Todd, 2014, n.p)

It is crucial to understand that Indigenous communities like Bodo and Garo Bathou and Wangala are not only performances of cultural expressions but they are also acts of "sovereignty, cultural survival, and decolonial struggle" (Schmidt, 2013). Most of these cultural practices re-emphasize the roles of the Bodo and Garo as defenders of the land and water that, to a particular extent, counter the impact of climate change (ibid). Climate change, according to Rob Nixon is a kind of "slow violence", "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011, 2). Instead, the local polities of Wangala and Bathou are based on wider implications of care for the climate and native ecologies. Bathou and Wangala co-create a "space in-between, a space of negotiation that exceeds human language and breaks away from a hermetic concern with human behaviours toward other ways of knowing" (Randerson & Yates, 2017, 28). This radically reconfigures the culture of production and spatial patterns of performance of rituals. The space of these cultural performances is important and in this context, Richard Schechner drew a strict line of demarcation between staged rituals and naturally evolved ones by stating that the former is deficient in "commitment" and significance (1988, 141–42). Staged rituals have two goal-oriented offshoots, entertainment and material productivity. However, Schechner also discussed middle grounds and elastic contexts that blur this line of division. For him, 'ritual' doesn't lose its "cultural essence" in traditional settings but rather mutates through mediatized performances in myriad stages and spaces (ibid).

A few questions remain. In the present times, with the genesis of new styles of performance, both Bathou and Wangala are aligned not only to Indigenous knowledge systems but also to technology and political ecology. How ethical is this variation, as seen in commercial initiatives such as the Hundred Drums Wangala Festival celebrated in Meghalaya every year since 1997 and the popular media coverage of Bathou? To what extent do the food heritage and the allied agrodiversity of the hills and plains become transformed as a result of humanized domestication? Do the 'everyday' and its allied cultural domains get reconfigured under the influence of digital media? Do Bathou and Wangala undergo a biocultural alteration when adapted to new methods and modes of digital life? What happens when the site of a 'natural archive' becomes a staged performance or embodiment of popular entertainment?

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Chapter 5
Indigenous Nature Conservation in Meghalaya: Environmental and Religious Dimensions of Tribal Land Ownership Among the Khasi Community

Srijani Bhattacharjee

Abstract The paper is an effort to understand the tradition of sacred groves among the Khasi community of Meghalaya and its role in the preservation of nature in the areas inhabited by them. It attempts to historically understand the factors that have contributed to the gradual erosion and destruction of this institution among the Khasi people across years and with changing regimes. The chapter tries to show that apart from factors such as commercial exploitation of forests as usually held responsible for environmental damage, aspects like flaws within the forest administrative structure are also accountable for injuries caused to sacred groves in the Khasi-populated districts of Meghalaya.

Keywords Sacred groves · Forests · Khasi · Religion · Administration · British · Colonial · Post-colonial

5.1 Introduction

Indigenous communities own, manage and occupy at least a quarter of the world's landmass. With increasing natural degradation across the world and consequent climate and economic changes in recent years, the local livelihood patterns have undergone considerable negative changes. These are, however, not limited to the local population only but have produced ramifications among the urban residents too. Hence traditional knowledge to preserve flora, fauna, biodiversity, and the natural environment as a remedy to the situation has drawn the attention of the policy makers, administrators, scientists, environmentalists, and academicians among others. Traditional or indigenous knowledge based on nature includes knowledge creation through generation-old observations and interactions with nature by assigning it a sacred

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position while considering humanity as an essential part of it. It contains sustainable knowledge and practical ways through which services from nature like water, soil, food, shelter, and medicines could be ensured for future generations. While the modern urban societies have broken away from the traditional lifestyles by realigning with a new techno-based life; the indigenous people in some peripheral areas continue to live their traditional life in the lap of nature. In such societies, nature is worshipped as sacred because nature is the provider and healer. These societies have also preserved their traditional knowledge about the trees and plants, and have their indigenous methods of addressing environmental crisis. As per the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, indigenous people have

> historical continuity or association with a given region or part of a given region before colonization or annexation; identify themselves as indigenous and be accepted as members by their community; have strong links to territories, surrounding natural resources and ecosystems; maintain at least in part, distinct social, economic and political systems; maintain, at least in part, distinct languages, cultures, beliefs and knowledge systems; are resolved to maintain and further develop their identity and distinct social, economic, cultural and political institutions as distinct peoples and communities; and often form non-dominant sectors of society.[1]

Traditional knowledge to preserve nature has been an integral part of indigenous cultures across India and the world.[2] The Northeast Indian hill communities residing in the eight states of the country also have a rich reservoir of knowledge traditions to conserve nature and biodiversity. Religious faiths, taboos, mythical beliefs, and knowledge gathered through age-old interactions with nature have acted as safeguards to the natural environment in the areas from anthropogenic interferences for ages. For instance, the Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh have their traditional ways to control soil erosion.[3] Similarly the Naga community protects forests in the hillocks by practising the *Zabo* mode of cultivation, which is a combination of maintaining forests, undertaking agriculture and animal husbandry along with soil conservation measures in forest areas located in the hillocks.[4] Sacred groves are essential parts of tribal cultures across the states of North East India.[5] Some studies suggest that sacred groves cover around 40,000 hectares of land in five of the states of North East India[6] However, with increased commercial importance attached to forests and the ushering of modern development, sacred groves in these regions have become threatened. These forest areas have received legal protection in India only in recent years as parts of community lands. Such as the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act of 2002 has assigned protection by law to community lands which also includes sacred groves.[7] The presence of sacred groves as a part of indigenous societies is considered as old as the initial stage of human development. The historical origin of sacred groves in India could be traced to the agricultural, hunting and gathering stages of human societies much before the period when humans started to domesticate animals.[8] Sources suggest that references to forests preserved on religious grounds could also be found in the Vedic literature.[9] In India, one of the initial documented works on sacred forests was prepared by Dietrich Brandis, the Inspector General of Forests in India in 1897.[10] At present, an array of literature is available on sacred groves existent in different parts of India.[11] These studies emphasise

the indigenous religiosity attached to sacred groves, flora and fauna types found in these areas, folklore connected to them, agents responsible for their destruction and the measures to be adopted to preserve them. However, few of these studies have attempted to historically trace the evolution of this institution among the indigenous communities, and chronologically discuss the reasons for their destruction across regimes and measures adopted for their preservation. This chapter intends to discuss this feature by emphasising the tradition of sacred forests among the Khasi community of Meghalaya. It historically tries to show how this tradition of indigenous nature and biodiversity conservation has been experiencing threats of extermination under colonial and post-colonial regimes. The study is based on consultation of scholarly works by administrators (both colonial and post-colonial), government reports, gazetteers, anthropological research, secondary literature, journal articles and in-person interviews.

5.2 Tradition of Sacred Grove Among the Khasis

The Khasi community represents the dominant ethnic group in the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya. Some Khasi population can be found in the neighbouring state of Assam and the adjacent country of Bangladesh.[12] Indigenous nature preservation forms a vital part of Khasi culture and the tradition of sacred groves among them is an important part of it. The origin of forest preservation on religious grounds could be found in the institution of nature worship that constitutes an essential element of the indigenous Khasi religion. Under the indigenous faith, natural elements associated with human survival are venerated by the people. There is a saying among the Khasi community according to which 'there can be no *Hima* or *Raid* without sacred grove and there can be no sacred grove without *Hima* or *Raid*.' Thus, the sacred grove represents an inseparable component of a *Hima* or a *Raid*. It is considered the space through which the people associate themselves with the Almighty by performing rituals and sacrifices. *Hima* has been a traditional institution among the Khasi and the Jaintia communities of Meghalaya which are represented by indigenous chiefs and religious heads like the *Syiems*, *Lyndohs*, *Sirdars*, *Wahadadar* and *Dalois*. *Raid* can be considered as a group of villages which are administered by the *Syiem* (king or chief). These authorities can sanctify a plot of land and perform rituals and sacrifices. With such measures, these lands are converted into sacred spaces.[13]

There are instances of reverence towards the sun, water and moon by the Khasi people. Certain rivers and mountain peaks are also worshipped as the abode of nature gods. Such as in earlier times, the river *Kenchiang* was assigned a divine status in Khasi Hills while the river *Kopili* was revered in the Jaintia Hills. Similarly, some mountains indigenously known as *U Lum Sohpet bneng*, *Lum Shillong* and *Lum Raiting* are considered as holy mountains by the Khasi people. *U Lum Sohpet bneng* Peak is regarded as the place through which the Khasi community have descended on earth. It is held as the location where the golden ladder was linked from heaven to earth.[14] The Khasis believed that every element of nature had a god within it and

hence natural objects should be worshipped. Thus, the idea that god is omnipresent in nature is imbibed in the concepts of nature worship among the people. The Khasis believe that prayers could be offered to nature gods anywhere which does not require a specific place for it although they assign portions of forests as abodes to nature deities and spirits. In these parts of forests known as sacred groves, flora and fauna are kept free from human interference, from village uses and exploitation in any form.[15] The people also worship the serpent spirit named *Thlen* who is believed to attack and swallow humans.[16]

Sacred groves that forms an essential component of Khasi culture have been preserved by the people as sacred entities since early times. This tradition can be found among other matrilineal communities of Meghalaya also like the Jaintia and the Garo. As per a study conducted in 1999, 105 sacred groves were reported from East Garo Hills, East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi, West Garo Hills and West Khasi Hills districts of the state.[17] According to an estimate by the State Forest Department, around 1000 kilometres in the state are under sacred groves.[18] The Khasis look upon these forests with reverence and believe that the guardian spirits '*U' Ryngkew* and *U Basa'* dwell in them. The people believe that offering prayers to these spirits would bring welfare and prosperity to them. Sacred groves are locally known as '*Law kyntang*'. In Khasi Hills, sacred groves are primarily divided into three types: (1) the groves under the administration of *Lyngdoh* (Khasi priest) are known as *Law Lygndoh* (2) the forests where traditional religion is followed are known as *Law Niam* (3) some groves are also under the village headman who is in charge of a village. The village headman along with the priest and members of the village *Durbar* (local assembly) perform rites for the forest deities to ensure peace and security in his village. In the past, these groves formed an important part of every Khasi village. The presence of monoliths erected in the memory of the ancestors symbolises the existence of sacred groves in early Khasi societies. Some other categories of indigenous forests can also be found among the Khasi people. This includes *Law Adong* or forests protected for non-commercial uses and *Law Shnong* or forests with natural resources for village uses.[19] These forest belts have been assigned significance in Khasi indigenous life by acts passed by the government like the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forests) Act, 1958 and Garo Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forests) Act of 1961.[20]

Sacred groves have been an essential component of Khasi culture since ancient times. They were maintained by the local rulers as a part of their administration. The Khasi kings were known for their public works including the construction of roads, bridges, embankments and canals primarily done for the well-being of the people. Preservation and development of sacred groves were also important duties of the local rulers. Such efforts by the rulers displayed their political strength and the village communities were employed for the purpose. This also bolstered the idea of divine kingship associated with the position of the indigenous king.[21] Scholars like B.K Roy Burman mention that the sacred groves of Meghalaya were created not only for the preservation of biodiversity but also for the priest-king to extend protection to traders who travelled through the region to international routes.[22] Local lores have also tried to draw a historical outline about the origin of sacred groves among the

Khasi community of Meghalaya. According to folklore, the *Blah* clan of Jaintia Hills prayed to the Almighty to provide them permission to move out of their lands and asked for the ways through which they could proceed. The Almighty heard their prayers and showed them some signs. The signs indicated that they could proceed through the northwestern parts of Khasi Hills by passing through the territories of *U Syiem* Shillong. Thereafter, they reached the Shillong Peak and followed downstream along the river *Umiaw* or *Umiam* Mawphlang. They arrived five miles down from *Lum Shillong* and climbed westward to settle at Pdenshnong Mawphlang. This hillock near Mawphlang sacred grove was identified by the *Blah* clan as the place for performing rituals and sacrifices. Later another eleven clans also joined the *Blah* clan which together formed the Hima Mawphlang.[23]

The Mawphlang sacred forest situated in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya is one of the largest sacred forests in India covering some 192 acres. There are several beliefs associated with this sacred grove which is considered as the habitat of the forest deity '*Labasa*'. The people believe that the deity '*Labasa*' protects the forest and the dwellers residing in its vicinity from ill health and misfortunes. They adhere to the belief that nothing could be removed or plucked from the forest or else the deity would be offended. The people also believe that the forest deity '*Labasa*' takes the form of tigers and leopards to protect the adjacent villages and their inhabitants from external threats. Religious ceremonies, sacrifices, rituals and spring dances are performed by the people in honour of the tiger spirit as considered the master of wilderness. The Khasi folklore discusses the association of tigers with the forest deity. Hence, tigers occupy a significant position in the Khasi mythology and indigenous belief systems. While the people revere and respect tigers, they also fear the animal. Thus tiger is considered both a bitter enemy of men as well as men's greatest benefactor. The Khasis also believe in the concept that certain people can turn into tigers.[24] The Cherrapunji sacred forest is also one of those forests reserved on religious grounds.[25] A publication of the government of Meghalaya entitled *Law Lyngdoh* (sacred forests) describes the Mawphlang sacred forests in East Khasi hills in these words:

> The sacred grove is kept in a comparatively undisturbed condition, due to the faith and regard of the local people and the belief that the sylvan deities would be offended if trees were cut, flowers and fruits plucked. The vegetation comprising the sacred grove is very different from that of the surrounding areas, which are marked by the dominating Khasi pine or Pinus Kesiya.[26]

The same publication further noted that the vegetation that had existed in the sacred grove was in sharp contrast to the surrounding low grasslands.[27] According to the British Historian W.W Hunter, Oaks, Chestnuts, *Magnolia Schima*, Cinnamum, *Prunus* and *Engelhardtia* among others were found in plenty in the sacred forests of Khasi Hills during the late 19th and early twentieth century. He also mentioned the presence of economically viable tree species like Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and rubber (*Ficus Elastica*) in these forests.[28] Studies suggest that sacred groves in Meghalaya are reservoirs of important medicinal plants too.[29] In the Mawphlang sacred forests, the office of the Lyngdoh has come up with instruments of law for its preservation.

This instrument of law was formed with the consent of 12 ruling clans or the *riti synshar* and introduced by the *Hima* Mawphlang on 30th April 1970. This proclamation formally categorised the Mawphlang forests according to the requirements of time with detailed elaboration on the functions associated with its maintenance. Indigenous methods of forest conservation are also associated with the maintenance of the Mawphlang sacred grove. The people believe that if the forest suffers from any form of natural calamity, then it is because of the wrath of the forest deity. Hence. on such situations, the village communities are summoned to plant new saplings for the replenishment of the grove. This concept is applied to the preservation of other groves also.[30] Eco-tourism is actively promoted in the Mawphlang sacred grove. The villagers of the Mawphlang area earn money from the tourists for the protection of the grove and maintenance of the village development activities.[31]

The *Law Lyngdoh Nonglyngkien* and *Law Lyngdoh Ing-blei Nonglyngkien* situated in South West Khasi Hills are also important instances of sacred groves maintained on religious grounds. These sacred groves are owned and controlled by the *Lyngdoh Nonglyngkien* clan. They were registered with the Chief (*Syiems*) of Maharam *Syiemship* on 5th April 1909. These groves have reservations against the entry of people other than the *Lyngdoh* clan. There are restrictions on the entry of the clan members also who can have access only during the time of providing offerings or performance of rituals. Only the designated clans involved in the rituals and sacrifices like *Nongknia Lyngdoh Rangbah* (head of the sacrificing ceremony), *U Lyngdoh pomblang* (one who sacrifices goat), *U Lyngdoh Dieng Sning* (one who plants Quercus species during rituals), *ka nong seng knia* (one who prepares the sacrifice) and *ka nong pom sla* (who gather leave for the sacrifice) are allowed to enter the sacred grove four times a year when rituals are performed.[32]

Distribution of Sacred Groves in Meghalaya

Districts	Sacred groves	Area (ha)
Jaintia Hills	15	866
Ri BHoi	3	1080
East Khasi Hills	32	4528
West Khasi Hills	13	1800
East Garo Hills	8	125
West Garo Hills	8	181
Total	79	8580

Source Kailash C Malhotra, Yogesh Gokhale, Sudipto Chatterjee and Sanjiv Srivastava, *Sacred Groves in India: A Overview*, Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya Bhopal and Aryan Books International New Delhi, 2007, p. 19

5.3 Sacred Groves are on the Verge of Decline

The tradition of sacred groves in Khasi Hills has been suffering threats of annihilation under different regimes. The Spread of Christianity and colonialism, the establishment of forest administrative structure under the colonial and post-colonial administration, modern development, and the commercialisation of natural resources have been instrumental in the process. Some studies consider the practice of shifting cultivation among the indigenous people as responsible for this.[33] With the emergence of British administration in Khasi Hills and consequent patronage provided to the propagation of Christianity in the region, erosions could be noticed in Khasi beliefs based around sacred groves. Followers of the traditional Khasi religion alleged that the Christian missionaries have generated disbelief among the residents about the religious significance attached to these forests. Under their influence, the Christian-converted Khasis questioned the holy importance granted to these forests as mere silly superstitions of the illiterate people. One of the instances suggests that a missionary named Rohn Robers of the Welsh Presbyterian Church secured land next to a sacred grove to refute the Khasi traditional belief that sacred groves were inhabited by forest spirits who harmed people entering these forests. This was done to convince the people about the non-scientific element associated with such beliefs. The missionaries perceived such beliefs as pagan.[34] Against such approaches of the Christian missionaries, there have been protests by the local people on some occasions. Incidents of protests by the followers of the traditional Khasi religion could be found against such propagation. One such instance was during the Jaintia rebellion of 1860 when a Christian-converted Daroga named Soloman Dehling killed a monkey in a sacred forest located in Jaintia Hills. The killing of the monkey in a sacred forest was vehemently criticised and opposed by the people who considered it as one of the reasons for the outbreak of the Jaintia rebellion. They raised protests against the implementation of Christianity in the region.[35]

The British administration in Khasi Hills handled the situation with tact. Though some restrictions were imposed on indigenous forest use in government-controlled forests, the administration emphasised the preservation of indigenous religious sentiments attached to the sacred groves. The British government realised that implementation of colonial rule in the region would be difficult if direct attacks were made on the indigenous religious beliefs of the people. Colonial plans to make Shillong the seat of political administration in Assam required maintenance of forests around it and in the catchment areas to ensure regular water supply for the newly created township. Forests around the place also included sacred groves. Hence, the colonial authorities propagated for protection of sacred groves in the areas.[36] Lieutenant Colonel. J.C. Haughton, the Officiating Agent in North East India in 1861 observed that punishments would be meted out to persons found to destroy sacred groves in Shillong and its adjoining areas.[37] However, despite such sensitivity shown by the colonial government in dealing with sacred forests in Khasi Hills, British patronage offered to the propagation of Christianity in the areas loosened the religious beliefs among the Christian converts about the sanctity these of wooded areas. The process

of decline further accelerated after Indian independence when factors like large-scale commercial timber trade, mining, and development of road and communication networks were amalgamated with the changed mindset of the people. Persons who are sceptical about indigenous faiths are found to cut trees and uproot other natural products from these forests. Economically viable natural species are felled for trade purposes. Citing instances of erosion of religious sentiments around sacred groves among the Khasis, Alison Ormsby observed that in the Mawphlang sacred grove of East Khasi hills district, Meghalaya the rituals associated with nature worship and reverence to forest spirits have considerably declined. Ormsby mentions that faith in the forest deity '*Labasa*' in the Mawphlang sacred forest has also been significantly reduced. People believing in other religions are found to cut trees in sacred forests ignoring the feelings of those who are attached to them. Instances of sacred forests being sold in auctions are also found in some areas.[38] Since these groves are mostly located within the community forests, timber felling in these areas often happens without the intervention of the State Forest Department. As per the administrative jurisdiction, the latter does not have control over the community forests and hence it is unable to directly intrude in such matters.[39]

In the post-independent era, the forest administrative structure in Meghalaya has hardly proved supportive towards the preservation of sacred groves in the region. Lack of control by the State Forest Department over community forests has allowed the felling of trees in the sacred forests without hindrance and penalty. The government laws promoting forest conservation remain unimplemented in these areas as they are under indigenous control. Though sacred forests in Khasi-populated areas are legally recognised under the Autonomous District Councils, in reality, there exists no check by the District Councils on the felling of trees in these groves.[40] As these forests primarily under community and clan control generate considerable revenue, timber and natural products extracted from these areas often remain unchecked by the District Councils. The State Forest Department could exercise a monitory role in such situations but without the authority to stop them.[41] The Forest Act of 1958 and other laws related to the forests of the region do not provide any punitive measures for violating the indigenous beliefs and customs associated with sacred groves. Clause (b) of Section 4 of the Management and Control of Forest Rules 1960 which deal with the management of sacred groves only mentions that timber to be used for religious purposes can only be procured from these forests. Apart from this, it does not mention any penal sanction either in the form of imprisonment or fines for violating indigenous rules and regulations associated with them.[42] Besides, other factors like conversion of forests into agricultural lands, over-extraction of timbers without afforestation, population pressure in urban centres bordering these forests, mining and industrialization have contributed to the depletion of sacred groves in the Khasi inhabited regions (See photographs for reference). Poor population residing near these groves are found to collect fuel wood, fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants from these areas often causing damage to the trees. Some people cause harm to these forests by grazing their cattle within the boundaries.

18.05.2019

18.05.2019

These photographs are a testimony to the gradual destruction of flora and fauna in Meghalaya (Biswas, 2022: https://asle-brasil.com/journal/index.php/aslebr/article/view/201/141)

5.4 Conclusion

Thus, there is a need to protect the age-old tradition of sacred groves among the Khasis. The process of decline started during the colonial period and went on unabated after Indian independence and later can be countered if the local population is made conscious of their utility and significance. In Meghalaya, the beginning has been made by the government that implemented national afforestation schemes and eco-development programmes under the Ministry of Environment and Forests in these areas. Some non-governmental organisations like Community Forestry International have also come up to safeguard the flora and fauna in sacred groves such as in the Mawphlang forest located in East Khasi Hills. Yet, there is a necessity to increase non-forest-based employment, educate the people on nature conservation, adopt measures to eradicate poverty, promote plant regeneration in sacred forests and fortify the groves from external encroachment. There is also a need to bring changes in the forest administrative structure to halt the felling of trees in sacred groves located in clan and community forests. Laws regarding the preservation of sacred groves should be strictly implemented so that the devastation of flora and fauna in these forests can be arrested.

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Part II
Theoretical Grounding: Education, Law, and Ethics

Chapter 6
Philosophy for Environmental Policy and Law

Mohan Parasain

Abstract Philosophy is understood as an art of "suspension of judgement" and also as "a quest for new metaphor and new language". With both the above spirits in mind, i.e., openness to new perspectives and a quest for new language in environmental humanities, this chapter argues for a shift in perspective from the anthropocentricity of theories in environmental discourse to give way to a wider approach. The first part evaluates the efficacy of moral theories as dialogue partners for environmental policies and laws, analyses Leopold's criticism of the anthropocentric presumptions of moral theories and highlights the limitations of the Land ethics of Leopold. The second part focuses on the Indian Constitutional provisions for the protection of the environment and the environmental jurisprudence developed in various judicial pronouncements from the right-to-life perspective. Our sensibility seems to be still enduring the presumption of the biotic/abiotic community as property in our policies and laws. Therefore, the third part reflects on the evolutionary possibility of philosophical reflections on the environment from the anthropocentricity of moral theories to Dharmic understanding through the Land ethics of Leopold. In Dharmic tradition, our theories are not only grounded in practice but the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community and reverence for it is considered, rather prescribed as important pursuits for human beings.

Keywords Environmental jurisprudence · Land ethics · Dharma · Public trust · Ethical parallax

6.1 Introduction

Philosophy is understood as an art of "suspension of judgement" and also as "a quest for new metaphor and new language". With both the above spirits in mind, i.e., openness to new perspectives and a quest for new language in environmental humanities, this chapter argues for a shift in perspective from the anthropocentricity

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of moral theories in environmental discourse to give way to a wider approach adopted in the Dharmic tradition.

The instrumental rationality of the industrial world and the philosophical concerns of the Western enlightenment tradition, which favoured instrumental rationality and pursued material prosperity, failed to appreciate and cultivate the moral perception required for environmental protection. The environmental crisis itself needs proper articulation not only for the sake of philosophical theory but also to build the foundation for environmental policy and law. This chapter evaluates the efficacy of moral theories in environmental ethics, analyzes Leopold's criticism of the anthropocentric presumptions of moral theories, highlights the limitations of the Land ethics of Leopold, focuses on the Indian Constitutional provisions for the protection of the environment and the environmental jurisprudence developed by the Judiciary from right to life perspective and finally enquires into the evolutionary possibility of environmental discourse in Dharmic tradition. In Dharmic tradition, our theories are not only grounded in practice but the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community and reverence for it is considered, rather prescribed as important pursuits for human beings.

Dharma has a wider connotation than its etymological meaning of '*dhru*' *or* '*dhri*', which means "to hold," "to maintain," or "to preserve" (Barnhart, entry Dharma). Dharma is that which sustains the cosmic order or that which is adopted by meritorious souls. The word 'Dharma' is used in philosophical literature as "cosmic law" underlying right behaviour and social order. Dharma is often used synonymously with 'duty', 'right means', 'conduct', 'righteousness', 'rule', 'ordinance', 'justice' and 'order' and often connotes one or another and combination of two or more meaning in the texts which use the term. At the same time, there is an element of tentativity in so far as the content of Dharma is concerned. Mahabharata emphasises the indescribability of Dharma[1] but it does not leave it untheorized. However, the difficulty is that firstly, Dharma is theorised in more than one way and secondly, "theory" itself, in Dharmic tradition, is a unified whole, the full nature of which cannot be grasped by analysing its parts. The parts therein are but various perspectives in the ongoing discourse. This epistemic humility inherent in the Dharmic way of argumentation offers a method as well as a philosophy for environmental policy and law.

Further, Dharmic tradition, in its broad sense, includes Vedantic, Buddhist and Jainist traditions. Dharma is the ecology of well-being which emerges organically from a devotional relationship with all elements and creatures. Most of the central texts in the Indic knowledge and tradition describe the mutual relationship between nature and humans not as that of domination, but of friendship and harmony. Even people who do not believe in the divine order should adhere to dharma for the sake of shared well-being. Observance of dharma secures two objectives-happiness on earth as well as salvation. Thus dharma, in the context of righteousness and cosmic law,

[1] The idea of *Dharma suksmatah* or "Dharma is subtle" recurs in the Mahabharata on several occasions (Ramanujan, 176–77).

offers an eco-spiritual approach to the environment.[2] This chapter, after analysing the limitations of Western moral theories in environmental discourse gives an overview of the principles and doctrines developed in judicial practice and finally advocates for the assimilation of the Dharmic spirit in environmental jurisprudence.

6.2 Moral Theories in Environmental Discourse

Moral theory sets moral rules, which are 'minimum demands of behaviour that a civilized society expects from its members' (Das, 2009, 272). Most theories of moral standards provide a general framework within which a particular moral issue or a case can be tested. Values represent a transition from what is desired to what is desirable through the medium of 'what is generally considered as desirable'. Among the most important moral theories are the deontological theories of Kant and other Kantians; Consequentialism (including Utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill); Contractual theories of Hobbes and Locke; and Virtue ethics (Aristotle, Philippa Foot, Macintyre, etc.). Though these theories differ on the criterion of moral decision as well as on the idea of moral good, they are developed with the conviction that in all moral decisions, we constantly conform to one or the other general principles. There is rarely any moral decision in which a general principle is not involved. The intelligible view of morality is not possible unless it is objective and rationally justifiable. Any rule, principle, law or standard demands uniformity and universality. Right is justified in terms of generally recognized claims, which are built about universality.

Moral theories are based on the conviction that the subjective principle of action can be justified on an objective rational anvil alone. This very conviction has led most of the theories of moral standards to search for objectivity in one's claims to answer any moral problem. This search for objectivity is epitomized by Kant in his concept of the *Categorical Imperative.* The moral law or Categorical Imperative is a command as opposed to an assertion of facts and it is categorical and not hypothetical or conditional like 'if you want to lose weight, eat low-fat food'. For example, a moral injunction like 'do not tell a lie' is to be followed irrespective of conditions. This imperative is to be followed for its own sake and not to achieve any end outside of it. This distinguishes Kantian moral theory from Consequentialism. It is based on the deontological maxim "duty for duty's sake." The first formulation of the Categorical Imperative is: "*Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*" (Kant, 1952, 268). That is, one should act only on those maxims that can be universalised without any contradiction. The second formulation talks about treating humanity always as an end in itself and never as a means (Kant, 272). To treat someone as a mere 'means' is to involve them in a scheme of action that they cannot consent to in principle. The third formulation provides the

[2] Sigurd Bergmann says, "Environmentalism is comparable to a child that only recently learned to walk. Ecospiritualities of different kinds seem to be the invisible backbone of the growth of this child." (11.3).

condition of its harmony with universal practical reason and unites different rational beings under common laws or a 'kingdom of ends': "*act by the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends*" (Kant, 273).

Thus the Kantian end-in-itself status is given only to the rational lawgiver, i.e., the human being, which is a problematic proposition if we are looking for a moral foundation for environmental protection. The basic presumption of critical philosophy is that the sentient human being is a morally relevant community and the human world is the subject matter of philosophy. It is because, in the Kantian framework, only an individual human being is 'end-in-itself' and is capable of forming the 'kingdom-of-ends'. According to Kant, morally permissible actions are those actions that could be willed by all rational individuals in every circumstance. Only human beings are capable of standing back from their desires and choosing which course of action to take. As animals and *abiotic* nature lack this ability, they are not considered autonomous. Further, "as the only thing with any intrinsic value is goodwill and non-humans have no wills at all, they do not have any intrinsic value." (Wilson, *Animal and Ethics,* IEP entry).

Similarly, in environmental ethics, subordination to utilitarianism is unappealing since 'utilitarianism' is an instrument of 'human' welfare alone. The Utilitarian 'greatest number' in their maxim of "greatest benefit of the greatest number as moral good", is the 'number' of human beings. The Cartesians also believe that only conscious beings are moral persons and thus it excludes the non-human in their moral theoretical articulations. Virtue ethics is interested in the complexities of character. It is primarily concerned not with consequence or duty but rather with defining the kind of character necessary to live a full and flourishing human life. Instead of intentions or consequences, the character traits that are manifested in our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and actions are at the centre of our ethical concern. But the environmental concern of the Virtue-ethicist is human flourishing, rather than the entire ecosystem.

The Contractarian tradition, from Hobbes to Rawls, presumes the centrality of self-interest of the moral or political agent in their policy formulation and therefore lacks pure altruistic concerns and consideration for *the other*. The motivation to follow the law is a necessity or a rational assessment of the best strategy for maximizing self-interest and does not have any bearing on the personal pursuit of improvement of the self. Autonomy is at the centre of moral and legal agency and responsibility. If one is not autonomous, one cannot be held morally responsible for his actions. If an individual has only gregarious instinct and is devoid of any altruistic sense, their assimilation into society is not possible. Further, the norms borne out of this hypothetical contract amongst self-centred beings may serve some altruistic objectives, but will always have an inherent fragility for not being the product of goodwill. Contractarians like John Rawls too believe that the best conception of a just society is one in which the rules governing that society are rules that would be chosen by individuals from behind a 'veil of ignorance'. The 'veil of ignorance' is a hypothetical situation in which individuals do not know any particular details about themselves, but they at least know that they are human beings and therefore choose the policies that suit the human race.

These theories of moral standards have contributed immensely to the development of moral philosophy. These theories are centred on three basic questions: what goals or ideals one ought to pursue, what is the moral status of an action, and what is the justification of an action? Kant, Bentham and other moral theorists look beyond religion as grounding for the obligation of morality. Moral theories in this sense are a step ahead of uncritical religious injunctions and prohibitions. Moral arguments of almost all hues can more or less be presented in the form of one or the other moral theory.

However, when it comes to environmental discourse, moral theories fail to accommodate non-humans and nature. Further, a theory claims universal applicability and when confronted by similarly situated but opposite claims, it takes recourse to arguments. While doing so, sometimes exceptions, which fall outside the general formulations of ethical theories, are compromised and particularity is sacrificed at the altar of generality.[3] The Land ethics of Leopold attacks the presumptions of ethical theorists. Land, for Leopold, is the whole community of life. Leopold says that if a being suffers, the fact that it is not a member of our species, cannot be a moral reason for failing to take its suffering into account. The hierarchical conception of nature and the superiority of a single species over all others is based on the spiciest bias. Leopold says 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold, 38). Leopold cites the example of Odysseus hanging the slave girls after returning from the war in Troy because he suspected them of misbehaviour in his absence. The hanging involved no question of propriety because the girls were considered property and he was merely disposing of his property. "The disposal of property', says Leopold 'was then, as now, a matter of expediency, not of right and wrong" (Leopold, 2003. 38). The concepts of right and wrong were not lacking in those glorious times, but it was not just extended to the slaves. This extension of ethics is a process in ecological evolution (Leopold, 38).

The existing moral theories are based on the premise that an individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. Their instinct prompts them to compete for their place in that community and ethics prompts them to cooperate. Land ethics simply tries to enhance the boundaries of this community to include soil, water, plants and collectively land. The anthropocentric theories face contradiction when future generations, trees, animals, rivers and mountains become their clients. Peter Singer gives the analogy of slavery to clarify this point. Before banning slavery the white racists, like the speciests, limited their moral concern to their race so much so that the sufferings of the blacks did not have the same moral significance as the sufferings of the whites. Now the world has realised that suffering is more morally significant than the race of the sufferer. 'The logic of "racism" and "speciesism" is indistinguishable, and if we reject the former then consistency demands that we reject the latter too' (Singer, 2003: 57).

[3] In human sciences, strict theorization betrays authenticity, particularity, novelty and uniqueness (Parasain, 145). See also, Clarke and Simson (1989), Stocker (1990), Williams (1985), Hinman (2002).

Land ethics is undoubtedly a way ahead of anthropocentric moral theories. However, the problem with Land ethics is that it could sometimes be uncomfortable for animal rights activists to position their moral judgements on the stability of the biotic community. Because, whenever the killing of animals is not affecting the stability of the biotic community, killing of animals could be justified. Further, if the stability of the biotic community demands so, even the human population may require to be 'rationalised'. The logical conclusion of Land ethics would be a belief that the world is better off with less number of over-consuming humans. Further, the land ethic of Leopold is akin to the Platonic doctrine, which demands that the good of the whole should override the good of the parts, which in extension of its logic, demands sacrificing individuality at the altar of collectivity. The platonic ideal of sacrificing the individual at the altar of collectivity is a dystopia for the modern civilised world, where individuality and individual rights are the cornerstones in policy and legal framework. Dharma, on the other hand, balances individuality and collectivity, personal pursuits or *Purushartha* and morality.

Therefore, though Land Ethics manages to overcome the anthropocentric bias of traditional ethical theories, it is still not the fittest candidate for environmental policy and law. This leads us to look into the cogency of ethical concern for the environment in ethical pluralism. Ethical pluralism believes that there cannot be a universally applicable algorithm for settling moral disagreements. No single ethical theory can encompass the concerns for human beings, species of animals, ecosystems, wilderness areas and evolutionary processes without appealing to moral pluralism.

However, a mega-theory or ethical pluralism has its difficulties in explaining the different or even competing strands of thought. Moral discourse on the environment cannot be reduced to a game of "metaphysical musical chair" (Callicott, 211). Environmental concerns are in dire need of a philosophical foundation, which offers consistency, coherence and closure and is more effective in developing environmental policies and laws liberated from anthropocentric bias. The section to follow focuses on how environmental jurisprudence has been developed so far in our legislative efforts and judicial practices.

6.3 Environmental Jurisprudence and Judicial Practice

The anthropocentric bias of the moral theories discussed above finds a place in our environmental policies and laws. Arne Naess argues that this bias is visible in the World Conservation Strategy, prepared by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in cooperation with the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The argument in this important document is thoroughly anthropocentric in the sense that all its recommendations are justified exclusively in terms of their effects on human health and basic well-being (Naess, 263; IUCN, Sec. 13). Similarly, the National Environment Policy, 2006 also puts human beings at the centre of its policy aspirations (NEP, Sec. 4, 10). However, it at least acknowledges that the most secure

basis for conservation is to ensure that people dependent on particular resources obtain better livelihood from the fact of conservation than from degradation of the resources. Further, NEP recognises that *ancient sacred groves and "biodiversity hotspots" should be treated as possessing* "*Incomparable Values*" (NEP, Sec. 5.2.4. b, 28). Despite some strands of granting intrinsic value to non-humans in the policy, the basic policy framework is still based on the anthropocentric bias particularly because the principles followed in framing the legislation are human-centric and the judicial decisions on environmental litigations are made with the help of human rights jurisprudence in the absence of environment-centric jurisprudence.

The environmental jurisprudence in India is based on Part IV and Part IV-A of the Indian Constitution, namely, the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) and Fundamental Duties respectively. Article 48-A of the Constitution (DPSP) says, "*The state shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country*" (Shukla, 384). The Environment Protection Act, of 1986 was enacted by the Indian Parliament under Article 48-A. Article 51-A (g) (Fundamental Duties), says that "*It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures*" (Shukla, 387).

These provisions of the Indian Constitution have been strongly influenced by the Latin principles of *Res nullius* and *Res Communis*.[4] Following these principles, several other nations have also imposed a duty on the government to provide or protect a quality environment (Boyd, 30–36). However, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties are not enforceable by the Judiciary like the Fundamental Rights. Fundamental Rights give a right to constitutional remedies in the form of various kinds of writs under Article 32 (Shukla, 340) and Article 226 of the Constitution (Shukla, 655). On the other hand, directives are only broad policy frameworks for the State to follow and the duties of citizens are too not legally enforceable duties, though they gave teeth to several legislations on the environment and supplement the Judiciary in their wider interpretation of the environmental laws. Therefore, the Courts needed to enforce and evolve environmental jurisprudence with the help of Fundamental Rights. They did so in two ways—first, a right to a clean environment has been read to be implicit in Article 21 of the Constitution, which says, "*no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law*" and secondly, the concept of 'sustainable development' has been firmly recognized through a combined reading of Article 21 along with provisions of the Constitution, statutory obligations, and international instruments.[5] The right to an environment free of the danger of disease and infection is inherent in Article 21. The right to a healthy environment is an important attribute of the right to live with

[4] *Res nullius* means 1. "*A thing belonging to no one whether because never appropriated (as a wild animal) or because abandoned by its owner but acquirable by appropriation*"; 2. "*Property not subject to private ownership under Roman law*" (Merriam-Webster). *Res communis* means "*things owned by no one and subject to use by all: things (as light, air, the sea, running water) incapable of entire exclusive appropriation*" (Merriam-Webster).

[5] Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action versus Union of India (1996) 3 SCC 212; MC Mehta versus Kamal Nath, AIR 2000 SC 1997.

human dignity. The right to live in a healthy environment as part of Article 21 of the Constitution was first recognized in the Dehradun Quarrying Case.[6] It is the first case of this kind in India, involving issues relating to environment and ecological balance in which the Supreme Court directed to stop the excavation (illegal mining) under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. In *M.C. Mehta versus Union of India, AIR 1987 SC 1086* the Supreme Court treated the right to live in a pollution-free environment as a part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution. In another case, it ruled that "*any change in basic environmental elements like soil, water, air* etc*., is hazardous for life and violates Article 21 of the Constitution of India.*"[7]

The global environmental constitutionalism developed till the mid-1990s saw around 50 constitutional provisions globally that explicitly recognised a fundamental right to a quality environment (May and Daly: 4). However, when environmental concerns are looked into from the perspective of human being's right to life, we are already establishing environmental policy and law on anthropocentric presumptions. Fundamental Rights, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is concerned about the life of human beings. It is because our sensibility is still enduring the presumption of the biotic/abiotic community as property in our culture and moral theories are recognising man as the master of that property.

There have been some attempts by the Indian Judiciary to liberate environmental jurisprudence from the above anthropocentric bias. The Uttarakhand High Court on March 20, 2017, had declared Yamuna and Ganga rivers as living persons with rights akin to other living entities. It said,

> We, by invoking our parens patriae jurisdiction, declare the Glaciers including Gangotri & Yamunotri, rivers, streams, rivulets, lakes, air, meadows, dales, jungles, forests wetlands, grasslands, springs and waterfalls, legal entity/legal person/juristic person/juridical person/ moral person/artificial person having the status of a legal person, with all corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person, to preserve and conserve them. They are also accorded the rights akin to fundamental rights/legal rights.[8]

The Supreme Court, however, stayed the order on the appeal by the state government saying that the ruling would make the state solely accountable for the upkeep and preservation of rivers. Nevertheless, this is still a paradigm shift in environmental jurisprudence and a welcome addition to the similar efforts to grant legal rights to

[6] Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra versus State, AIR 1988 SC 2187.

[7] MC Mehta versus Kamal Nath, AIR 2000 SC 1997.

[8] Lalit Miglani versus State of Uttarakhand and Others, WPPIL 140/2015, Uttarakhand High Court, 2017.

nature in New Zealand, Columbia,[9] Bangladesh[10] and Bolivia.[11] The Uttarakhand High Court judgement casts constitutional and moral responsibility to all persons to endeavour to avoid damage or injury to nature (*damno vitando*). Any person causing any injury and harm to the Himalayas, Glaciers, rivers, streams, rivulets, lakes, air, meadows, dales, jungles and forests is liable to be proceeded against under the common law, penal laws, environmental laws and other statutory enactments governing the field.

So far, the Indian state and Judiciary have developed environmental jurisprudence from a fundamental right-to-life perspective, because of Fundamental Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in turn are founded on enlightenment beliefs on human reason. Therefore, we could at the most develop the doctrine of Public Trust or the polluters pay principle to deal with persons harming nature. Environment is now at least considered as common property, and the State is enjoined to act as a trustee of the natural resources meant for public use and fixed civil liability on the one who harms nature.[12] But the environment is still a property, like the slave-girls of Ulysses, which could be disposed of on our expediency. There was a time when humankind's moral sensibility was at peace with the idea of slaves as property, now it is not. Once trained in Dharmic consciousness, our sensibilities will not tolerate the presumption of the other biotic/abiotic community as property in our culture and our laws.

Thus the way forward from the anthropocentricity of our environmental laws and policies is not to ape the assumptions of Human Rights jurisprudence, which are based on the moral theories discussed in the previous section, but to embrace and train ourselves in Dharmic consciousness. The arguments from deep ecology[13] movement offer a paradigm shift from the anthropocentricity of moral theory. The shift from human-centric concerns to life-centric and then to the entire biotic community-centric approach indicates the evolutionary possibility of our philosophical reflections on the environment. Though the constitutionalization of the rights of nature[14] is now part of a growing environmental movement which highlights the importance of the natural environment for its own sake and as a whole, rather than an aggregation of resources to be harnessed by humans for their end, the movement still requires a

[9] The Constitutional Court of Columbia recognized that the river Atrato is a subject and holder of rights.

[10] The Supreme Court of Bangladesh in 2019 granted all its rivers the same status as humans (Islam, O'Donnell, 160).

[11] In 2017, New Zealand recognized the Whanganui River (considered sacred by the Maori tribe) as a living entity and its catchment as a legal person through legislation (Whanganui River Claims Settlement Act 2017, Section-14) and Bolivia passed the legislation "Law of Mother Earth" (O'Donnell, 2018).

[12] M C Mehta versus Kamal Nath AIR 2000 SC 1997.

[13] Deep ecology is based on the belief that the environment is to be valued not because it is useful to mankind, but because nature has intrinsic value (Naess, 264).

[14] In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to recognise and codify the rights of nature as a constitutional right. Art 71–74 gives the rights of nature or *Pacha Mama* (Mother Nature) to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles.

strong philosophical foundation for concrete policy perspective and legislation (See also May & Daly, 2015:255). The all-encompassing ideal of Dharma as moral and cosmic order epitomises and theorizes humankind's natural veneration of nature in their daily customs, practices, traditions and religious beliefs into a philosophical system, which may prove to be an important dialogue partner with moral theories and environmental jurisprudence developed so far by legislative and judicial efforts. Dharma affirms that man is the measurer of all values, but it does not affirm that man is the measure of all values. Value is measured in the integrity of our existence with our surroundings and human beings are only one component of the wider reality.

6.4 Environment in Dharmic Tradition

> *Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart',*
>
> (Hymn No.-12, sloka No.-34, Atharva Veda, Prithvi Sukta).

Dharma is not confined to objective codes of prescriptions alone. For example, the Mahabharata presents many situations surrounding its characters and their diverse perspectives. It is an epic which tells us what should not be done by exposing the tragic flaws of its heroes when they meet their nemesis on the battlefield, and presents a complex of utilitarian, duty-centric, virtue-based as well as a spiritual theory of action. Therefore, the understanding of law, morality and spirituality in the Mahabharata needs to be explored integrally. Similarly, Dharmashastra mentions five authorities on Dharma: Vedas, Dharmashastra, virtues cultivated by saints, the good conduct of the honest and finally satisfaction of the mind (of the agent) (Matilal, 57). Dharma is not simply the injunctions of the scriptures but a subject of rational inquiry. Mimamsa-sutra begins with "*athato dharma jigyasha*" (which means "now, enquire into the correct dharma") and goes on into the path of rational investigation into the text. A science of interpretation, *Tarka* or *hetushastra* aids such investigation. In matters where doubt intervenes, the natural inclination of the heart of the good person becomes the *pramana*, authority or the decisive factor (Kalidasa, I-22).

In Dharmic tradition, our moral beliefs are not only grounded in practice but the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community is both morally and ontologically connected with human actions and the reverence to nature is a prescribed pursuit for human beings. However, our laws following the various international conventions are still based on the doctrine of Public Trust. Trusteeship is still a property concept and thus the environment is still a property, like the slave girls of Ulysses or Jim in Mark Twain's novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Finn felt morally obliged to return the escaped slave Jim to his master because Jim is a property in the conscience of a person growing up in a particular cultural milieu and value system (Bennet, 1974: 123–34). The environment suffers because of our anthropocentric bias. However, Dharma is not anthropocentric. Dharma encompasses the entire existence and integrates it into the pursuit of the self, thereby transcending

the anthropocentricity of the Western moral and legal order. The concepts of good and bad, right and wrong in a moral theoretical framework are anthropocentric. But Dharmic integrity begins with the awareness of 'the other' and that 'the other' is not limited to humans alone. It then goes on to *Maitribhava* with the entire existence, which is the highest Dharma. Now our environmental concerns work very well in practice, but how does it fit in in value theory? We can find the answer to this question in Dharmic tradition. Dharma is a moral as well as an ontological concept. It is oneness with the entire existence as a moral pursuit and the ultimate destiny of the self. *"Dharanath dharma ucyate"*—that which sustains all species of life and helps to maintain harmonious relationships among them is Dharma (Palmer & Finley, 91). That which disturbs such ecology is Adharma.

There are two fundamentally connected ways to understand the impact of Dharma in the environmental discourse of our day: (a) philosophical and (b) beliefs, practices and ways of living of the people who follow that philosophical tradition. Mahabharata and other Dharmic texts offer problem-solving philosophical approaches to moral concerns and prescribe 'consideration of the benefit of others at large' *or Maitribhava* as the single most important virtue. It holds that *Maitribhava* is a higher virtue than 'truth' or 'keeping vows', as it is for the benefit of all. So it must be adhered to even at the cost of 'breaking a vow' which is merely a personal virtue. There are philosophical texts which consider nature as part of the body of Brahman. According to Ramanujacharya, Brahman is always qualified by matter and consciousness, which form His body and Jiva (individual self) and Jagat (material world) are the real modifications of the Brahman (*Brahmaparinamavada*). It is an organic unity, an identity which is qualified by difference (Sharma, 345–347). There are other metaphysical systems which regard nature as either the real transformation of the absolute reality, namely, Brahman or the appearance of that transformation for the conditioned mind. In other words, there are innumerable strands of philosophical thoughts in the Dharmic tradition, which acknowledges divine immanence in the objects of nature and the spiritual practices, and beliefs and the ultimate end of the practitioners founded on these philosophies have natural veneration for the entire existence.

In addition to the philosophy, the beliefs, practices and ways of living in Dharmic tradition are in more proximity to nature. In the Vedic age, people worshipped water, air, trees and forests. Even today, despite the invasion of Western consumerism in the geographical and cultural space of Indian urban centres, our villages are inextricably linked to a way of life, which has reverence for birds, animals, trees, plants and rivers. As Valmik Thapar observes,

> After nearly fifty years of independence, the Indian subcontinent can still be justly proud of its enormously varied flora and fauna. In India alone, 13000 species of flowering plants and 65000 species of fauna have been recorded... While the extremes of climate and habitat explain the enormous diversity of life, they do not explain how this wealth of flora and fauna has managed to survive on such an immensely crowded continent. Despite all the pressures, the diversity of both flora and fauna is the richest in the world. The answer lies, in part at least, in the special relationship that the people of the subcontinent had, and continue to have, with the other living creatures that share their land (Thapar, 11).

The most interesting point to recall in this context is that not only Dharmic tradition but the entire pagan and pre-Abrahamic world believed in oneness with nature, as argued in some of the chapters of this book. Whether it is the ancient Greeks, Indians, Nordic cultures, Maoris or African tribes, none of them believed that God has made humans the masters of the world. Indigenous people in the Andes believe that the "good way of living" is rooted in community and harmony with nature. The fundamental basis of recognition of the 'rights of nature' in the last decade in the various legal jurisdictions, as mentioned in the preceding section, is found to be the special religious, spiritual and cultural significance that these rivers have for the indigenous people. It is a well-known fact that most of the primitive cultures were nature worshipping.[15] It is the Abrahamic tradition that made man the master of the universe, which had the widest influence on religion, culture, philosophy, policy and law. As the Bible says,

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and the cattle, and all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
>
> (King James Bible, 1769/2008: Gen-1, Verse-26)

The nature that was venerated in the form of myths and beliefs of the ancient civilisations and tribal practices was eclipsed in the Dark Ages and later the reason-centricity of the Enlightenment era too was not able to accommodate the man-nature relation in their articulations. Romanticism, as a reactionary response against the scientific rationalisation of nature during the Enlightenment, commonly expressed in literature, music, painting and drama, has understood and appealed to mankind to go "back to nature" but was never in the business of mainstream policy and governance. Further, the emerging and expanding industrial capitalism in the late eighteenth century was simply unstoppable by a mere literary and cultural movement. As a result, the romantic hero became misanthrope and wanderlust in his realisation of the anthropocentric bias of his culture. Finally, the philosophical, cultural, and political tussle between Capitalism and Marxism, which from an environmental perspective, are homogeneously based on the common substratum of production, put an end to man's tribal veneration of nature.

Ancient traditions, cultures, customs and religious beliefs, which were implicit in the daily lives of people in the sub-continent, were lost from the popular consciousness during the two hundred years of colonial rule and post-independence materialistic competition amongst the nations compelled them to adopt policies and legal framework which were far removed from traditional indigenous wisdom and practices. As a result, what we have produced ultimately is an economic order which fails to factor in biodiversity, ecological disturbances and climate change in their cost–benefit analysis. Criticising the shortcomings of the market paradigm, John Martin Gillroy proposes an alternative way to conceptualise and create environmental policy, one that allows for the protection of moral and ecological values in

[15] One of the finest examples is given in the present volume. *Chapter 2: Indigenous Nature Conservation in Meghalaya* by Srijani Bhattacharjee.

the face of economic demands (Gillroy, 1999). He argues in favour of the integration of the intrinsic value of humanity and nature into the law.

The laws and policies for the future of humankind, therefore, must be based on those articulations and theories which accommodate the elements that have been left out in our economic rationality. Arguments in favour of such broad-based conceptualisation are found in the Dharmic tradition. Theory, in Dharmic tradition, is like a clinical gestalt, (a unified whole, the full nature of which cannot be grasped by analysing its parts) where parts are but perspectives. This is what has been argued using the metaphor of 'parallax' (Parasain, 175–187). Just as our vision with two eyes with overlapping visual fields use parallax to gain depth perception, the various perspectives with which mankind has evolved their understanding of the meaning of life, needs, their position in the world and their responsibility towards the earth or biosphere, with overlapping, conflicting and even contradicting convictions, may traverse through the parallax gap and found a new philosophy for our environmental concern. The epistemic humility inherent in the Dharmic understanding is capable of accommodating the wisdom built up so far on this issue in the form of 'deep ecology', 'Land ethics' and 'rights of nature' movements.

6.5 Conclusion

The basic argument in this chapter is not to revive the *Dharmashastras* and infuse them into the modern legal system but to enquire how the spirit of Dharma can be useful for the legal order of our times, particularly the laws needed for the preservation of our ecosystem and earth. The *Dharmashastras* as texts could be static but Dharma is dynamic and has the seeds of discursive practice in it. The spirit of *Shruti*, particularly the Mahabharata, repeatedly claims that following static norms and traditions is not Dharma if it fails to accommodate emerging situations and does not act as a problem-solving model. Dharma and its unsettled character give way to justice even within the steel framework of legal doctrines and settled rules of interpretation.

The act of living may be instinctive and biological but meaningful living has a spiritual dimension to it. Legal order for environmental protection is not meant to be instrumentalities for survival alone but for meaningful living. By arresting the primordial gregarious instincts, the law prepares the ground for the self to care for the other. Law is to restrict the use of the power of coercion. It is all about '*Maryada*' or self-imposed limitation and restriction. The legal framework for the environment could be founded on what Geeta calls *Samattva Yoga*[16] (a state of equanimity, equality, indifference or uniformity), and universal beneficence to all and harmlessness. Based on this philosophy, it would not be difficult for the legislature in

[16] *Yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṁtyaktvādhanañjaya siddhy-asiddhyoḥsamobhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga uchyate* 2.48 "*Fixed in yoga, do thy work, O Winner of wealth, Abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure, for evenness of mind is called yoga.*" (Radhakrishnan, 1953: Chapter-2, Verse-48: 120).

any future overhauling of environmental laws to give moral personality to the biotic and abiotic components of the earth, hydrosphere and energy components as these are already included in the legal definition of "environment".[17]

Although the common good or moral consensus of a society is reflected in the legislations or the constitutional documents of a nation, much of these values, being the wisdom of an ancient society transmitted over the generations, may not be reduced to written form. They may just remain embroidered in the collective unconscious of a civilisation. The Indian concept of Dharma is the 'institutional a-priori' of its legal system. Therefore, the rationalities and technicalities of our environmental policies and statutory laws shall not find it difficult to reorganise themselves around the most important institutional a-priori of our civilization.

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[17] Section 2 (a) of The Environmental Protection Act, 1986 says "environment" includes water, air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land, and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organisms and property.

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Chapter 7
Derangement in Ecological Consciousness Today

Kaushani Mondal

Abstract If Talal Asad points out that for him secular is a concept that "brings together certain behaviours, knowledge, and sensibilities in modern life," my chapter tries to carry it forward by bringing a few other domains like psychology, earth consciousness, planetarity into the striations of the secular. This secular is a deep commitment to a belief that need not be religious always: an inner sincerity to see the truth of imagination, the cataclysmic state of the environment, the relational mesh with the non-human world, the grammar and paradox of pain and survival, the reality of an understanding the worldliness neuro-sensually and our embodied responses to the world around. The secular is a habitus, sensibility, embodiment, reflections and critical understanding. Being secular is not always being religious; being secular is about being existential, socio-cultural, neuro-natural, and ecosophical-ecocritical. This chapter is about the dynamics and poetics of togetherness and takes three points of explications: three conceptual performatives in recognition, sublime, and improbability from Amitav Ghosh's book, *The Great Derangement*. We are amid continuous transcendence where climate change, Anthropocene, species extinction, environmental apocalypse, and nuclear war call for separate configurations of the secular. The secular can no longer work as a priori with its own innatism. This is not the Habermasian and Kantian non-religious reason; this secular reason holds desire, romantic and aesthetic qualities, the spirituality of everydayness, the fragility of existence and terror of the non-human green, the green anxiety, our state and conditions and desires of existence, our restless contemporary. Also, our fullness in life, bio-egalitarianism, planet-sharing ethics, and inclusive humanism that believes in being with plants and non-human animals feature in this secular figuration. In a post-natural world with a new sense of nature and increasingly reversed roles, man continues to deanthropogenise himself. Derangement is our new order and new poetics of living together.

Keywords Amitav Ghosh · Green secularism · Donna Haraway · Derangement · Recognition

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7.1 Introduction

We are on the edge of chaos: out of order, struggling to keep order, overwhelmed by disorder and, in a large way, deranged—thrown into confusion. We are at the bend of losing our sanity of living under the pressure of an insanity of living where everything about this planet is anthropomorphized in a Baconian gust of avarice and domination. The whole non-human community is on the line, struggling to find an axis to survive and be sustained. The last hundred years have seen a terrible beauty in the making—a transformed nature, a seriously altered habitat, a dismantled bio-egalitarianism, a being with others under the menace of permanent disrupture. The explosion is already on, and the aftereffects are gradually becoming palpable. This chapter looks into our situated reality within an encompassing derangement. The discussion brings out the nuanced connection that derangement has with politics, our conscious-unconscious state of being, and our embedded engagement with the world. Working through Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), the idea of the post-political, psychoanalysis and other concepts, the chapter brings us before what I describe as togetherness that is not outside the deranged nature we are forced to live with. Derangement, the chapter argues, is as much our predicament as it is a product of the human and non-human interface.

Are all crises attributed to humans? Are we to believe the discourses of environmental scepticism? Without locating humans as prime players in the ongoing climate tragedy, environmental sceptics regard planetary upheavals as major causes of derangement. They argue that it is the natural cycle of the planet to induce climatic changes while greenhouse emissions and waste disposal remain confusing points for climate skeptics.[2] We need not bother; the planet will reset itself. Humans may continue doing what they are in the habit of doing; the planet will forget and forge, adjust and accommodate; humans can live with impunity. But the lions and the plants do not produce carbon emissions as humans do. They do not try to terrorize and territorialize as humans are accustomed to doing. They don't use weapons to protect and kill. Humans are unique in their way of survival that declares that living is about outliving others, and surviving is survival at the cost of others, something that philosopher Lynn White Jr. in his 1967 essay traced back to a particular verse in the book of *Genesis* around the theme of domination (*Genesis* 1:28). The world crisis is precisely anthropogenic. Despite how nature and the planet adjust and adapt, humans are all powerful and manipulate the axis of existence. Humans know only one form of existence that will keep their flag flying over the planet—being sectarian. Kureethadam (2017) argues by pointing out that,

The anatomically modern humans, the Homo sapiens sapiens, emerged nearly 195,000 years ago, and the Holocene epoch during which our current civilizations rose began just around 12,000 years ago. The arrival and flourishing of modern humans in our planetary home is indeed very recent when compared to the long geological history of the earth. The last time that our home planet experienced a similar rise in the global average temperatures as could occur in the current century

without mitigation efforts, was a period named by scientists as the Palaeocene–Eocene Thermal Maximum (PETM) which occurred as far back as 55 million years ago when a massive amount of carbon in the form of methane—about 4.5 trillion tons—entered the atmosphere, causing temperatures to shoot up by 5C (9F). The big difference is that while the previous episode was caused by natural factors and stretched over a period of 10,000 years, today human activities are releasing greenhouse gases 30 times faster than the rate of emissions that triggered a period of extreme global warming in the Earth's past, capable of achieving the same effect in just 300 years (13). So derangement is our unavoidable reality, a predicament that makes us secular with other beings to death-drive dominate the planet and all species across land, sea, and air. The chapter develops a differing range of perspectives on the subject of derangement and connects its varying valences—both within our ecological consciousness and the dynamic of being together in the face of crisis.

7.1.1 Derangement and What It Spells for Us

Derangement is multiscalar and most often incomprehensible to human understanding. The multiscalarity creates its web of existence and, with it, webs of meaning. Addressing trans temporality, derangement messes up human time and through material and physiological ramifications, our sense of reality is affected. Derangement then leaves us before a "real" that is difficult to grasp and define. This real has a different rhythm to it: what I mean by this is that as derangement intrudes planetary life, our methods of living and surviving to keep changing and staying together are no longer the same as before. I think the ethics of living *across* species has changed to a point where we are mostly forced to share a community because derangement has gradually evened out our hierarchical modes and attitudes. Understanding is defied; perception, though, has changed. We know we cannot be outside the life web.

Amitav Ghosh argues in his book *The Great Derangement*: *Climate Change and the Unthinkable* the three major concepts of *recognition*, *sublimity* and *improbability* to understand how derangement through climate change, natural upheavals, and ecological emergency work. For Ghosh, our deranged state has brought us before an imaginative failure—a terrible lack of comprehending what is thrown at us and what we are stretched by. This deficit is difficult to imagine as an invincible invisibility of becoming that threatens where we are, what we are, and what awaits us. Imagining the calamity and failure to imagine are forms of suffering: a kind of sufferance that has deep effects on our unfolding processes of derangement. How does this deficit build an imagination that brings us all into a secular space of extinction and destruction? The secularity of derangement—the denouement in our planetary existence—and the disorder have brought all species together into a common point of mutual recognition. It is through recognition that we identify ourselves and the other. Recognition can be a (in)determinate moment where recognising the other can come through understanding as much as the lack of it. It is the lack, the ignorance, that spells the line

of disorder—not recognising is not recognising oneself too. Interestingly, Amitav Ghosh writes, “To recognize, then, is not the same as an initial introduction. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognize mutely. And to recognize is by no means to understand that which meets the eye; comprehension needs play no part in a moment of recognition” (Ghosh, 2016, 5). To add to the derangement, we can say that recognition is just not mute always; it can be misplaced, or misdirected, where recognizing the other in our surroundings and nature can be misemphasized within an anthropogenic hegemony and where understanding is bereft of empathy, lack sensibility towards the other and becomes largely solipsistic. This is like negating the other to recognize oneself; the negation of the other’s presence is a way of connecting the self with the other. This means when we negate the essentiality of a tree to declare how much we need the absence of it to flourish. Ghosh further writes,

> The most important element of the word recognition thus lies in its first syllable, which harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness that makes possible the passage from ignorance to knowledge: a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld. Yet this flash cannot appear spontaneously; it cannot disclose itself except in the presence of its lost other. The knowledge that results from recognition, then, is not of the same kind as the discovery of something new: it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself (5–6).

It is the “lost other” that inculcates the recognition to generate greater secularity—lost species, lost trees and plants, lost seasons, lost oceans, lost lands. This loss can be a memory to ‘come together’, and also an overcoming of the ideology of power and domination that has defined how interspecies existence has come to rule this planet in the last hundred years. Thoreau cannot visit a Walden because a Walden does not exist: it is lost. It is a painful recognition of our continued derangement. Our staying together has changed.

Human recognition of nature or the nonhuman nature has been ideological and power-centred resulting in a misrecognition that created a serious controversy. The misrecognition of non-human nature—the birth of the Anthropos tyrannus—has left the other with less independence and the human agency with an illusion of liberation: this is an illusion because the more the misrecognition continued the greater the shrinking of spaces between species resulting in man realizing how the planet is getting increasingly inhospitable and hence uninhabitable and hence foreign. So, the categories by which the recognition failed demanded that those categories be revised and reinstated to continue with secularity which is the only promise for planetary cohabitation. Derangement is negative, but within this disorder, there is a bend that can come through re-cognition emerging in new ethics of co-scepticism. Ghosh observes that.

> But the earth of the era of global warming is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast. The waters that are invading the Sundarbans are also swamping Miami Beach; deserts are advancing in China as well as Peru; wildfires are intensifying in Australia, as well as Texas and Canada.

> There was never a time, of course, when the forces of weather and geology did not have a bearing on our lives—but neither has there ever been a time when they have pressed themselves on us with such relentless directness (82–83).

So, the narration of our coming together and being together has to change: not simply a re-narration but an investment in a probability that perhaps can find a way out of fiction. Not a mere fabula or fictionalization; but a reflection and representation of probability that gives a philosophy of hope in our daily grind in a carbon democracy. This relocates the imagination that I have been talking about at the beginning—a radical imagination that tries to understand the climate caprices, massive upheavals across the planet, the global warming as it destroys our fine balance of coexistence.

What Ghosh via Freud calls the uncanny makes our planetary status debatable. How much responsibility do we have to keep the axis in place? Do we deserve to claim our planetary citizenship after all the marauding violence that we perpetrate? If the earth was uncanny in the beginning, our misrule and over-dominance have made it more uncanny in ways that we never thought were possible: the improbable is our uncanny today. Ghosh is right to note that.

> … in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway. It is as though our earth had become a literary critic and were laughing at Flaubert, Bankim, and their like, mocking their mockery of the 'prodigious happenings' that occur so often in romances and epic poems. This, then, is the first of the many ways in which the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability. They are not easily accommodated in the deliberately prosaic world of serious prose fiction" (35).

This announces how the uncanny is our secular point of connection: it is through recognition and improbability that we reach the uncanny. The powerful uncanny and the overpowering improbable have changed the way we narrate our times and our times through fiction. Derangement has changed our frames of literature, our politics of representation and with it our connection with climate and fiction. Ghosh notes that.

> All of this makes climate change events peculiarly resistant to the customary frames that literature has applied to 'Nature': they are too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein. Indeed, in that these events are not entirely of Nature (whatever that might be), they confound the very idea of 'Nature writing' or ecological writing: they are instances, rather, of the uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the non-human (43).

Our unbalanced equations with the non-human have thrown us into the reality of the improbable and the uncanny. Our secularity is emphasized through possible extinction, deanthropogenization and discontinuities. Derangement has become hyperobjective in that a majority of people are unaware of what global warming is doing to us and consider the minority view as elitist, selective and a wealthy group burden. The hyperobjectivized nature is the source of the uncanny and the improbable. This hyperobjectivity shocks our imagination and leads us before a derangement which we never thought would be our reality. This is also a disanthropic imagination

that engages with the improbable to build a fresh world of mourning. The mourning is less over what is getting lost for the coming generation of penguins or polar bears will be picture-reality only. The mourning is mostly about what our callousness is throwing us into as more realities are transformed into pictures or images to look back at a forgotten time.

Derangement is not just our lost time: it is a way of entering into an image gallery of past events and past realities. It is the rupture with time and tradition of experience and seeing. It is a deep rupture that constructs our emotional and intellectual detachment from a past which we shall forget to mourn; the memory of nature is fleeing, perhaps. The mourning and the uncanny bring us before the future where the narrowing of distance from the present is another form of ecophobia. An 'all is well' and 'all must be going well' are the two approaches that mourning provides for a withdrawal from acts of destruction and imminent catastrophe is the only vantage point from where life can be lived and survival can be made survivable. In a post-natural world with a new sense of nature and with an increasing reversal of roles where man continues to deanthropogenise himself, derangement is our new order. And derangement is our new poetics of living together.

Has derangement made us future-oriented? The very reality of something 'coming' has left us living in a sequential time and space: one follows the other. We are told 'time ahead will be dreadful' or monstrous time awaits us. We listen to Latour saying.

> "Are you going to disappear soon?" "Are you the telltale of something new coming to replace everything else?" "Is this the seventh seal of the Book of Apocalypse that you are now breaking?" An entirely new set of questions has now emerged: "Can we cohabitate with you? Is there a way for all of us to survive together while none of our contradictory claims, interests, and passions can be eliminated?" (40)

We do survive either in the past or the future and this, as Latour points out, shuts us out from the present realities. Derangement as a reality lives mostly through comparison with the past and the oncoming time, which, in a way, leaves the politics of the present less heterogeneous and more democratic. Time impacts every one of us—human and nonhuman—differently, and the present is fraught with such differences. So, to say climatic change will affect us ignores how our spatialities and temporal associations are different and differently transformative. The post-political then is mostly about trying to rationalize the deeply irrational present. Staying on with Latour, we agree that the complexity of the present makes our climatic thinking and imagination better tuned and equipped to deal with the ground and its realities.

The association and disassociation with nature are dialectical; in a Lacanian sense, man the child submits to Mother Earth only to find alienation that disrupts him to the point of further violence to possess. The loss of control begets the urge to control more. The ravaged earth is the expression of a reactionary child dispossessed by the very fact of not being able to dominate the mother. Nature/earth is the unobtainable object of desire. It is the desire that leads to misrecognition that I have argued earlier. Desire, dispossession and unobtainability combine to produce a lack which makes man chase nature more for possession and in the process lose further control over

it. This dialecticism works to a point where nature becomes deranged and the man stands further dispossessed. The predicament of derangement then is both conscious and unconscious. The symbolic order of Anthropocene is built in this way where after the language of possession we now have the language of protection and catastrophe; the symbolic order makes us build forms of discourses that threaten man with disappearance (called extinction) and possible resilience. Threatened by castration the human struggles to find his meaningful subjectivity within an imperilled existential crisis. As Lacan (2004) explains, “It is in so far as his desire is beyond or falls short of what she says, of what she hints at, of what she brings out as meaning, it is in so far as his desire is known, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted” (218–219). So, this is the nature, rather natures, that is deranged at various levels, alienated at many points of becoming. Nature is imagined into a being that the human feels cannot be identified with. Lack of identification with nature is our derangement today. Failure to understand nature is the nature outside our symbolic order of immediacy and cognition.

7.1.2 Derangement as a Form of Secular Living?

Derangement is alienation; this is a lack of the symbolism that troubles us; the trouble is not simply with earth scientists and climatologists but with ordinary humans who start to face it materially and emotionally. This is a continual process of separation. Like, we aspire for what is seriously lacking in nature and yet surrender to the processes of readjustments that capitalist developments make, rendering us further and further away from the mother figure. The memory of a losing nature fleets past. Living with nature now is the impossibility of not being able to connect with Nature. Disconnection in ecological consciousness is derangement. The deranged nature is not a static state; it is dialectical in its recuperation, sustainability and relentless lack. The difficulty is that nature now is inescapably implicated in culture. And without culture, it is difficult to believe in nature. Even the calamitic nature that confronts us is a consequence of the cultured and cultivated nature and this state is our permanent fate. Our state of eco-mourning must understand that the impossibility of ending separation is the fate that makes ecological understanding a singular discourse. Nature now is nature is disrepair. Derangement is our new ontology. So, if derangement is what we have to live with, our ways of cohabitation—the oikeios—cannot be a Cartesian arithmetic. We are as much invested in nature as nature is invested in us. This is a deeply secular thought. Derangement-ecology demands that we believe in a non-Cartesian mode of existence where *natureculture* is our predicament even if we decide not to believe in it. Lack, loss, denudation, and irreparability are cluster words of an ecological consciousness which survives in loss and submission to a changing nature. Human subjectivity about nature has changed, has been under process and making us ‘globe the earth’ (Ghosh, 2012, 3) in ever intriguing and demanding ways.

However, if politics is brought to nature, what kind of green politics are we a part of? In trying to make us live in a dangerous boat—common peril, common destiny—critics like Ulrich Beck feel that we have been de-politicized and our political passions have been blunted. Our secular predicament is not just about a common danger; it is not merely about a catastrophe that is impending on all in equal measure and force. Violation in nature is political because we don't violate in the same way; identities matter as also our positions of power and privilege. Violators vary as well as the forms of nature. Nature at peril is a common slogan for a singular nature. But is nature so homogenous as green activism believes in? Swyngedouw (2011) explains that certain particular imaginings of Nature are speaking of endism or ecocide. Swyngedouw quotes Zizek's Lacanian reading to enunciate how nature builds a series of signifiers when its central element of understanding is empty (nature does not exist, as Zizek says.) Swyngedouw writes that.

> Nature constitutes exactly such a central (empty or floating) element whose meaning can be gleaned only by relating it to other more directly recognizable signifiers. Nature becomes a symbolic tapestry, a *montage*, of meaning, held together with quilting points. For example, "biodiversity", "eco-cities", "CO_2", or "climate change" can be thought of as quilting points (or *points de capiton*) through which a certain matrix of meanings of Nature is articulated. These quilting points are also more than mere anchoring points; they refer to a beyond of meaning, a certain enjoyment that becomes structured in fantasy (in this case, the desire for an environmentally balanced and socially harmonious order). In other words, there is always a remainder or excess that evades symbolization (71–72).

So, nature leaves remainders and, hence, a secular understanding demands not a singular deranged nature; but a matrix of meanings where nature can be unnatural or deviant or wayward or queer. Derangement multiforms its manifestation. Nature today is nature limitless, nature delimited. So, derangement, in my opinion, requires various forms of recognition where recognising nature speaks about a certain set of values, opinions and ideologies. This is the political in nature. With multiple-meaning signifiers, this becomes the nature that Zizek likes to see. A nature that is not empty in the centre is dead and 'unreal.' Also, the emptiness makes us think about entanglement differently. This is not simply a binary between culture and nature and pushes the problematic of *nature-culture* into the forefront and declares how things have collapsed between the two. If nature is multiple, undergoing multiplicity of derangements, nature ceases to be a coherence. Nature assembles outside anthropocentric determinations; nature succumbs to deassemblage under human impact and other 'inhuman' forces too. So, the universalizing theory of nature under crisis and mourning just does not fit into the life of things. Derangement then for me is an episode that is organic and human but also erratic and sporadic. And the crisis is perilous where the Real in nature is too complex to be understood as unitary and homely.

Whatever the form and version of nature we live in, the negotiations affecting the human and the non-human, the underlying secular consciousness is rooted in fear. We are brought into a complex of varying degrees of fear and anxiety. The fear that nature has always evoked in us has changed now; nature has created more anxieties than ever before. Also, previously nature used to be unpredictable in the sense that

we did not know what to expect next—the nature tomorrow is not dependent on nature today. But the equation has changed where nature today has a somewhat consequential fate awaiting in the future. Nature has natures; but the flow of nature, underwritten by fear, is gradually getting into a unidirectionality where the only prognosis is a calamitic imagination. Swyngedouw is right to see that.

> This cultivation of "ecologies of fear", in turn, is sustained by a particular set of phantasmagorical, often apocalyptic, imaginations. The apocalyptic imaginary of a world with endemic resource shortages, ravaged by hurricanes whose intensity is amplified by climate change, pictures of scorched land as the geo-pluvial regime and the spatial variability of droughts and floods shifts, icebergs that disintegrate around the poles and cause sea levels to rise, alarming reductions in bio-diversity, the devastations raked by wildfires, tsunamis, spreading diseases like SARS, Avian Flu, or HIV. These imaginaries of Nature out of synch, destabilised, threatening, and out of control are paralleled by equally disturbing images of a society that continues piling up waste, pumping CO_2 into the atmosphere, deforesting the earth, etc. We seem to have an unquenchable fascination with such dystopian imaginaries (75).

But again does this anthropocenic imaginaries produce depoliticization or can we argue back to say it is a new form of repoliticization? It is I would like to argue produces varieties of fear and anxiety levels leading to a symbolic order of dystopian and often regenerative imaginaries. A section fights back; a section succumbs; a section transforms itself; a section becomes indifferent; all are different forms of repoliticization.

Is derangement or the fact of our secular calamity or this staying together in crisis a simple and often simplistic discourse of nature-depredation and anthropocenic overpowering? Is the shrinking of ecological space just about man-centric damage and not about a certain section of people who amass obscene amounts of capital and wealth, have access to the technology that causes the worst damage to nature and habitat, decide to fight wars and bomb the planet for their good and ego, damage ecology for their good and prosperity? Are we all party to this or a mere section of powerful people wrought the damage and we then all share the precarious boat and struggle to save our lives? Kathleen McAfee rightly points out that.

> Claims of superior, scientific knowledge, often flying in the face of deep local knowledge and experience, have supported major projects for reordering landscapes, frequently with disastrous consequences and nearly always with inequitable results. A brief sampling might note the ill-fated hydrological reengineering of Tenochtitlán, the replacement of community forests by scientifically managed imperial woodlots, the substitution of Cartesian-grid, mono-crop planting for native polycultures adapted to local soils and rains, the violent suppression of women's practical healing knowledge by an all-male medical elite, the new enclosures of landscapes and forests by today's agro-efficiency engineers and would-be "global" conservation organizations acting in the name of nature and the best interests of "humanity." One need not deny the power of Enlightenment reason, or dismiss the achievements of scientific method in engineering and medicine, to be justifiably leery of agendas to "guide mankind" with knowledge—and, as strongly implied, superior values—possessed by an unspecified "we" (66).

Limits to 'green grabbing' and limits to planet grabbing could have come to our rescue. But who decides the limit? The collective we or the specific 'we'? The

hegemonic decision makers or the overwhelmed majority who struggle under the misuse and misrecognition of the powerful few? McAfee raises pertinent questions claiming that.

> If climate change is indeed epoch-changing and humans are a geological force, is this not the worst time to abandon the lessons of history, the insights of the humanities, and the tools of social science? ... Is not the urgent political task first that of communication—and the creation of languages and modes of interacting that enable diverse communities to see and hear each other without becoming subordinate to or even like each other—and so the forging of ties, networks, practices, movements, and institutions through which the worlds environmentally affected might wrest control of our "environments" from those who gain from their destruction? That can help us prefigure and continue building equitable and, yes, sustainable worlds (71–72).

Living together is not an easy plan. Listening to each other, and forming communities of resistance, adaptation, resilience and protest is harder. Wresting control from the climate changers, the merchants of technological dominance and disaster is the hardest.

7.1.3 Coda

I want to see derangement as a new form of hospitality. Less about hostility, it is closer to how we start to become hospitable to others in the face of the despairing present. Derangement has left the home with porous walls. Humans are not separated from other life forms, and being hospitable to each other is the only way by which the complexity of the present can be understood and the 'time to come' can make sense. Our borders of living are not enclosures but openness too: they are not prohibitions but invitations to see how we can conditionally accept the other and again revise our conditions to build a space for staying together. The nonhuman other has always been a stranger in the human world, and the deranged present makes us see how hospitality can be welcoming of the uninvited, the sudden visitations of the other, and how what we anticipate is transcended by wider forms of possibilities. The present is membranous as it keeps changing the texture and formation of the hospitable community of which we are a part. Mastery matters, but not hegemony. The ethics of living addresses both conditional and unconditional hospitality. Risk and insecurity matter, but not dominant predation.

What, then, is this "coming nature"? The present breaks open a space to situate and spatialize the other. What kind of other is this "derangement"? A deranged other? The present is not ready to receive this other; the present knows the unpredictability of the other, the lack of control over the other expected to arrive in any form and with any consequence. However, this hospitable space is accepting of any kind of deranged visitor and yet again starts to build its gate against certain intrusions. This, following Derrida, I can say an unconditional hospitality of the present but not without its means of finitude; this finitude does not and cannot, lay conditions for the kind of deranged visitors it might allow and host. The present in its hospitality has lost its

mastery and this has generated the spectre of a visitor who might decimate all that comes its way. This unconditioned acceptance of “stranger consequences” makes the present a resistance to derangement; this present connects with the future both in helplessness and formal preparedness making for an odd and intriguing combination of roles.

Derangement addresses the material but not without it being a medium for emotions and the unconscious. My understanding of derangement then builds somewhat on Von Essen’s ecomysticism (2010) where Von Essen sees mystical experiences as natural and material. This is interesting because we are in trace not like an ascetic but a profound materialist who sees a mystical connection with the environment through the dwindling of the matter, the dispossession that derangement brings in our material existence. So ecomysticism is a centrifugal force that moves through the senses to the outer material world as largely different from panentheism. It extends relational panentheism to a point where experiences with nature are extrospective, connecting with the material nature and its vagaries. This is not about trying to find God in the outer world or trying to experience nature introspectively; eco-mysticism looks at derangement differently. It is the materiality of derangement that concerns us. We are left to identify with the outer world and its degeneration, the loss and lapse, and realise that there are no clear boundaries to separate us from the depredations around us. Derangement has made us physically responsive to the cataclysm. We are destined to struggle materially and it is through matter that we connect with the natural world and emotively try to reach its core and concern. Ecomysticism, I would like to argue, denudes our anthropocentric ego and reduces us into a connector within an expanding consciousness of living together.

For me, Kirkman’s (2002) claim that ‘environmental problems are, in a word, endemic’ (153) hardly makes sense. Kirkman’s arguments underlie ecological crisis as an ‘ever-present potential within human condition’ (153) and, hence, the alarm bells are ringing unreasonably loudly for environmental degradation is an inevitable part of our existence leading us to the crisis and catastrophe of the planet. A stance such as this argues for an oblivion of recuperation of nature; it works against the abuse that humans have put the planet to. It exonerates humans from the damage it has caused and does not claim any derangement that has brought all biotic communities into the bounds of peril and disaster. Derangement as a secular crisis owes to over-technologization. Heidegger (1977) considered technology as a ‘mode of revealing’ (13) which is both about how technology helps us to manifest ourselves and how technology as a category of objects reveals itself on us. But if such have been the acts of revealment since humans first made their engagement with technology, things are no longer the same as an aeroplane or industrial waste machines are very different from the windmills. The former extracts and destroys in a non-sustainable way while the latter turns the energy of nature into useful sources of energy. The technological mode of being cannot be our defence against technology as essential to survival. Derangement is a form of technological misuse, a misappropriation of our technological mode of being. We have forgotten what it means to live and survive non-technologically. Perhaps, Heidegger means both in the sense that being technological is also understanding the non-technological being of existence. Watching

a river is about watching a nontechnological mode of being revealed to us in joy and delight; it is also technological in the way humans crowd around it, harness its waters, bring down vegetation to build a bridge, and pollute the surroundings as tourists on vacation. They bring more objects of technology into the world of the river to unworld a separate form of existence called derangement. Perhaps, this ecofascist attitude through technology does not make humans the only offenders in this whole set of things; nature is just not 'standing reserves'. Our living together brings a complex relationship between things and humans, the biotic and the non-biotic; this complicates the issue of technology both as unavoidable, as habit, as necessity, and as avoidable also.

Derangement then, despite the profuse apologies of the environmental sceptics, cannot but owe to the Homo Faber, "the human fabricator" (173), as Szerszynski (2012) argues. All roads end and begin with the homo faber; all glow and cycles of nature are affected by this species. The problem of this species is that it is continually under a deconstructive bind. If nature is changing and is being transformed, the subjectivity of Homo Faber is under revision too. The presence of man and nature is the temporal space that is always leaving behind traces to build a new image of a future. Man is deranged because nature has been in the process of derangement. If deconstruction recentres without losing the centre, homo faber is one such centre that raises promises of more centres of existence and more deranged points of living. Interspecies living happens at these various points of living. Derangement is not a permanent state of experience because derangement pans out at various points of manifestations at different levels of meaning and consequences and with it, species existence keeps shifting points of survival. Nature is under deconstruction and derangement is a concept that is under deconstruction too.

7.2 Endnotes

1. Parts of this chapter overlap with Chap. 1 of my book *Staying Together*: *Natureculture in a Changing World*, 2023. Lexington Books.
2. For an in-depth understanding of the term 'environmental scepticism' one can refer to *Climate Change Scepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Analysis* (2019), edited by Greg Gerrard et al. Bloomsbury Academic.

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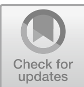
Part III
Literary Formulations: Memoir, Parable, and Storyworlds

Chapter 8
Multispecies Conviviality, Bioregionalism, and Vegetal Politics in Kodagu, India



Subarna De

Abstract The essay examines the changing human-plant geographies in Kodagu, situated in the Western Ghats in southern India. Paying attention to Kodagu helps investigate how "plantiness" impacts resource politics in Indigenous landscapes across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial timeframes. This chapter will study Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* (2010) and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* (2010) from a bioregional perspective to understand the importance of native plants, forests, vegetal, and feral spaces across Kodagu's shifting societies and timeframes and investigate how the human-plant encounters redefine the role of plants in Kodagu's more-than-human geographies. With a particular focus on the Kodava ritual of Kailpodh, this chapter will explore how humans often classify plants as native, invasive, weeds, sacred, and unwanted, depending on their impact on human social life and how ritualizing plants such as *rajakirita* helps to reinhabit Kodagu and deepens the Kodava human-plant interaction across space and time.

Keywords Decolonial bioregionalism · Human-plant geographies · Plantiness · Multispecies conviviality · Vegetal political ecology · Indigenous knowledge · Kodagu/Coorg · Decolonization

8.1 Introduction

Human-plant interaction has been the fundamental aspect of cultural ecology since Julian Steward (Head, 2007; Head & Atchinson, 2009). Plants provide human sustenance and are essential for food, ecology, and culture. These material performances of plants, also known as 'plantiness', have been central to defining human-plant geographies for centuries (Head & Atchison, 2009; Head et al., 2012). Nevertheless, humans often classify plants as native, invasive, weeds, sacred, and unwanted, depending on their impact on human social life (Argüelles & March, 2022). From

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the perspective of vegetal political ecology, the agency of plants actively contributes to more-than-human environmental politics based on their plantiness (Barua, 2014; Head et al., 2014; Robbins, 2007).

The concept of plantiness was first introduced and defined by Lesley Head, Jennifer Atchison, and Alison Gates as "the assemblage of qualities that makes a plant" (2012, 3). Plantiness, however, does not depend on a single quality or set of characteristics of a plant but rather on an 'assemblage' that combines material characteristics, that is, modes of representation of how plants are identified concerning particular material capacities (Head et al., 2012, 26–30; Atchison & Head, 2013, 955; Pitt, 2017, 97). At the core, the biological characteristics of plants configure their material capacities and help plants become essential players in human social life (2012, 27; Argüelles & March, 2022, 1). However, disciplines such as cultural ecology, landscape research, human geography, and environmental anthropology have repeatedly asserted that exploring the role of plants in determining their plantiness or considering the impact of plantiness on human-plant encounters depends entirely on three interdependent variables: place, culture, and power-laden societal structures rather than the biological capabilities of the plants (Argüelles & March, 2022, 2; Fleming, 2017, 27; Hinchliffe & Whatmore, 2006, 135; Rose & Van Dooren, 2012, 16). Simply stated, plantiness refers to the role or performance of plants in a particular place, community, and culture.

For a deeper understanding of the theory of plantiness, it is, therefore, crucial to understand the shared characteristics common to the biological group of plants in different societies and cultures, how plants live, think, communicate, and perform as active agents in human social life across various timeframes (Hall, 2011; Chamovitz, 2012; Marder, 2013, 156–160; Pitt, 2017). The coupling of plant performance across different times and places and how different societies and cultures perceive plants and their plantiness is what Head et al. (2014) call "vegetal political ecology." Vegetal politics, therefore, involves understanding plants' material and political status by recognizing plants and their multiple engagements with and beyond humans (Head et al., 2014, 861–863; Argüelles & March, 2022). Vegetal political ecology thus includes investigating collaborative practices and conflicted relationships between humans and plants, challenging cultural, economic, and socio-political frames, understanding the changing more-than-human geographies in specific places and documenting/envisaging the exploitative economy related to the belongingness and relocation of plants. Precisely, vegetal political ecology addresses the "botanical realm and the complexities of plant ontology" (Ryan, 2018, 128). With this understanding, it is essential to investigate how plantiness impacts resource politics in Indian Indigenous landscapes such as Kodagu across pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial timeframes and how human-flora encounters redefine the role of plants in Kodagu's more-than-human geographies.[1]

[1] In this essay, I use the term 'Indigenous' to refer to the Kodava people and their culture, heritage, knowledge system, and lifeways that grew in situ before colonisation; see Shaw et al. (2006), p. 268. Because the Kodava ancestors owned the land in Kodagu before colonization, and they share a strong spiritual connection with their ancestral land, I call the Kodava people 'Indigenous'.

To answer these questions, building on S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich's concept of multispecies ethnography and Peter Berg and Raymond F. Dasmann's concept of bioregionalism, in this chapter, I examine Sarita Mandanna's novel *Tiger Hills* (2010) and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* (2010) to understand the importance of native plants, forests, vegetal, and feral spaces across Kodagu's shifting societies and timeframes.[2] In doing so, I investigate the plantiness of individual plants and how the classification of plants as native, invasive, weeds, sacred, and unwanted depends on their impact on human social life. With a particular focus on the Kodava ritual of Kailpodh, I examine the transition of *rajakirita* within Kodagu's changing landscapes and societies from being 'native' to 'unwanted', 'invasive', 'weed' to becoming the indigenous 'sacred' ingredient used in the Kodava ritual of Kailpodh.

Kodagu is situated in the Western Ghats in Karnataka in South India and is home to the Indigenous Kodava community.[3] In pre-colonial India, the Kodava community perceived plants as their more-than-human companions and valued their material performances in configuring their place-based culture. However, since the nineteenth century, European colonizers have caused massive deforestation in the Kodagu tropical highlands to establish colonial coffee plantations (Gadgil & Guha, 2012; Nambisan, 2010).[4] The continuous global thinning of native plant species in Kodagu has led to immense biodiversity loss, transforming, affecting, and displacing human and more-than-human lives.

Examining Kodagu from this lens provides an opportunity to adopt a decolonial bioregional approach that transforms colonial coffee plantations into sites of multispecies conviviality and resituates human-plant relationships ecologically to perform conservation and restoration activities. Multispecies conviviality refers to the fundamental aspect of living well together with more-than-humans (Donati, 2019). The decolonial bioregional approach aims toward living a convivial lifeway that decolonizes most of the economic, social, and cultural activity around a naturally defined region/bioregion and helps overcome climate crisis and ecological breakdown. This line of inquiry builds upon the emerging anthropological concept of 'multispecies ethnography' (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010), which, as Kirksey and Helmreich explain, investigates "how a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces" (2010, 546). In examining this interrelatedness, multispecies ethnographers study "contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down, where encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches"

I use the term 'landscape' to refer to a panoramic view or a cultural image of place (here, Kodagu), an individualist way of seeing and conjuring the natural scenery that separates the subject from the object by eliminating alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature; see Cosgrove (1984), pp. 13, 262; Pavord (2016), p. 353; Stilgoe (2015), pp. ix, 17–18, 31.

[2] In this essay, 'native' refers to the plant and animal species that 'occur naturally in a particular region [here, Kodagu], state, ecosystem, and habitat without direct or indirect human actions' and do not cause any harm to the environment; see Guiaşu (2016), Morse et al. (2000).

[3] Kodagu is the indigenous name of Coorg. Kodava people are also known as Coorgs.

[4] Coffee in Kodagu is a non-native plant. Continuous coffee cultivation in Kodagu led to massive topsoil erosion.

(Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, 546–47). The advent of European colonization in Kodagu broke down their traditional nature-culture relationships, thus separating their culture from nature.[5] To mend traditional ways and remain rooted in place, the Kodava people began to ritualize their native plants and forests as a means to reinhabit their bioregion; that is, to decolonize the European coffee plantation culture and practice 'more-than-human conviviality' (Rigby, 2018, 73) on the plantations to 'generate mutual ecologies' (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010, 547).[6] Kate Rigby defines 'more-than-human conviviality' as "resituating 'humankind ecologically" along with "other kind (plants, animals, and fungi, but potentially also rivers, wetlands, and woods, for example) ethically" (2018, 73).

Specifically, to understand how Kodava Indigenous ecological knowledge includes more-than-human conviviality, this chapter draws inspiration from two place-based works of historical fiction: Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*.[7] *Tiger Hills* and *The Scent of Pepper* are set in Kodagu at particular epochs, depicting pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Kodava society. *Tiger Hills* begins with a pre-colonial Kodava lifeway and narrates the communal experiences of the Kodava people with the advent of European agency. Spanning four generations, *Tiger Hills* tells the life story and communal lifeways of Devi, a strong-headed dominant female persona and Devi's childhood friend and later husband, Devanna. The novel narrates the influence of European colonization, the establishment of the coffee plantations in Kodagu, and how it transformed the sociocultural lifeways and the ecology of the place and the people between 1878 and 1936. *The Scent of Pepper* began around 1855 and ended with the uprising leading to Indian independence. Set in Athur in Kodagu, the novel narrates the changing lifeways of Nanji, a strong-headed Kodava woman, her son Subbu, and her grandson Thimmu. The novel significantly depicts the transformations of Kodagu's nature and culture across four generations, describing pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Kodagu.

Inspired by plantiness and its role in shaping human cultures, I focus on Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* to show how literary narratives help understand plants' social and material production. A significant inquiry into these texts demonstrates how specific native plant species and their plantiness have been intricately woven into "the social fabric of place and community" (De, 2022b, 37) and encourage convivial lifeways to live-in-place and reinhabit the Kodagu bioregion.[8] Reading Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* and Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*, I will first contextualize convivial Kodava lifeway

[5] I use the terms 'tradition' and 'traditional' to refer to Kodagu's historical practice, a 'central process of Indigenous survival and renewal'; see Clifford (2013), pp. 28–29.

[6] I use the term 'place' to refer to the Kodagu 'spaces' that the Kodava people have 'made meaningful' and are 'attached to' in one or more ways; see Cresswell (2004), pp. 7–8.

[7] In addition to the historical novels of Sarita Mandanna and Kavery Nambisan, this essay includes qualitative ethnographic data (such as personal conversations) from my fieldwork in Kodagu between 2016 and 2018 and refers to ethnographic texts on Kodagu; see Perry (1855), Richter (1870), Thurston (1913).

[8] Living-in-place and reinhabitation are core bioregional concepts; see Berg and Dasmann (1978).

in pre-colonial Kodagu to understand the importance of more-than-human spaces and how the plantiness of native flora defines Kodava bioregional culture. The following section, "Rajakirita, More-than-human Spaces and the Ritual of Survival", will explore the diverse more-than-human spaces in Kodagu, illuminating how material performances of plants shape Kodagu's Indigenous culture with particular reference to rajakirita and Kailpodh. The third section examines the vegetal politics that have changed human-plant geographies in colonial Kodagu, followed by the fourth section illustrating how bioregional reinhabitation endorses convivial worldmaking in colonial and post-colonial Kodagu. I will conclude by summarizing how the transition of rajakirita and coffee within the transforming Kodava society deepens the Kodava human-plant interaction across space and time.

8.2 Plantiness and Bioregional Culture in Pre-colonial Kodagu

The Scent of Pepper begins with the "maniacal music" of the jackal "in the bamboo groves" when "the sun bled behind the areca palms" (Nambisan, 2010, 3). The *Tiger Hills* opens with Devi's birth on "a clear day in July" with the "sowing season upon them" and "every field in Coorg" filled with white herons and "bright green paddy" (Mandanna, 2010, 3). *The Scent of Pepper* begins by describing the forested landscape of pre-colonial Kodagu, whereas, *Tiger Hills* opens by showing how the livelihood of the Kodava people is intertwined with their landscape. Before colonization, the Kodava people were hunter-gatherers and forest dwellers cultivating their staple food, rice, in their paddy fields. From a bioregional perspective, the Kodava community was living-in-place. Living-in-place means living in harmony with nature, "following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site" (Berg & Dasmann, 1978, 217).

Living-in-place in Kodagu means practicing multispecies conviviality in everyday life. *The Scent of Pepper* and *Tiger Hills* describe Kodava homes inclusive of plants and livestock: the bitter lemon and mango trees in front and the fringe of areca palms along the chicken coop, the granary, the pigsty, and the barn adjacent to their paddy fields (Mandanna, 2010; Nambisan, 2010). The presence of the livestock with the plants within the home premises shows that the community considered the more-than-human as their kin. In pre-colonial harmony, multispecies conviviality was the social dimension of the Kodava lifeway where the Kodava people "share an unshakable sense of kinship" to 'their land' (Poonacha, 1997; Mandanna, 2010, 26). They considered Igguthappa Swami as "the god of the hills" and Ayappa Swami as the "god of the jungle" (Mandanna, 2010; Nambisan, 2010; Perry, 1855; Richter, 1870).[9]

[9] The Kodava word, 'Swami' means Lord in English.

Deborah Bird Rose and Thom Van Dooren state that conviviality requires inclusiveness and that humans should "make room for the other in activities and shared spaces" (2012, 17). As a hunter-gatherer community, the pre-colonial Kodava community included native plants in their daily activities. During festivals, the Kodagu women climbed forested hills in search of wildflowers and wore them on their ears while the Kodava men collected toddy from the doub or tal palm trees (*Borassus flabellifer*, native to Kodagu) for toddy-drinking sessions (Nambisan, 2010, 19, 41). Mandanna and Nambisan provide extensive narratives about the Kodava native plants, their material performances, and how they were included in the lived-in Kodava communal spaces. For example, 'madh toppu' or medicinal green (*Jisticia wynaadensis*) was cooked along with "jaggery and coconut milk at the onset of monsoons" (Mandanna, 2010, 52). Because it prevented "no fewer than forty-seven maladies" when consumed throughout the monsoons, it is known as the magical leaves of the monsoons (Mandanna, 2010, 52). *Banana* (*Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*) is another native plant cherished by the Kodava community and serves an integral part in their daily lived experience. They use banana leaves as plates, curry the stem, consume banana as fruit, and boil a "pot of banana" until it "turned sticky purple-red" to prepare jam and store it in jars (Nambisan, 2010, 27). This shows that the pre-colonial Kodava community was entirely reliant on plant-based resources as the base of their existence.[10] Viewing plants as a sustainable source of nutrition and integrating them into daily lived experiences and culture shows that the pre-colonial Kodava community unknowingly lived a more ecological and bioregional lifeway.

Plants play a "crucial role in the formative myths of all cultures, from Yggdrasil, the World Tree of Norse lore, to Asvattha, the cosmic tree of the Upanishads, to the... Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden" (Laist, 2013, 10). Since the thirteenth century, the Indian Bhasa literature has made various references to native flowers and plants that have been shaping the traditional cultures in diverse Indian societies (Ward, 1999, 15–16). Similarly, plants have been pivotal in shaping the Indigenous Kodava belief system. The Kodava community considers the native butter tree (*Madhuca longifolia*) as 'sacred' because it was beloved to Krishna Swami, the Hindu god, who used the spoon-shaped leaves to steal butter from his mother's churn (Mandanna, 2010, 53). According to Kodava Indigenous knowledge, the pipal, also known as the sacred fig *(Ficus religiosai*) and the wild gooseberry (*Physalis minima*), have immense medicinal uses, bring in good luck, provide shade, and their wood is used in daily Kodava life for cooking and warming up the house and the livestock (Mandanna, 2010, 53). The Kodava regard the Ashoka tree (*Saraca asoca*) as a 'no-sadness' tree because it banishes "all woes" if a Kodava sat "beneath its branches" (Mandanna, 2010, 54). The Kodava folklore states that the Ashoka tree only flowers when a beautiful woman places her henna-tipped feet upon its trunk (Mandanna, 2010, 54). These botanical associations and imaginations reflect how Kodagu's origin myths centrally involved plants and plantiness.

[10] Kodagu's sustainable native plant-based diet is called 'bioregional eating'; see De (2022b).

From Kodagu's formative myths and folktales, the material performances and 'cultural background' of the plants define who they are, their 'ontological boundaries', and the basic assumptions of how these plants potentially contribute to shaping Kodagu's Indigenous cultures (Laist, 2013, 14; Marder, 2012, 2015). Here, 'culture' refers to the ways of living, lifeways, and economic contribution to society. The 'cultural background of plants' refers to the "interactions and relationships among plants as well as between plants, other organisms, and the environment" (Gagliano & Grimonprez, 2015, 149; Marder, 2013). From a bioregional perspective, native plants determine the bioregional culture of a place to support life sustainably (Snyder, 1990, 49; Thayer, 2003, 36). 'Bioregional culture' refers to the communal practices in the daily life of the bioregion (De, 2022b, 42). While illuminating how native plant species define the bioregional culture of a place, bioregionalist Gary Snyder explains that maize, rice, and sweet potato indicate places and cultures (in the Northwest of the United States) (1990, 49). Hence, the plantiness of Kodagu's native plant species defines Kodagu's bioregional culture.

8.3 Rajakirita, More-Than-Human Spaces, and the Ritual of Survival

Since the pre-colonial period, rajakirita (*Gloriosa superba*) has defined Kodagu's bioregional culture and is closely linked to the Kodava socio-cultural world that defines their livelihood. Rajakirita is also known as the gunflower and is considered "the favoured flower of heroes" (Nambisan, 2010, 11). *The Scent of Pepper* mentions how Nanji kept "bunches of Rajakirita […] in a copper pitcher" on the table of his father-in-law to rejuvenate his mood when he was grieving the death of his younger son Machu (Nambisan, 2010, 11). Mandanna in *Tiger Hills* describes rajakirita as "the gun flower groves that grew in the jungles of Coorg but withered away in captivity" (2010, 54). They bloomed each year for only one week, during the traditional festival of Kailpodh, also known as Kailmuhurtha, a festival of arms celebrated every year on the third of September to mark the commencement of Kodagu's hunting season. Rajakirita is an orange-yellow blossom that the Kodava community used in pre-colonial Kodagu to decorate the mouth of every gun during Kailpodh (Mandanna, 2010, 54). According to the traditional Kodagu belief system, the celebration of Kailpodh remains incomplete without rajakirita.

In Kodagu, rajakirita thus defines the "practical mode of signification to the spiritual and cultural kind of symbolism that flowers have come to embody" (Laist, 2013, 14). Rajakirita's diverse material performances make it "biologically intimate" (Argüelles & March, 2022, 45) to the Kodava community. Kodava interactions with rajakirita include using the flowers to rejuvenate mood, performing hunting rituals, and celebrating Kailpodh. It enriches the symbolic profile of rajakirita in Kodava communal living. More importantly, the relationship between rajakirita and the Kodava community shows how plants and human culture are deeply interwoven

and how plants shape cultures and livelihoods around them. This becomes more prominent in understanding how the ritual of Kailpodh is entirely dependent on the performances of plants, their meaningful contribution to Kodava human life, and the human-plant relationship embedded in the crux of their socio-cultural, ecological, and bioregional framework for sustainable livelihood in Kodagu.

During pre-colonial Kailpodh celebrations, the Kodava people worshipped their traditional hunting weapons with exceptional food and offerings. The Kodava ritual of Kailpodh is also known as the ritual of survival because it is a celebration of respecting their forests, hunter-gatherer culture, and livelihood.[11] Hunting and gathering forest produce for food and rituals was integral to Kailpodh celebrations. This shows how the plants and their plantiness help the Kodava community to 'perform' and 'do' the landscape (De, 2022a, 231–232; Olwig, 2008, 87). 'Performing' and 'doing' the landscape with eyes, ears, and nose is equivalent to experiencing a sense of place and contributes to defining bioregional culture (De, 2022a, 231; Olwig, 2008, 82, 87). For example, during Kailpodh, Kodava women follow forest trails to collect jasmine flowers in plantain leaves and stitch them into long strings to decorate their long plaits because of their beautiful smell (Mandanna, 2010, 106). On collecting jasmine from the forested landscapes, Kodava women practice their traditional culture and perform in the landscape where the smell of jasmine and the jasmine itself become synonymous with Kailpodh, identifying with a sense of place and its dominant culture. Conviviality, then, appears to be a matter of living well and respecting nature. Bioregional living-in-place shares the same fundamental concerns of living well in harmony with nature.

Living-in-place in Kodagu thus endorses multispecies conviviality.[12] Conviviality, here, refers to living in harmony with more-than-humans. To understand how Kodava Indigenous practices are bioregional and convivial, it becomes pertinent to know how Kodagu's food and eating practices are linked to their bioregion. Kelly Donati employs conviviality "to explore the co-constituted social worlds" of gastronomy (2019, 119). This means that food items and communal eating practices build a bioregional culture that encourages sustainability. The foundations of Kodava gastronomy can be configured from their traditional dietary habits, which include (but are not limited to) "cardamom-clove-and-cashew-studded rice" heaped on banana leaves (Mandanna, 2010, 105), partridge fried in pork, "salted pork, dried mathi [dried sardine], pickled mangoes" (Nambisan, 2010, 212–13), "mutton curry with soft and thread noolu puttoo [rice dumplings], pork pulav [a variety of rice prepared with pork] with wild mango chutney, and payasam [sweet porridge] flavoured with poppy seeds" (63), hot ottis [rice flour chapatti] with crab chutney [sweet crab pickle], fried bamboo shoots (Mandanna, 2010, 129), mutton bones seasoned with onions and peppercorns (19), fish stuffed with coriander and tamarind, and crisp sizzling pork (13). The consumption of meat from native animals is bioregional because

[11] Machaia, Rani. Personal Conversation with Subarna De. 03/14/2016.

[12] Kodava indigenous practices are inherently bioregional and endorse convivial relationships with the more-than-humans even before the official terms of bioregionalism and multispecies conviviality were introduced in the academic lexicon.

it is collected by the hunter-gatherer community after ritualistic slaughtering and hunting in the wild. Since primordial times, Kodava traditional gastronomy has been a more-than-human endeavour where bioregional eating takes on a more-than-human convivial approach while maintaining the perfect balance in the local food chain and remains fundamentally indebted to the native plants and their particular qualities, or plantiness.

At its etymological roots, conviviality attends fundamentally to the question of living well together (Donati, 2019). Conviviality 'reknits' social bonds (Gertenbach et al., 2021, 392; Latouche, 2009, 42). Given that the Kodava community shares a kin-centric relationship with their more-than-human world, hunting and slaughtering play significant roles in the traditional Kodava belief system, are associated with the honour and ecology of the region, and are considered sacred. Based on animistic ideology, hunting, meat, food, and traditional festivals are closely related to Kailpodh, Kodagu's daily gastronomy, and Indigenous lived experiences.[13] During hunting, the forests represent nature, the space for more-than-humans. The collective plantiness of different kinds of native flora within Kodagu's feral spaces contributes to their hunter-gatherer traditions. For example, rajakirita is used to evoke the spirits and pay homage to the souls of more-than-humans before killing them. Similarly, "the leaves of narvisha," also known as nirvishi (*Chassalia curviflora*), have "a pungent odour that was anathema to snakes, poisonous even to the mighty tiger" and hence are used to keep away animals from attacking (Mandanna, 2010, 52). As a result, in Kodava's feral spaces, the plants are both providers and protectors to the Kodava hunters. As providers, the trees collectively create forests, the feral spaces providing for the hunting ground and simultaneously protect the hunter in the wild spaces with their material performances.

The material performances of the plants, then, collectively create and protect the pre-colonial Kodava native feral spaces. In the Kodagu bioregional context, the hunter, the hunted, the veneration of the weapons used to hunt wild animals, the use of forest produce to perform hunting rituals, and the forests all reciprocate the belief in the sacred and provide evidence of convivial worldmaking. Invoking animal spirits in Kodagu rituals such as Kailpodh and during hunting is another example of doing and performing the Kodava landscape. Here, convivial worldmaking includes humans, more-than-humans (animals, plants), and multiple spirits. Rane Willerslev argues that humans exist in a "betwixt-and-between state" representing the souls of animals and humans (2007, 165). Respect for the hunter, the hunted, the forests, and staying protected from their more-than-human companions in feral spaces, are integral aspects that require celebration. Kailpodh celebrates this animistic hunter-gatherer culture and, hence, the Kodava community considers Kailpodh as the ritual of survival.

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[13] Animistic ideology here refers to the philosophical and religious concept founded on a belief in the existence of multiple spirits; see Rooney (2000), p. 135. Indigenous hunting follows bioregional parameters of place-based culture and connects profoundly with the ecology, plantiness, and animal spirits; see De (2022b).

However, with the advent of European colonization in Kodagu in the final quarter of the eighteenth century, Kodagu lost its dense mountain forests to colonial coffee plantations. The topographical transformation, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation threatened Kodagu's native ecology and the people's place-based traditional knowledge. To survive the cultural and ecological crisis, the Kodava community started practising agriculture as their livelihood instead of hunting-gathering. Gradually, the Kodava community adopted the colonial coffee plantation culture. It significantly changed Kodava's human-plant geographies.

8.4 Changing Human-Plant Geographies and Vegetal Political Ecology

Tiger Hills narrates the influence of the European colonizers on the Kodava people. Devanna, the dominant male persona trained in a mission school by European colonizers, "often felt there were two parts of himself—Mission-Devanna and Coorg-Devanna" (Mandanna, 2010, 55). The Mission-Devanna helped the colonizers identify native plants, samples of which the colonizers arranged to send to Kew Gardens in London (Mandanna, 2010, 56–59). Mission-Devanna began to look at plants as a commodity, which can be "assigned a value and exchanged" (Lane, 2013, 319; Marx & Engels, 1988, 30). On the other hand, Coorg-Devanna continued his Indigenous approach to cherish "the sweetness of the nectar that pooled inside the lantana blossoms" and enjoyed the "heat of germinating paddy slush against his bare feet" (Mandanna, 2010, 56). Devanna was aware of the differences between his Indigenous-self rooted in a convivial relationship with plants, and his colonized self, which identified native plants for the colonizer-ruler to transport to the West. However, under the colonial influence, Devanna managed to keep his two halves "unquestionably" separate, not allowing oneself to "encroach into the other's territory" (Mandanna, 2010, 56).[14] Devanna's split identity foregrounds how the colonial influence powerfully changed the relationship between native plants and Indigenous people in Kodagu, where people's identities began to reflect both the Indigenous and the settler communities. This changing human-plant relationship shakes the moral standing of Kodagu's Indigenous people's consideration of their plants as kin and more-than-human companions.

Moving in a related direction, *The Scent of Pepper* portrays Thimmu, an Indigenous Kodava brought up under colonial influence. The novel depicts how Thimmu inherited the native forests that belonged to his father, Subbu and grandmother, Nanji, only to fell the trees and split them into logs: "Trees were being chopped down and flung in a mountainous heap... haystacks were on fire...flames burst in the sky, lighting up the moonless night" (Nambisan, 2010, 262–263). Thimmu represents how the colonial influence changed the mindset of the Indigenous Kodava community and

[14] Devanna represents the colonial mindset of the indigenous Kodava people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

their attitude toward their native land and landscape.[15] With the Kodava community considering native plants as commodities, they cleared hundreds of "acres of underbrush from beneath their holdings of rosewood, and turn[ed] to coffee" (Mandanna, 2010, 222; Nambisan, 2010, 261).[16] This shifting attitude of the Indigenous Kodava people toward their native vegetation sheds light on how the changing human-plant geographies in Kodagu's transformed landscapes reshaped Kodagu's environmental history, society, and economy.

Mandanna in the *Tiger Hills* introduces Reverend Gundert, a German colonizer and a "keen amateur botanist" who came to Mercara in Kodagu "looking for exotic plants" and was ready to "pay a fair sum for anything that caught his fancy" (Mandanna, 2010, 52). Here, 'exotic' refers to Kodagu's native plants such as jasmine, lantana, and sampigé. The change in the nomenclature of plants from 'native' to 'exotic' in the transformed Kodava society emphasizes the political agency of plants and reconfigures their plantiness. Subsequently, this leads to political consequences for the plant's capabilities in more-than-human geographies. More importantly, the multiple identities of plants determine how plants act in transformed landscapes and communities, how the relative plantiness of plants is perceived in transformed space and time, and how plants continue to perform in different worlds (Head et al., 2012, 10, 159–162). For example, soon after the colonizers treated the native jasmine and sampigé as 'exotic', their demands increased with the Indigenous community uprooting "fiercely coloured orchids, sweet-smelling sampigé and slender shoots of wild jasmine" from their native vegetal landscapes and bringing them to Gundert (Mandanna, 2010, 52). This particular act questions the environmental justice of plants and introduces insights from vegetal politics, which allows the reimagining of plant performances, their subjectivity, life, agency, and ethical responsibilities. Ethical and environmental justice issues become prominent when, on receiving native Kodava plants that were 'exotic', Gundert plants some of them in his missionary garden while shipping most plant species to Kew Gardens in London (Mandanna, 2010, 52). Moreover, with Gundert expanding his collection of "indigenous medicinal plants" and sending them to Kew Gardens (Mandanna, 2010, 52), native Kodava plants began to acquire new ecologies in exotic landscapes. This changing of societal landscapes and the effect of colonialism on native plants, their plantiness, and shifting human-plant geographies undoubtedly "typifies people-plant relationships" and connects plant performances to vegetal political ecologies (Fleming, 2017, 26, 31). The native plants that once defined the Kodava lifeway in pre-colonial Kodagu soon crossed normative nomenclatures, territorial borders, and taxonomic boundaries and became 'exotic' in Kodagu's white settler colony, gaining a new identity, life, nature, culture, environment, and subjectivity.

Within the domain of more-than-human scholarship, the displacement and reorientation of the plants within their native landscapes after colonization raises serious

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[15] I differentiate between land, which has ownership and can be encapsulated with all senses, and landscape, which remains a panoramic way of regarding nature through only the visual senses and cannot be owned.

[16] Rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*) is native to Kodagu.

questions of ethical responsibilities and environmental justice. This became more prominent when the colonizers considered them 'unwanted' after sending samples to London. They later cleared the native Kodava vegetation to plant the non-native cash crop, coffee.[17] In Western practices, more-than-humans "are generally relegated to the background, tolerated only on human terms and in their proper places" (Rose & Van Dooren, 2012, 16). We find a similar attitude towards Kodava native plants within Kodagu's transformed colonial society. The native plants, such as rajakirita and narvisha, experienced continued disorientation and shifting identities. Along with the white settlers, the Kodava people began to consider their native plants as 'unwanted' and cleared native vegetation to plant the non-native coffee. *The Scent of Pepper* narrates how the Kodava Indigenous community began to acquire huge coffee plantations. Rao Bahadur Madaiah, Nanji's father-in-law and Kodava community elder, purchased "one hundred and twelve acres of newly-planted coffee and five thousand battis of land in Athur" from a European colonizer in the late-nineteenth century for his son Baliyanna, Nanji's husband (Nambisan, 2010, 10). Purchasing colonial plantations from the British planters in Kodagu became a new trend in colonial Kodagu. Nanji's son Subbu attempted to make a deal to purchase a "two-hundred-acre estate with a bungalow" from Edward Rice, who was leaving Kodagu to return to England (Nambisan, 2010, 242). These passages illustrate how coffee, the new economic crop introduced by the European colonizers, changed the attitude of the Kodava people toward their native vegetation and colonized the Kodagu landscape and culture.

James Ellis rightly observes that plants "first colonised the planet" (2019, xiii). Kodagu shares a similar history with the introduction of non-native coffee on Kodagu's landscape. The coffee plant gained power because of its material performance and gradually colonized Kodagu's land and landscape, threatening Kodagu's Indigenous nature and culture. Since the late nineteenth century, the material performance of the non-native coffee in Kodagu forced both Indigenous and colonial ways of perceiving Kodagu's pre-colonial native vegetation as a lower form of being, often identifying them as 'unwanted' and 'weedy'. A plant "growing out of place" and "growing wild" is called a weed (Campbell, 1923, 50; Harlan, 1992, 85). Weeds are traditionally "regarded as cumbering the ground or hindering the growth of superior vegetation" (Harlan, 1992, 85). In colonial Kodava society, the coffee plant broke Indigenous human-plant relationships and established concrete capitalist ways of relating to plants whose material performances assured profit. This defined Kodagu's changed communal relationship to their land, determined

[17] Coffee was introduced to Kodagu from Ceylon, present-day Sri Lanka. Since the mid-seventeenth century, Ceylon has been the top coffee-growing country on earth. From 1872, Ceylon's coffee production seriously declined because of the leaf rust disease caused by the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix*. After Ceylon's coffee production stopped in 1879, the European colonizers were searching for an alternative. They found Kodagu's dark-soiled mountainous region at an elevation of about 1,800 feet above sea level an ideal alternative to Ceylon. For a more comprehensive colonial history of the coffee plantations in India and Ceylon, see Lewis (1909), McCook (2006), Mendis (2005), Perry (1855), Richter (1870), Thurston (1913), Wenzlhuemer (2008).

empirical methods of capitalizing plants, and undermined all native vegetation as weedy or unwanted.

Before colonization, the Kodava rituals, paddy fields, and forests were more-than-human multispecies spaces and sites of convivial worldmaking. On turning native forests into colonial coffee plantations, their convivial spaces were lost. More importantly, native forests were burned and transformed into monoculture coffee plantations. This resulted in the remaining native plants, such as the sacred rajakirita, becoming the *unwanted weed* that would threaten the new economic performer of the region, coffee. This colonial practice of identifying the native rajakirita as an unwanted invasive weed threatened the traditional ceremony of Kailpodh, making it a forgotten ritual for the hunter-gatherer community.[18] Rajakirita became an invasive weed because its material performance could not be capitalized and it interrupted coffee monocultures. Weeds are often considered invasive, and managerial thinking encourages the controlled growth of invasive plant species. Following the same line of thought, the colonizers controlled Kodagu's long cherished rajakirita, which led the species to disappear gradually from Kodagu's landscape toward the late nineteenth century (Richter, 1870; Thurston, 1913). From the perspective of vegetal political ecology, the social change in Kodava society was so potentially entangled in the environmental politics of human-plant geographies that, in Kodagu, it becomes pertinent to understand vegetal political ecology about multispecies ethnography and bioregionalism. The following section will investigate how the Kodava Indigenous people have used their traditional knowledge systems to decolonize the vegetal politics of Kodagu's coffee plantations and revive nature-culture relationships.

8.5 Bioregional Possibilities and Convivial Worldmaking in Kodagu

The term 'bioregion' refers to "the geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness—to a place and the ideas that have developed" about how to live in a place (Berg & Dasmann, 1978, 218). Geographically, a bioregion is a "separate whole" with distinct "climatology, physiography, animal and plant geography, natural history, and other descriptive natural sciences" (Berg, 1978; Berg & Dasmann, 1978, 218). Kodagu's wet climate, colonial history of coffee plantations, black alluvial soil, native biodiversity, mountainous topography, Indigenous community, and distinctive cultural practices make the place a bioregion. Living-in-place and reinhabitation are fundamental bioregional concepts for practicing bioregional culture. The changing human-plant geographies in Kodagu with the advent of coffee turned Kodagu into an

[18] For detailed environmental history and ethnographic survey of Kodagu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Thurston (1913).

injured land.[19] Prominent bioregional scholars such as Berg and Dasmann (1978), Snyder (1990, 1995), Mills (1995), McGinnis (1999), Sale (2000), and Thayer (2003) argue that bioregional reinhabitation helps restore injured land and revive the lost nature and culture of the place by developing bioregional lifeways.[20] Here, the adjective 'bioregional' refers to the "intellectually rich and culturally diverse way of thinking [about] and living" an ecological lifeway rooted in the bioregion (McGinnis, 1999, 1–3; Snyder, 2013, 44). In this section, I investigate the bioregional possibilities in colonial/post-colonial Kodagu (1920–2016) and argue that the Kodava community reinhabits Kodagu to re-establish human-plant relationships and revive the nature-culture intersections of the place.

The continuous cultivation of monoculture coffee continued until the Kodava people realized how the drastic ecological imbalances threatened their Indigenous culture. To counter the severe ecological crisis and restore their 'nature culture' (Haraway, 2004, 210) relationships, the Kodava people began to reinhabit their ancestral land by growing coffee under native shade trees such as orange, mango, and jackfruit (Mandanna, 2010, 223–252; Nambisan, 2010, 35–48). This represents a significant turning point in the environmental history of Kodagu because the practice restricted the adverse effects of land-use changes, restored the bioregion's lost ecology, maintained the topsoil that enables long-term survival, and provided the resources of native crops and other ingredients for daily survival (De, 2022b, 42). This particular Indigenous knowledge helped the community to revive their native ecosystem and facilitate the return of native vegetation to Kodagu's colonial plantations, turning them into mini forests. In doing so, bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu undoes Western thought and practice by connecting "people, plants and places" (Tsing, 2012, 145) in colonial and post-colonial Kodagu.[21] This not only renders native plants as agents of revival but also transforms non-native coffee into a bioregional crop in Kodagu.

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[19] Extensive human exploitation leads to topographical changes that threaten the native ecosystem of the place and cause an immense loss of biodiversity making a land injured; see Berg and Dasmann (1978).

[20] All the inhabitants of the bioregion, including both the indigenous people and the settler community, can practice reinhabitation and live a bioregional lifeway. However, in Kodagu, even today, only the indigenous Kodava people reinhabited their land.

[21] Because the concept of bioregionalism was coined by Berg and Dasmann (1978), many scholars believe that bioregionalism is in itself a Western thought and practice. However, a productive line of enquiry refutes the case that bioregionalism is a Western thought and practice; see Berg (1978), Berg (1991), Glotfelty and Quesnel (2015). Berg emphasizes that "the bioregional idea is not an American idea. It is a biospheric idea and the biosphere is something we all share" (Glotfelty and Quesnel, 2015, 221). Thus, at the crux of bioregional and watershed thinking is decentralization (as opposed to Western thought and practice), making bioregionalism strive toward a biotic community. However, bioregional reinhabitation has always been conceptualized from Western thought and practice since 1978 and argues that only settlers reinhabit bioregions. Here, I make a point to argue that bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu includes both the settlers and the native Kodava people and finally argue that reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial.

Focusing on the agency of crop plants, it is crucial to understand that reinhabitation in Kodagu encourages convivial worldmaking in maintaining ecological sustainability while simultaneously growing coffee along with native crops. This creative Indigenous ecology once again changed the attitude of the Kodava people toward more-than-humans. In *Tiger Hills*, Devi, the dominant female persona, proclaims that she knows "the histories of [Kodagu's] trees" even "before they were rooted to the ground" (Mandanna, 2010, 53). Again, in *The Scent of Pepper*, "the sound of the trees being split into logs" felt like "bleeding wood" to Subbu (Nambisan, 2010, 262). This shows that, due to the process of reinhabitation, the agency of plants in Kodagu once more reshaped the Indigenous community, which is founded on convivial worldmaking. In previous research, I have argued that this Indigenous approach is bioregional or 'decolonial reinhabitation' because the Indigenous Kodava people undo Western practices on their plantations to reinhabit their ancestral land and re-establish their fractured human-plant relationships (2023).[22]

Decolonial reinhabitation in Kodagu caused rajakirita to naturally return to Kodagu's landscape, reviving Kailpodh. The Kodava people then ritualized rajakirita and created sacred groves on their plantations to protect native rajakirita. Rajakirita, thus, has become a social agent of revival and reconnection. Ritualizing plants as 'sacred' rather than marginalizing them as 'unwanted weeds' transformed the plantiness of rajakirita and changed the dynamics of Kodava human-plant relationships. Hence, the ritualizing of rajakirita is a crucial decolonial reinhabitory strategy. Here, the native plant becomes a bioregional agent undoing Western plantation science and facilitating Kodava Indigenous knowledge on Kodagu's transformed landscapes. In this way, sacred groves on Kodagu's coffee plantations reintroduced the native functional biodiversity in Kodagu within a hundred years (from around 1915 to 2016). This reinhabitory practice of ritualizing and preserving native plant species is what Kate Rigby refers to as a significant "cultural shift to resituate humankind ecologically" (2018, 73). Correspondingly, the Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood understands similar reinhabitory approaches as "cultural practices of 'deep sustainability'" (2009). In reinhabiting Kodagu and reviving the convivial relationship with the more-than-humans on colonial sites of western plantations, Kailpodh was reintroduced to post-colonial Kodagu.[23]

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[22] I coined the term 'decolonial reinhabitation' and argued that bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial. To understand why reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial and not postcolonial, see De (2023).

[23] In post-colonial Kodagu, Kailpodh continues to be celebrated. Though hunting is banned in post-colonial India, Kodava people still go for forest walks on the coffee plantations which are now mini forests housing diverse native vegetation and sacred groves. Instead of hunting, a coconut is shot to mark the commencement of the traditional hunting season followed by a traditional meal prepared with collected fruits and vegetables from the coffee forests and sacred groves.

8.6 Conclusion

Within the transformed Kodava society, rajakirita becomes an agent in multiple spaces. Before colonization, rajakirita was ‘native’. In colonial Kodava society, rajakirita became an unwanted invasive weed. On reinhabiting Kodagu by undoing Western practices and turning coffee plantations into native forests, rajakirita naturally returned to Kodagu and was ritualized and recognized as ‘sacred’. Unpacking Rajakirita as native, invasive, weedy, and then sacred reveals the power of the vegetal politics of plants based on their plantiness and how they construct landscapes, society, culture, and environmental narratives. John Charles Ryan rightly observes how “plants constitute certain social practices and customs as well as the ethics surrounding them” (2012, 104). The transition of rajakirita and coffee across time and space illuminates how plants feature in different Indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial settings and evolve as essential actants in human social life.

More importantly, the material performances of individual plants in Kodagu demonstrate how a flowering plant (rajakirita) and a crop plant (coffee) become entangled in more-than-human social life and earn the power to affect, displace, and transform landscapes and cultures while contributing fundamentally to shaping cultures and societies around them. In this regard, bioregional concepts of living-in-place and reinhabitation serve as vital practical solutions to understand human-plant ethnographies, mediate human-plant entanglements, and politicize vegetal politics to break down hegemonic plant performances and re-establish convivial worldmaking to encourage cultural production for deep sustainability. In Indigenous environments of crisis such as Kodagu, decolonial reinhabitation becomes the viable approach to collectively identify and represent humans and more-than-humans as ‘we’, strongly asserting the value of convivial worldmaking including the more-than-human world.

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Chapter 9
"When the Black Half of the *Kunni* Seed Whitens": Plant-Lore and the Plantationocene in Ambikasuthan Mangad's *Swarga*

Varna Venugopal and Swarnalatha Rangarajan

Abstract In 2009, Ambikasuthan Mangad published *Enmakaje*, a novel based on the experiences of the inhabitants of Enmakaje, a village in Kerala, who were adversely affected by the aerial spraying of the pesticide Endosulfan, by the Plantation Corporation of Kerala, the state's largest public sector plantation company. The novel, translated into English by J. Devika as *Swarga* in 2017, has since then established itself as a narrative of toxicity, offering "transnational visibility and audibility" (Nixon 37) to those victimized by the slow violence of multigenerational toxic exposure. Even though state-owned cashew plantations constitute a significant portion of the novel's toxic-scape, *Swarga* has rarely been regarded as a 'plantation narrative'. This chapter will analyze how the novel responds to the 'Plantationocene' by mobilizing a new form of pastoral, namely the 'mythic pastoral', casting Swarga as an 'earthly paradise' which has now fallen into decadence. The idyllic charm of this pastoral past is placed in opposition to the bleak, anti-pastoral vision of the 'lifeless' plantations inhabited by poisoned plants. The chapter looks at how arboreal tropes and botanical imagery are interwoven into the narrative to construe the mythic pastoral and the anti-pastoral. In doing so, we recontextualize *Swarga* as an exemplar of contemporary plantation fiction that situates its environmental politics at the intersections of social and ecological justice struggles in post-colonial societies.

Keywords *Swarga* · Endosulfan · Plantationocene · Plant-lore · Mythic pastoral · Toxic flora

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9.1 Introduction

"This is the story of how one species changed a planet," says the narrator at the opening of "Welcome to the Anthropocene," a short 3-min video that was played at the opening of the United Nations' 2012 Rio+20 Summit (Gaffney & Pharand-Deschenes, 2012). Inviting spectators to acknowledge that we are now living in the "Age of Man," this introduction traces the origin, or the 'Golden Spike', of the Anthropocene back to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in England. Welcoming this new epoch implies that humankind has reached a point in history where we hold the fate of the planet in our hands, bringing forth the image of the 'Anthropos' as the 'super-species' responsible for the profound changes in the Earth's biosphere. The term 'Anthropocene', to put it simply, signifies that we live in a time when the human agency and anthropogenic interventions have reached such a magnitude that they have become a geological force. While the word now serves largely as a metonymic expression encompassing various and often conflicting narratives about how we arrived at the present state of the world, there also exists a fair share of criticism against its uncritical usage.

For instance, some scholars point out that 'the Anthropocene' is best understood culturally rather than geoscientifically (Schneiderman, 2015). Others argue that the term largely reflects the poverty of our nomenclature, engendering a "Promethean self-portrait" of humans as a species (Crist, 2013, 123). Marxist critiques, on the other hand, assert that what is commonly referred to as 'anthropogenic' in climate change discourse is, in fact, 'socio-genic' (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, 66). The use of alternate terms like the 'Carbocene' or the 'Anthrakacene' that acknowledge the role of material elements like carbon-based fuels in shaping human agency has been proposed by Neo-materialist critiques of the Anthropocene (LeCain, 2015, 23). Some other notable names suggested for the epoch include 'Capitalocene' (Moore, 2016), 'Corporatocene' or 'Plasticene', and 'Elachistocene' (Schneiderman, 2015, 182), 'Chthulucene' (Haraway, 2015), 'MisAnthropocene' (Patel, 2013), 'Technocene' (Hornborg, 2015), 'Thanatocene' (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016), and 'Androcene' (Vuillerod, 2021).

In recent times, the term 'Plantationocene' has gained traction, which urges us to acknowledge the role of plantations in shaping the social and environmental history of our planet. The word was coined by Haraway (2015) as a "better, more descriptive term" that "makes one pay attention to the historical relocation of the substances of living and dying around the Earth as a necessary pre-requisite to their extraction" (556, 557). She identifies the key features of this redefined epoch, marked by the emergence of the plantation-system, as the systematic relocation of "generative units" like plants, animals, microbes, and people (557). Recent scholarship in the environmental humanities, political ecology, critical race studies, Indigenous studies, agrarian studies, and Caribbean and postcolonial studies has opened up new avenues for understanding the plantation-system. These studies have drawn attention to the foundational role of plantations in the emergence of racial capitalism, highlighting

their extractivist logic and the transmigration of both human and non-human beings, which has resulted in displacement and dispossession.

Ferdinand (2021) uses the expression "matricides of the Plantation" to describe the ecological consequences stemming from the deliberate transformation of the Earth's landscape through the plantation system during the colonial period. Commenting on how colonial plantations disrupted the perception of the Caribbean as "mother-islands" and "mother-lands," Ferdinand notes that this signified an "ecumenal rupture," where "[t]he colonized land is no longer a Mother-Earth: it has become a land-without manman, a motherless land" (38–41). This ecological shift prompts a deeper examination of literary and cultural responses to the evolving paradigm of the 'Plantationocene' vis-à-vis the 'Anthropocene' within the environmental humanities. In the literature, for instance, the 'plantation tradition', primarily refers to a collection of works mostly authored by white writers from the antebellum American South. These narratives portray 'the Old South' with a nostalgic and highly idealized lens, while also romanticizing the institution of slavery (Mollis, 2006,709). However, if we regard plantation fiction as a genre in flux, and acknowledge the varying impacts of the plantation system across different regions of the world, it is possible to anticipate the wide range of literary works that may emerge in different parts of the world in response to the multiple meanings evoked by the 'Plantationocene'. Clukey and Wells (2016) argue in favour of "new plantation studies" that extend in their geographical and temporal range to include plantation cultures produced in the wake of the British Empire (5–7). There is a pressing need to account for the multiple meanings and memories that 'the plantation' evokes. This is crucial as the plantation system continues to drastically reshape millions of lives and landscapes worldwide, leaving an enduring legacy.

This chapter reads Ambikasuthan Mangad's *Swarga* (2017) as a 'narrative of the Plantationocene', examining how the novel encounters the extractive practices and the ecological violence of contemporary monoculture plantations in Kerala. The novel, first published in the Indian language Malayalam as *Enmakaje* (2009), is set in the areca and cashew plantations of Kerala's Kasargode district. The plot revolves around the aftermath of the indiscriminate aerial spraying of the highly toxic organochlorine pesticide Endosulfan in the region. This incident, popularly known as the Endosulfan disaster, has since then fundamentally reshaped the environmental politics in Kerala, and the people's movement demanding justice for the victims has seen active participation from writers and cultural activists of the state. This chapter will analyze how the novel responds to the Plantationocene by mobilizing a new form of pastoral, namely the 'mythic pastoral', casting Swarga as an 'earthly paradise', which has now fallen into decadence. The idyllic charm of this pastoral past is placed in opposition to the bleak, anti-pastoral vision of the 'lifeless' plantations inhabited by poisoned plants. We also look at how arboreal tropes and botanical imagery are interwoven into the narrative to construe the mythic pastoral and the anti-pastoral. In doing so, we recontextualize *Swarga* as an exemplar of contemporary plantation fiction that situates its environmental politics at the intersections of social and ecological justice struggles in post-colonial societies.

9.2 Reading *Swarga*

In an interview which happened eight years after the publication of his debut novel *Enmakaje*, novelist Ambikauthan Mangad remarks: “When society suffers, writers suffer alongside it, not only in Kasargod but wherever pesticides are used. This novel is for all those people; it is not just art but an act of protest” (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b). In the same year, the novel was translated into English by historian J. Devika as *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*. The plot revolves around the story of two central characters, Neelakantan and Devayani, who flee to the forests of northern Kerala from the capital city, seeking refuge from the ‘woes of civilization’. While living in the wilderness of the Jadadhari forest, the couple encounters an orphaned child covered in sores all over his body, and they adopt him. They gradually become aware of other children with similar conditions, leading them to become actively engaged in the fight against the pesticide industry in the region.

The narrative features two ‘returns to nature’: first, an escape to Jadadhari, and later, a return to the primaeval cave resembling Noah’s Ark. In both cases, nature serves as a refuge—initially as an escape from reality and later as a retreat to a pre-civilizational state after confronting societal injustices and failing to find political solutions for them. The first part of the narrative builds on the idea that human nature is inherently corrupt and civilization is contaminating, so accordingly portrays wilderness as the last untainted refuge. In the forest, the characters shed their social identities, living as ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’, and eventually transitioning into ‘beings’ who willingly embrace non-humanness. The land is depicted as a mythical landscape, presenting Swarga (a location in Enmakaje, which also translates as ‘heaven’) as a tangible Eden—a lost paradise where natural bounty once thrived, and Truth reigned supreme.

Mangad’s initial response to the disaster-affected areas materialized in the form of a short story titled ‘Panchuruli’ (2002). Later, *Enmakaje* was published as the very first novel addressing the Endosulfan disaster, propelling this issue into the mainstream of Malayali literary and cultural discourse, and establishing itself as a canonical work in the realm of environmental literature from Kerala. The English translation by J. Devika, titled *Swarga* introduced a new subtitle—‘A Posthuman Tale’. Devika justifies this decision, stating that “[t]he book’s voice emanates from an exceedingly post-human space” that documents the “journey from a human to a being that sees everything as part of itself” (Nair, 2017). Since its publication, the novel has been classified into various categories: eco-fiction, eco-disaster fiction, eco-disability fiction, toxic narrative, and an environmental justice narrative, in both academic and popular discourses. Existing critical interpretations of the novel have read the text as a narrative of ecoprecarity (Nayar, 2019), a narrative of biocultural precarity (Nayar, 2022), and as a toxic, eco-crip text from the Global South (Dilipkumar & Rangarajan, 2020). This chapter interprets *Swarga* as a narrative of the Plantationocene, an exemplar of the contemporary Indian plantation novel, and above all as a ‘plant narrative’. We analyze how arboreal tropes and botanical imagery in the novel form its environmental poetics, focusing on three key elements:

the 'mythic pastoral' in the novel, the representation of the plantations, and, finally, the emergence of an environmentalist politics mobilized by the presence of poisoned plants.

9.3 "Seeing Nothing but the Trees!": Tracing the 'Mythic Pastoral' in *Swarga*

When Neelakantan, the protagonist of *Swarga*, seeks refuge in a remote jungle in Northern Kerala, he experiences a moment of epiphany. He discovers that the idyllic landscape he envisioned is inhabited by numerous ailing children. At this juncture, he exclaims to his companion, Devayani, "It is in a place like this, Devi, that we lived for five or six years in total ignorance, seeing nothing but the trees, like animals. Oh, what cruelty!'" (77, 78). He realizes that his decision to live in the forest as a 'man' along with his 'woman' had rendered him oblivious to the social injustices around them. This inner turmoil is compounded by his past as an activist. In his previous life, he had distanced himself from his family and relocated to the capital city. Troubled by the injustices he witnessed, he committed himself to an ascetic and altruistic life, offering refuge to those ostracized by society. It is during this time that Neelakantan 'rescues' Devayani, a former sex worker, and they begin living together. As communal strife and political turmoil engulfed their life in the city, Neelakantan's disillusionment led him to contemplate suicide, from which Devayani saves him. This incident urges him to renounce his social existence altogether. After staging his death, they both depart the city and travel to northern Kerala to start a new life. The Jadadhari forest's idyllic setting serves as an apt backdrop for their transformation—a self-described state of blindness, that Neelakantan reflects on later as "seeing nothing but the trees." It is evident that for Neelakantan and Devayani, the landscape served various functions—aesthetic, ideological, and political. To their 'outlander' eyes, the space appeared 'pure' and untouched by human civilization, facilitating their rebirth as man and woman. The wilderness acted as a sanctuary for their ascetic life, fostering a connection with a 'transcendental' self, and liberating them from disenchantment with the everyday life in the city. Swarga's wilderness, on the other hand, epitomized a pastoral vision, juxtaposed against the defilements and debaucheries of the city.

The pastoral form, rooted in Greco-Roman traditions, has profoundly shaped environmental imaginaries evolving across diverse sociocultural contexts. While numerous studies have rightly recognized *Swarga* as a canonical work in post-colonial Indian ecofiction, there's a conspicuous gap in scholarship concerning its central element—the pastoral vision. We propose that *Swarga* represents a new form of pastoral, which we term the 'mythic pastoral'. This term suggests a mode of writing that evokes nostalgia for a mythical past, inscribing an imagined history through myths, oral traditions, rituals, and folklore onto an ecological landscape. The mythic pastoral mode aims to inspire readers with an ecological yearning to

move away from the degenerate present toward a phantasmic pre-modern past. In other words, the mythic pastoral retrospectively projects nostalgic visions of the landscape onto an ahistoricized legendary past, and in doing so, the folklore surrounding the lush greenery of the region (or the 'plant-lore'), becomes an important agent in constituting the mythos of this eco-memory.

The pastoral trope is fundamental in shaping our perceptions of nature, while simultaneously presenting challenges within environmental discourses (Garrard, 2012, 33). *Swarga* draws on the pastoral literary tradition in its portrayal of the landscape as an Eden-like '*locus amoenus*[1]' before its 'fall' into its current degenerate state due to the widespread use of toxic chemicals. *Swarga* serves as an exemplar of the pastoral mode, given that it resonates with what Gifford describes as "the literature of return" (Gifford, 2012, 17). The novel showcases the retreat to an idealized pastoral landscape in primarily three ways: firstly, the retreat to nature as an escape from civilization; secondly, the wishful return to a pre-modern mythical past; and finally, the 'return' to the primaeval cave, providing a second chance for 'life' to begin anew.

The first return, undertaken by the couple, is depicted as an impulse to escape humanity and its eternal suffering. However, they are repeatedly reminded that there is no true 'Swarga' (paradise) to escape to; human suffering has tainted even this seemingly pristine space. The second return is imaginative and occurs through Neelakantan's encounter with Swarga's myths and folklore, which he learns through the stories told by Panji and other villagers. This imagined past is constantly contrasted with the profane present, where this sacred geography has been robbed of its sanctity. The third 'return' at the climax of the is a withdrawal to the primaeval cave, which operates as the voice of 'Truth'.

Gifford (2012) discusses three ways in which the word 'pastoral' is employed in literary discourse. In the first sense, what he terms "classical pastoral," the word refers to a specific literary tradition. In the second sense, "Romantic pastoral" is used to contrast the countryside with the city. In the third sense, the word is used pejoratively, often found in Marxist critiques of Romanticism (34). Gifford also coined the term "post-pastoral," which he distinguishes from the pastoral and anti-pastoral. The pastoral, according to Gifford, refers to an idealized representation of nature, often viewed through "rose-tinted spectacles" (8). It nostalgically looks back to a "Golden Age," which doesn't necessarily have to be set in the past but can also be imagined in the future (13, 15). In contrast, anti-pastoral literature, described as the "corrective of pastoral" and its literary distortions, emphasizes "gritty realism" and largely unidealized representations of nature. It reveals inherent "tensions, disorder, inequalities," and "demythologizes Arcadia, Eden, Shangri-La" (18, 19). Gifford (2012) introduces the concept of "post-pastoral" as a way to move beyond these two categorizations. He defines it as having "awe leading to humility in the face of the creative-destructive forces of nature; awareness of the culturally loaded language we use about the country; accepting responsibility for our relationship with nature and its dilemmas; recognition that the exploitation of nature is often accompanied by the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit less, or obviously depend upon its resources" (6). In the post-pastoral, there is a reiteration of retreat

and return, but there’s also a keen recognition that “the exploitation of our planet [is] aligned with our exploitation of human minorities” (26).

In many ways, *Swarga* incorporates elements of the post-pastoral, moving beyond the pastoral/anti-pastoral dichotomy. However, in the novel, the mythic pastoral surpasses the post-pastoral, wherein the feeling of ‘awe’ in the face of nature is generated by perceiving the landscape through the lens of the sacred, and by attributing cosmological significance to the non-human environment. The decadence of land is portrayed as the fall of ‘Truth’. The *locus amoenus* is evoked not solely for its natural abundance but also for its perceived egalitarian social structure, where in this imagined past, an ‘innate’ sense of social harmony among various social groups existed. The mythic pastoral in *Swarga* therefore creates a cultural-ecological narrative that invokes an ‘age of Truth’ for humans and confers sacrality on the non-human world. This narrative is used as a rhetorical strategy that critiques the environmental crisis brought about by the extractive forces of capitalism in a globalized world.

Acknowledging the potential challenges of generalizing the pastoral mode, which exhibits “a high degree of ideological flexibility” (84), scholars such as Huggan and Tiffin (2010) have set out to demystify it in post-colonial contexts. They point out that the pastoral mode is resistant to postcolonialism for primarily three reasons: firstly, it has been instrumental in disseminating bourgeois ideology; second, it strategically avoids addressing or downplays social injustice; and third, it is primarily of European origin in its sensibility, stylistic conventions, and form (83, 84). Huggan and Tiffin (2010) argue that the postcolonial pastoral is inherently political, “intrinsically ironic,” and should be seen as a “spectral form, always aware of the suppressed violence that helped make its peaceful visions possible and always engaged with the very histories from which it appears to want to escape” (120, 85). Rob Nixon defines the term ‘postcolonial pastoral’ as “writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the Colonies […] [that] can be loosely viewed as a kind of environmental double consciousness” (Nixon, 2005, 239). He adds that the idea of the nation as a “garden idyll into which neither labour nor violence intrudes” is central to the vision of the English pastoral, which has systematically erased colonial spaces and histories to achieve this vision (239). The postcolonial pastoral emerges when these effaced memories of colonial space intrude upon pastoralism. For instance, in his reading of V.S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival,* Nixon notes that even as the protagonist encounters the pastoral serenity of the Wiltshire manor garden, he is reminded of the spectral presence of the “shadow garden of the transatlantic plantation,” which made the former possible. Thus, these spaces become a “shadow island, a corrective to the spatial amnesia of a self-contained, regenerative English pastoral” (241). In a similar vein, Sullivan (2016) uses the term “Dark Pastoral” to refer to literary works that refuse “to separate our green dreams from the material manifestations of the new toxic nature” (48). The dark pastoral unites the Anthropocene’s fossil-fueled agriculture and technology with retro-nostalgic pastoral dreams of resplendent greenery (Sullivan, 2020, 18). In *Swarga*, while the forest-scape itself mirrors the pastoral, what disrupts this vision is the disquieting imagery of the postcolonial eco-grotesque—the bodies of diseased children placed against the spectral presence of the cashew and areca plantations.

Raymond Williams uses the metaphor of an escalator that moves backwards to describe the nostalgia evoked by the pastoral, which symbolizes the yearning for better or happier times. This nostalgia often finds its imaginary locus in 'Eden' or the "well-remembered garden" (12). However, the meaning of this locus, which continually recedes further into the past, changes with time and often presents conflicting ideas and contradicting values. In *Swarga*, the protagonists' attempts at escaping into a pastoral life reflect these contradictions. In the beginning, they perceive the forests of Swarga as an idyllic escape from civilizational corruption. However, this vision eventually ruptures, and the *locus amoenus* retreats temporally further back into a mythical past. The pastoral vision is initially imposed through the eyes of Neelakantan and Devayani and later through Jayarajan, an activist, thus framing it through the eyes of the 'outlanders'. The mythical green-scape of Swarga is constituted in mainly three ways. First, mythic motifs are woven into the narrative in different ways, such as naming the characters after mythological figures. This imparts cosmological significance to their roles and legitimizes their position as 'saviours' in the disaster-stricken village. As Mines (2003) notes, "Myths are cosmogenic narratives" (424). For instance, in the novel, the protagonist Neelakantan's name literally translates as 'The Blue Throated One', a reference to the legend of the Hindu god Shiva, who consumed the deadly poison *Halahala* to save all of creation from its effects. The narrative also frames Swarga's lost pastoral past as a requiem for the reign of Bali. Bali, also known as *Mahabali*, alludes to the figure of the Asura king who had been exiled to the netherworld by *Vamana* (one of the ten divine forms of Hindu god Vishnu), and whose annual return to his former kingdom is celebrated as 'Onam' festival in Kerala. In an early study on Onam, Kurup (1977) describes the festival as the "commemoration of a mythical event, the origin of which is shrouded in the hoary past" (95). In the novel, Mangad incorporates an alternative version of the Bali myth, widely embraced in the northern border regions of Kerala. For most Malayalees (speakers of the language Malayalam), Onam celebrated during the month of *Chingam* as a ten-day festival (August–September), signifies the annual visit of the banished king. However, in the border regions of Kasargode, there is a second Onam, known as Poliyindram or Baliyindram, which falls in the month of Thulam (September–October). People who celebrate Baliyindram believe that this is the day of Mahabali's visit, and they conduct 'Bali-pooja' worshipping Bali on this day. The pala tree (*Alstonia scholaris*) plays a crucial role in the folk rituals associated with this celebration. During the festivities, a pole made from the tree is erected in the courtyard of houses, on which lamps fashioned from coconut shells are placed. At sunset, the trees are lit and Bali is welcomed to the land. Neelakantan (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b) says.

> Every house in Enmakaje is abuzz for three days preparing to welcome Mahabali. He is not the pot-bellied clown we have made him into, back home in Kerala—here he is God; he arrives like God! The branches of the pala tree are cut and mounted on the entrance of the houses, near the wells and the cowsheds, and lamps are lit there for three days at dusk. There is a ceremonial call made then, three times, amidst showers of rice—'Balindra, Hooi'! In some places, the branches are adorned with flowers, and people recite the Balindra Snadhi

> and dance. The song means, 'O King Mahabali, come soon, this land is yours'. Indeed, in Enmakaje, the pala tree is called the Balindra Pala. (139)

One of the most popular folk songs about Onam, recounting the Golden Age when Mahabali ruled the land, begins with the lines "*Maveli Naadu Vaneedum Kalam*," which can be translated as follows:

> When Mahabali ruled the land, all people enjoyed equal status and were extremely happy. None had any difficulty, and there was no disease or decay. Infant mortality was unknown during the time, and people enjoyed long lives. Agriculture was at its zenith, and paddy yields were a hundredfold. Everyone was extremely good, and not a single corrupt or cruel person was to be seen. The people were all alike. People used only good gold to make jewellery. Thieves and cheats were unknown; measures and measuring rods were true. There was sufficient rain at the appropriate time. People read the scriptures and invoked the deities with reverence (Kurup, 1977: 105) [quoted in Kalidasan 2015, 104].

Onam and Baliyindram, in distinct ways, both serve as commemorations of the era of Bali's reign. These festivities then also double as mournful elegies, as the mythical past that Onam evokes is believed to be characterized by egalitarian governance, material abundance, and natural prosperity. Historian Devika (2010) notes that the construction of Kerala as a "veritable heaven" and a "near-egalitarian paradise" because of the state's achievements in human and social development resonates with the ideals associated with Mahabali's reign (800). For instance, in the 1950s, Kerala's first chief minister, EMS Namboodiripad, described the region as 'Mavelinaadu' (The land of Maveli or Mahabali), conceived as an antithesis to the "Brahmanical construction of Kerala as Parasuramakshetram—the land created by the Brahmin warrior-sage Parasurama" (Devika, 2010, 811–812). Devika quotes EMS Namboothripiad's redefinition of what Mavelinaadu symbolizes in modern Kerala: "Mavelinadu… in the twentieth century" was "a new Kerala in which equality and freedom reign, in which poverty and unemployment will be unknown, will begin to emerge. That Mavelinadu, which exists only in our imagination, will become a reality in the twentieth century" (Namboodiripad 1946b, 346, qtd. in Devika). The vision of the land as Mavelinadu and the construed memories of Mahabali's mythical reign, thus, remain central to the formation of Malayali cultural identity and have played an important role in the state's political and environmental rhetoric.

In his analysis of the popular discourse of the Mahabali myth in Kerala, Vinod Kalidasan (2016) similarly argues that Onam "presupposes a common ancestry, a common myth of origin, and a common 'civilization' for all people of Kerala" (104). The trope of 'return' invokes the notion of 'homecoming' as the return of the "natural body ('the body natural')" of Mahabali, as well as his 'political body ('the body politic')" (105). The experience of exile is common for both the King and his former subjects, who migrated to the Persian Gulf for livelihood (107). Thus, "In the case of the Mahabali myth, the king is replicated not only in the form of his returning subjects but also in the form of the modern state that strives to see itself as the successor of the just king" (108). The 'return', therefore, deploys the notion of Mavelinadu or as "an active force behind the policies of the modern state" wherein this space is imagined as existing in a "past-like future" (110). Markose (2019) also points to the

reinvention of the nostalgia for a unified “Mahabali time” as a key factor in forging the environmental politics of contemporary Kerala, along with the consolidation of agrarian values and the romanticization or mythification of the ‘green’ (253). Thus, both the spatial formulation of Mavelinadu (as the land that Bali reigned) and the temporal formulation of Mavelinadu vaneedum kalam (as the time of Bali’s reign) is invoked in popular register and political rhetoric as crucial to the conjuring of Malayali cultural identity, as integral to the vision of an egalitarian welfare state, as embodying the trope of ‘return’, and as a nostalgic vignette of a ‘greener’ past. In *Swarga*’s mythic pastoral, Mavelinaadu emerges as the *locus amoenus*, symbolizing a “pleasing botanical place” (Wesolowski 2011, vii), while Bali himself personifies the ‘Age of Truth’ before Swarga’s ‘fall’.

In recent years, growing interest in the literary and cultural representation of botanical life has led to the emergence of interdisciplinary frameworks like that of the ‘Critical Plant Studies’ that acknowledges the agency, intentionality, and subjectivity of plants, urging us to move beyond the anthropocentrism that often characterizes ecocritical inquiries. Re-centring the figure of the silenced plant that has hitherto been relegated to the margins of the text, Ryan (2017) postulates botanical criticism as a “… plant-based form of criticism attentive to the representation of vegetal life in cultural artefacts and literary works” (Ryan, 2017, 10). *Swarga*’s mythic pastoral also narrativizes the rich oeuvre of plant-lore or plant-folklore in the region, serving as a literary archive for the otherwise forgotten plant-presences. The myths woven around the arboreal presence of the Balindra Pala Tree are central to Swarga’s storyworld. On the very first page of the novel, Devayani appears with the diseased child in her arms under “the shade of the huge Balindra Pala tree at the end of the house’s front yard” (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 1). If Swarga alludes to the Eden-like Garden where ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’ dwell, the Balindra Pala is its ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, consuming the fruit of which leads to their fall back to humanity. As the name ‘Balindra Pala’ suggests, the tree is associated with the Bali myth in certain regions of Kasargode district. Commonly known in Malayalam as the *Ezhilam Pala*, or simply the ‘pala tree’, *Alstonia scholaris* is known as the ‘milkwood tree’ in English because of the milky sap that oozes from its trunk. It is also colloquially known as the ‘devil tree’ in English. The tree is considered poisonous, although it is believed to have medicinal properties in the Indian ethnobotanical tradition. Under this tree, Devayani’s yearning for motherhood is realized. The oozing milk of the tree, deemed to be toxic, resonates with the maternal imagery ascribed to arboreal life and serves as a metaphor for the poisoned breastmilk of Swarga’s mothers.

The Jadadhari hill, and its forests filled with “the lush foliage of the aryaveppu trees” (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 5), also constitute an important site for *Swarga*’s plant-lore. The Jadadhari houses the primaeval cave of the forest and is presented as a pristine wilderness, untouched by humanity. In the beginning, the people attribute their maladies to the anger of the Jadadhari *Bhoota*, the presiding deity of the forest (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 16, 17). The Bhoota was captured, through black magic, by the Sivolli Brahmins who took over the region. They buried him atop the hill. His female companion, *Kurathi*, was also captured but she managed to escape and rescue the Bhoota. After this, the Sivolli Brahmins faced repercussions for their actions

in the form of crop failures, disasters, diseases, and death. Venomous snakes started following them, disrupting their lives to the extent that they had to leave Swarga (16–17). Swarga's pastoral mode mobilizes mythic reasoning to account for the vastly distributed effects and traces of pesticide poisoning. Similarly, there is the lore of the 'Balakhilyas', also presented about a local shrub (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 76, 77). The Balakhilyas are "sixty-thousand boy-ascetics, each no bigger than a little finger," who perform austerities on top of the hill. According to the story, the divine bird Garuda was flying to fetch the nectar of immortality when he landed on an enormous banyan tree branch. The branch started to break under his weight, but he noticed that there were sixty thousand Balakhilyas hanging upside down from the branch, deeply immersed in their austerities. To avoid interrupting the sages' penance and incurring their curse, Garuda caught the branch in his beak and flew around the world. Eventually, he safely placed them on the Jadadhari hill (76, 77). Neelakantan says that Enmakaje is the 'land of Truth' because they perform austerities: "When children pop those fruits and people uproot the shrub, their austerities are interrupted. The Truth will sink then. Please remember when you go up the hill next time, we should not disturb them" (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 77).

The novel also features other trees with their own mythical stories attached to them. For instance, there is a tree known as "Permalan's jackfruit tree," that remains under the ownership of Permalan and members of his family, regardless of who owns the land. The tree belongs to the Indigenous Adivasi inhabitants of the forest. Permalan's descendant Panji, the tribal elder of Jadadhari forest, permits Neelakantan to pluck fruits from the tree, telling him, "You pluck as much as you want. Don't ask anyone" (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 96). Only Panji and his family have the right to touch the tree or pick its fruit, and even if someone from the Sivolli family, who owns the land, wishes to taste the jackfruit, her or she must ask a Mogeyan (a member of the tribe) (97). No matter who owns the land, the tree belongs to the people who nurtured it. Similarly, the narrative also mentions the *nakkare* (Indian cherry or *Cordia dichotoma*) plant (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 64), under which the Bhoota is said to have been buried. Lastly, when the narrative reimagines Bali's return to his kingdom, the utopian promise of his reign is framed largely through plant-lore: "When the white stone bursts into bloom, the granite boulder bears fruit, when children run around playing under the tiny thumba herbs, when the barren cow gives birth, when the cow grows a handlebar moustache, when the old woman begins to menstruate, when the black part of the red-and-black kunni seed turns pale, you can return and rule this land!" (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 182).

9.4 "There Was Nothing Else to Be Seen": Plantations and the Anti-Pastoral Vision

When Neelakantan encounters the vast swathes of plantations in Enmakaje, he describes them as the "false forests of cashew" that "spread endlessly on both sides of the road" (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 185). In the novel, at first, the plantations are largely represented as indistinguishable from the dense 'greenery' that enshrouds the landscape. However, as Neelakantan begins to recognize the plantation tree-cover as "false forests" that stand out from the lush tropical foliage of the region, we witness a moment of rupture in the pastoral vision that had hitherto been imposed upon the landscape. Preston-McGee (2011) argues that the "natural beauty of the plantation is both tempting and horrifying," citing instances from African-American literature wherein the authors employ pastoral images to suggest how the landscape itself was imposed on its slave-subjects. The vision of the plantation as a "pastoral garden" is punctured as both the beauty and the trauma that this space enforces upon its occupants create a disorienting experience (Preston-McGee 2011, 2, 4). *Swarga* uses the word "garden" to refer to the plantation at several points in the narrative, as a literal translation of the Malayalam word *thottam*, which can be interpreted contextually as a garden, orchard, or a plantation. The novel represents the plantation primarily in two ways: as a marginal nature that lurks at its peripheries and as a *locus horridus* that invokes the uncanny.

In *Swarga*, even though the looming presence of the plantation is central to the rupture of its pastoralist vision, the plantation itself remains in the margins. The mythic-pastoral of *Swarga* and the plantations in its margins constitute a central-peripheral relationship, where the latter is necessary for constituting the eco-nostalgia for the former. Anderson (2009) uses the term "marginal nature" to refer to a form of nature that is "neither pristine nor pastoral, but rather a nature whose ecological and cultural significance requires a reassessment of our narratives of nature" (xiii), a "hybrid type of nature characterized as both weedy and wild" (3). Anderson's use of this term is mainly about what he describes as the patches of "shadow nature" (5) characteristic of wastelands and urban landscapes. However, the idea can also be useful in understanding the 'false forests' of monoculture plantations that create a sense of foreboding and bring forth the concealed violence of toxic wastelands in the global South. The spectral presence of the plantations in the periphery casts a shadow over the pastoral re-storying of Swarga's mythic past. The plantations emerge as "unending rows" of trees on both sides of the road as the protagonists travel to Swarga: "On both sides, there grew nothing but the areca trees, reaching towards the sky, tall and straight like lines in a copybook" (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 89). At first, they are presented as an indistinctive feature of the 'green backdrop' of the novel; merely operating as a spatial 'setting' where the action occurs. For instance, when Neelakantan "stroll[s] through the areca gardens" (61) awaiting Panji, he does not notice their function in the topography of the region: "The other side of the Kodangiri canal that flowed past the hill was full of areca gardens. On the canal's banks, black-green fences of hibiscus stretched as far as the eye could see. He had noticed them on

his very first stroll through the gardens, those well-trimmed hibiscus fences” (67). Instead, what captivates him are the hibiscus flowers adorning the “fences with no thorns, in perpetual bloom!” (67). Here, the act of walking is crucial; it guides the reader through the toxic-scape of the plantations, enabling the point of view of the lone man lost within a vast space constituted by the endless proliferation of trees. As Neelakantan walks, the plantation haunts him, instilling fear in place of wonder, and consequently destabilizing his mythic pastoral fantasy of Swarga. Later, Neelakantan and the beekeepers of Swarga visit the plantation after they conclude that the aerial spraying of Endosulfan could be the reason for the children’s maladies. Here, they view from under the thick shade of the cashew trees, the helipad from where the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) launches its pesticide-spraying helicopters (102).

The second important way in which the novel represents the plantation is as the locus horridus or the ‘fearful place’. The discomfort and disorientation with the space are evident when Neelakantan trespasses into one of the “areca nut garden stretched endlessly,” all alone (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 121). He gets lost in the plantation where “it was impossible to see anything beyond a short distance from within rows and rows of areca trees” (122). The areca garden metamorphizes into a maze from which he is unable to escape; he ends up “going round and round inside the garden for hours” (121). This incident provokes feelings of anxiety and terror while encountering the vast emptiness of the plantation, in which “[n]ot a single soul was to be seen anywhere” (122). Neelakantan experiences solitude and grief in being stranded in the middle of what he describes as a “huge graveyard”:

> Suddenly something struck him. In this vast expanse, he could not sense the presence of a single living creature. Not even a lizard, chameleon, frog, snake, or mongoose. Above him, the verdure of the palms nearly blocked off the sky. Below the ashen trunks on the grass, sandal-coloured leaf sheaths lay scattered like snakes with their hoods raised. Ripe areca nuts lay everywhere, smouldering like coals. The areca flower beds were everywhere on the grass, as if someone had showered them there (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 122).

The ‘lifeless’ plantations are counterposed against the Jagadhari wilderness and its rich mythic lore, juxtaposing the inanimate with the animate, vacuity with abundance, and homogeneity with diversity. Neelakantan experiences the horror of the plantation as a “fatal silence” (123), and he attempts to dig the soil with the hope of finding any signs of life, which he eventually refrains from out of the fear of not finding any. The disorienting experience initially triggered by the labyrinth of the plantations gives way to the dread induced by the ‘silence of the nonhuman’ where “not a single animal sound [were] to be heard. Not even a bird” and “not even a cockroach was to be seen” (122, 123). Keetley (2016) uses the term “plant horror” to describe “humans’ dread of the “wildness” of vegetal nature—its untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth,” as well as its “inscrutable silence” (Keetley & Tenga, 2016, 1). Similarly, the endless proliferation of plant life as seen in a monoculture plantation can also induce other forms of anxiety; comparable to what Anderson (2016) describes as the “anxieties about plant life that become unmanageable and therefore dangerous and horrifying,” where “visual and spatial boundaries are blurred”; an “overreaching of plant life” that signifies a “betrayal

of the promise of disciplined abundance" (131). Thus, even as the human protagonists articulate their uneasiness with the obvious absence of animal/insect life on the plantation, they are equally unsettled at the sight of the "false forests" constituted by the endless proliferation of vegetal life. "A vast cashew plantation rolled over four or five hills, seemingly endless," exclaims Neelakantan and Jayarajan, adding that "[t]he last worm must have died by now" (152). In the end, as Neelakantan and Jayarajan discuss the 'culture of monocultures', we witness the plantations of Swarga evolve into an operative site for environmental and social justice struggles that extend beyond Enmakaje and the Endosulfan disaster:

> Most of the biodiversity disappeared. The water sources dried up. The land is filled with sickly people [...] like the eucalyptus plantations in Karnataka and the pine plantations in the Himalayas [...] Look at the acacia forests in Kerala [...] that was a plant meant to dry up swamps in Australia! That horrible tree is now turning Kerala into a desert, in the name of afforestation! Must be some foreign conspiracy! Otherwise, it's hard to imagine why this useless plant, in fact harmful plant, which increases the acidity of the soil, sucks up all our water, and causes allergies in people, was given such a welcome, in our land where mango trees and jackfruit trees grow so plentifully! This culture of monoculture, what a politics of diversity should end... (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 155).

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9.5 'Unseen Presences': Toxic Flora in Swarga

"The plants are poisoned too, onl' tha' we don' know. They don' yield like befor'…they aren' as healthy" (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 127), cautions Srirama, a journalist and an anti-Endosulfan activist, in a conversation with Neelakantan about the state of Enmakaje's vegetal life. The despair evident in Srirama's words points to the tragic aftermath of the relentless spraying of lethal pesticides for a prolonged period—the poisoning of plants which eventually seeps into other crevices of life. Later, when Neelakantan and Jayarajan devour the jackfruit from Panji's tree, the latter holds up an aril of the fruit to the rest and poses a question: "Do you know how many ppm endosulfan can be found in this aril?" (135). The others find this proposition to be absurd, and disagree with Jayarajan since there was no direct spraying of the pesticide anywhere near the tree. However, gradually, they realize that if people living by the waterbodies of Enmakaje can fall ill, there is an equal chance that the poison must have spread to the trees on the Jadadhari hill too. This realization, that the poison is everywhere, even in the most sacred of trees, renders them more vulnerable than ever: "Panji stopped eating and looked up as if he had seen an unseen presence" (136). The permeability of toxins that 'contaminate' both human/animal bodies as well as the vast swathes of vegetal life that make the plantations and the forest, give rise to a new form of environmental politics that is primarily preoccupied with agriculture pollution. For instance, the narrative points to the use of a toxin called "Roundup," an alternative version of Agent Orange used in the Vietnam War, being

sprayed at the Cheemeni plantation (176). In forging this link between the ecological and social devastation of two locales in different parts of the Global South, the narrative situates the struggle against toxic exposure within the larger struggle for environmental and social justice in similar parts of the world.

The novel concludes on a dissonant note, with the primaeval cave in the Jadadhari forest welcoming Neelakantan and Devayani into their abode as they flee the clutches of the evil leader and his goons. The cave, bearing semblance to the Biblical Noah's ark, invites both of them to enter without their clothes, joining the fold of various mammals, reptiles, and birds inside (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 245). The cave reassures them that "[e]ven when the flood and rain of poison engulf Enmakaje, the surviving Life seeks refuge here" (245). The couple also beholds the sight of the golden-donkey, a symbol of Bali's reign, and walk into the cave, to share words of wisdom to the 'Life' gathered around him. Here, strikingly apparent is the crucial absence of plants that do not get invited to this mythical refuge, even as they fall victim to the poison rains outside; even more perplexing is the ostensible exclusion of plants from the category of 'Life'. *Swarga's* ending attempts to tie together the different threads that weave together the narrative—an unresolved political struggle against the pesticide lobby and the magical-realist elements imbibed with the mythic pastoral ideal, while grappling with some of the inherent limitations of the novel form that zeroes in on certain literary 'subjects' at the expense of others. Thus, plant life, though central to both the mythic pastoralist vision of Swarga's past and its anti-pastoral present in the plantations, is relegated to being an 'absent presence' in this crucial moment in the cave. Instead, we find the presence of the plants in this toxic-scape elsewhere—most notably in the form of the *aryaveppu* (neem or *Azadirachta indica*) and *cheru* (black varnish tree or *Holigarna arnottiana*) trees which Neelakantan plants in the forest, which are believed to possess the ability to draw out poison from the soil (Mangad, 2017a, 2017b, 141). The sprouting seeds which Neelakantan plants in Swarga's forests to deter the spread of the "unseen presence" of the poison, emerge as the new 'Life' that the narrative desperately seeks, forging an environmentalist politics of the future.

Notes

1. Locus amoenus—'charming place, pleasance', a phrase used to refer to the literary topos constituted by the description of an idyllic landscape.

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Chapter 10
Mourning the Loss of Mother Earth: Examining Human-Water Interrelationships in Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake*

Somasree Sarkar

Abstract In today's industrialized world, the degradation of the environment is a major concern, recognized to have severe impacts on the planet and its inhabitants. The current environmental changes are attributed to anthropogenic activities, making human beings the discernible factors behind the current climate crisis. Human perceptions related to exceptionalism and exemptionalism are at the core of hubris, triggering the proclivity to exploit the more-than-human world. The unrelenting exploitative measures of human beings toward nonhuman entities have injured and damaged the Earth irrevocably, jeopardizing the planet's biodiversity and ecological balance. The Earth is often conceptualized as 'Mother Earth' for its sustaining abilities and nurturing qualities. The concept of 'Mother Earth' encompasses the interrelated lives of human and nonhuman beings and the Indigenous traditions that eulogize human-nonhuman interrelations (Shiva, 2020). The present corporate culture is disrupting the interrelationship between humans and nonhumans, widening the chasm between the two, thereby, disturbing the balance of Mother Earth. This can be viewed as a deprivation of Mother Earth's rights since her well-being is dependent on the stable relationship between all the species she sustains and nurtures (Shiva, 2020). In connection with the preceding discussion, the present chapter seeks to critically analyze the novel, *Softly Dies a Lake* originally written in Telugu by Akkineni Kutumbarao (2014), and later translated by Vasanth Kannabiran into English (2020). The author through his eco-memoir records the slow dying of the largest freshwater lake in India, Kolleru, located in the state of Andhra Pradesh owing to the mercenary practices of humans. Kutumbarao characterizes the lake as the living figure of a mother who nurtures multiple species in the region. The dying of the lake signifies the loss of the mother who sustains the balance in the ecosystem. The chapter, therefore, endeavours to show how the exploitive measures deprive Mother Earth, here identified with Kolleru, of her well-being and rights. Also, it attempts to show how the dying of Lake Kolleru degrades the livelihood of those people thriving on her, triggering mourning for the ecological loss. Finally, the chapter will interrogate the

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possibility of recovery from eco-mourning by striking a balance between the human and nonhuman world in the region surrounding Lake Kolleru.

Keywords Ecology · Human/nonhuman · Kolleru · Mother Earth · Mourning

10.1 Introduction

Today, many analyses of the planetary condition lead to the conclusion that we are living in times of ecological degradation and significant alterations in climate. In 1995, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), consisting of 1,500 scientists, summarized their data and stated: “The balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernible human influence on global climate” (McKibben, 2003, xii). The unprecedented human influence on climate has disrupted global ecological conditions significantly, causing “the end of nature” (McKibben, 2003, 47). ‘The end of nature’ refers to the de-natured conditions of the Earth, acknowledging humans’ overwhelming impacts on the biosphere. Human intrusion is evident in the increased amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in “pursuit of warm houses and eternal economic growth and of agriculture so productive it would free most of us from farming” (McKibben, 2003, 48). This has dramatically warmed the planet, resulting in precarious climatic conditions. Bill McKibben (2003) views the process of ending nature not as an “impersonal event,” but as something that “we humans have brought about through a series of conscious and unconscious choices” (83). Therefore, ‘we humans’ have caused planetary conditions to become precarious by exerting our will over the Earth system. The human-caused precarity of the Earth system inevitably destabilizes more-than-humans, for they are enmeshed within the web of life on Earth. Nayar (2019) terms this condition ‘ecoprecarity’ and explains that the “discourses of fragility, vulnerability, and power relations across species” are encompassed within the notion (7). For Nayar (2019), eco-precarity signifies “the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster [and also] the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene” (8). Human beings are the victims of climate precarity while also being the agents of such precarity. The critical condition of human beings along with non-human beings characterizes the current epoch—the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene generally indicates “a moment when (some) humans exceeded their ‘natural’ limits and boundaries […] and impacted the planet’s geology in ways that will leave isotopic traces for millennia” (DeLoughrey, 2019, 8). The Anthropocene, thus, wields the “grand species narrative” (Nixon, 2017, 43) of *Homo sapiens* as the foremost factor behind planetary change. It is also “a lived phenomenon that humans experience” and signifies “the entanglement of environmental and sociological processes and structures”—having serious consequences on “people’s day-to-day lives” (Kelly, 2018, 13). The Anthropocene unfolds the planetary history of all life by conjoining natural and human histories, which have traditionally been separated (Chakrabarty, 2009, 201). The epoch is said to have originated in the Anglo-Industrial Revolution

of the mid-eighteenth century (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000, 17). The term suggests that we humans "over the past two and a half centuries" have been "inadvertently laying down in stone a geological archive of human impacts" (Nixon, 2017, 43). Since its conceptualization, the Anthropocene has been expanded to define those human agents specifically responsible for changing the planetary conditions. Dipesh Chakrabarty attempts to describe human agents in the Anthropocene, which he refers to collectively as 'we':

> We are simultaneously a divided homocentric[1] humanity, and a dominant species and thus a part of the history of life on this planet. […] With this collapsing of multiple chronologies—of species history and geological times into our very own lifetimes, within living memory—the human condition has changed. (Chakrabarty, 2015, 180)

The Anthropocene marks an epochal shift in human consciousness because humans have recognized themselves as agents causing significant changes in the Earth system, regardless of economic or political differences.

However, Anthropocene-related consequences are experienced in varied contexts, and they find expression through diverse media. The adverse experiences connected to degraded ecological conditions can be personal, leaving a significant void in one's psyche. The fractured psyche develops from "anthropocenic consciousness" emerging with the recognition of humans' potential to make "permanent changes to the earth and that this could be corroborated by empirical evidence" (Kelly, 2018, 9). The sense of rupture between humans and the planet characterizes many narratives of the Anthropocene. Recognizing the underlying anxiety and pain in narrating ecological loss and climate precarity in the Anthropocene, this chapter focuses on the vulnerable conditions of a community that sustains on a massive lake in southern India. This chapter investigates the demise of Kolleru, one of Asia's largest freshwater lakes, situated in Andhra Pradesh, India, through a critical reading of Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake*. The novel was originally published in Telugu in 2014 and then translated into English in 2020 by Vasanth Kannabiran, a veteran social activist and educationist in India. Kutumbarao, an acclaimed Telugu film director and National Award winner presents an eco-memoir from his youth, putting forth a "story of the deeply entangled lives of five-year-old Seenu and the tempestuous Kolleru" (Kannabiran, 2020, ix). Young Seenu represents the author as a child, and the close connection between Seenu and Kolleru reflects the author's intimate relationship with the lake, Kolleru. Kutumbarao (2020) asserts, "[t]his novel is about my childhood. All the people in it are real. That village is real. Kolleru is real" (xxii). The chapter then examines the interactions between humans and the freshwater body of Kolleru and the later disruptions in their relationship caused by capitalist intervention. Furthermore, the discussion explicates the eco-mourning associated with

[1] The word 'homocentric' is derived from the Latin word 'homo' that stands for human. Here, Dipesh Chakrabarty uses the term 'homocentric' to relate to the current epoch constituting human beings as divided political subjects. He views 'homocentric' in opposition to 'anthropocentric,' derived from the Greek 'Anthropos,' meaning human beings. For Chakrabarty, the 'Anthropos' stands for "collective and unintended forms of existence of the human, as a geological force, as a species, as a part of the history of life on this planet" (Chakrabarty 2015, 173–174).

Kolleru's death and contends that Kolleru's narrative, which exemplifies a "human error" and depicts "one of the catastrophes of history", documents "the ills that befell Kolleru" to elevate its readers' consciousness of the depletion of natural resources in India (Kutumbarao, 2020, 197, xxi).

10.2 Relationship Between Humans and Kolleru's Water: Knots of Connection

The narrator, Srinivasa Rao, gives an emotive account of Kolleru's lost vitality, positioning the lake in Indian history as a case of human-caused environmental deterioration. The tale follows Kolleru's devolution from a thriving ecosystem sustaining multiple species to an imperilled environment. The narrative opens within the liminal space of past and present, as the narrator's memories of a boundless Kolleru clash with his current vision of the fragmented lake:

> The lake which should have stretched out boundlessly before his eyes lay in tattered strips. Kolleru, once dense with plants and creepers and flowers, lay bare before him like shards of shattered glass. Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone? Where had the sounds of birds rising like scattered blooms gone? Like a map of the world divided wantonly by crooked boundaries Kolleru was split by bunds. Broken bunds. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 1)

Srinivasa beholds the dilapidated lake ecosystem, breached by the enormous fish tanks that extend beyond the homes of the villagers, devouring the banks of the lake as well (Kutumbarao, 2020, 1). The narrator's childhood recollections in his village Pulaparru surrounding Lake Kolleru chronicle the lake's perished grandeur, with myriad streams and its "majestically" flowing waters across "several hundred acres" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 1). Kolleru, once a nurturer of life, is currently a "filthy pond, a breeding ground for germs, a danger to the environment, a toxic net for birds" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 2). Kolleru has deteriorated into an "image of destruction and death," leaving an indelible imprint of hyper-exploitation (Kutumbarao, 2020, 2).

The contaminated Kolleru represents "traumatized Anthropocene" waters, as the water body is exploited by capitalist aggressors (Oppermann, 2023, 6). The "rendering of freshwater as an extractable resource" is underpinned by capitalists' exploitive actions (Campbell & Paye, 2020, 1). These disrupt the "ontologies of [water] and its multispecies engagements" (DeLoughrey, 2017, 32). Like many terrestrial species, human beings depend on freshwater bodies for sustenance, and the unrelenting depletion of freshwater resources destabilizes the entire ecosystem, encompassing terrestrial and aquatic ecologies. The narrator, Srinivasa Rao, understands the "poetics of planetary water" that explores "the relationship between humans and water" (Mentz, 2024, 2). Srinivasa describes Kolleru as a nurturing body, embracing all kinds of species, including humans. Kolleru of Srinivasa's childhood represented a biological hotspot that vibrated with buffaloes, cattle, snails, fish, and numerous birds. Srinivasa hesitantly recalls memories of:

> Children running out of their homes. Children playing with sticks and stones on the bank. Children picking snails and snail shells. Children cutting grass and carrying bundles of fodder for their buffaloes. Others carrying bundles of lotus roots […] Some walking along the bank. Herds of cows and buffaloes mooing loudly moving along the bank. Flocks of many-hued birds colouring the sky and descending in order like troops of soldiers along the lake. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 2)

Srinivasa's memories depict a splendid image of once-mighty Kolleru, "stretching across two hundred and sixty square miles between the Krishna and West Godavari districts" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 10). The lake received water from many rivers, namely Budaleru, Naguleru, Akkilleru, and Sammiveru, and from about 67 canals (Kutumbarao, 2020, 10). Srinivasa's memoir on Kolleru's glorious past and the lake's engagements with humans emphasize "the multiple dimensions of human relationships with the watery part of the world" (McKinley, 2023, xxii). Srinivasa recalls that during the summers, "countless birds from across the world would come like faraway travellers to brighten the land with their colours" and to make the "place vibrant with the sound of their music" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 10). Such hydro-centric experiences are fundamental to his and many other villagers' cultural imagination, as the lake water "permeates [their] emotions and imaginings, providing metaphors to think with" (Strang, 2015, 7). Kolleru's waterscape merges the "songs of birds" and "calls of the fishermen," as these sounds echo like "a hundred ragas and notes" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 88). Indigenous people and diverse nonhuman species thrive by establishing connectivity through the lentic waters of the lake.

Steve Mentz (2024) observes, "Connectivity defines all watery bodies, from vast oceans and large rivers to streams and lakes" (80). The same feature characterizes Kolleru, since it enables biotic connectivity between innumerable species, hence maintaining the region's biodiversity. It is critical to appreciate the connectivities developed between people and "more-than-human aquatic communities," (Oppermann, 2023, 48). Indeed, "failing connectivities" result in a damaged environment and a reduction in the well-being of all interconnected species (Rose, 2017, G52). The depletion of Kolleru's resources disrupts its relationship with its "ecosystem people" (Gadgil & Guha, 1995, 3). According to Gadgil and Guha (1995), ecosystem people "depend on the natural environments of their own locality to meet most of their material needs" (3). Indigenous people within the Kolleru ecosystem thrive on its freshwater resources, and increasing conflicts over these resources eventually alienate ecosystem people from their immediate ecosystem. Resource conflicts represent power struggles occurring at micro-levels within society and indicate humans' proclivity to acquire natural resources for their benefit (Gadgil & Guha, 1995, 2). Competition for resources frequently leads to the victimization of nonhuman entities, resulting in a relational rupture between human and nonhuman worlds.

10.3 Water Exploitation and the Depletion of Kolleru Lake: Unravelled Human-Water Ties

The exploitative traits of certain humans foster a hegemonic sociological structure, and ecosystem people, along with nonhuman inhabitants, bear the brunt of the consequences. The adversities related to ecological depletion—also a marker of the Anthropocene—are "experienced unevenly and therefore function quite differently in different contexts" (Kelly, 2018, 13). In the case of the Kolleru ecosystem, Indigenous inhabitants are victims of capitalist intrusion. The capitalist encroachment undermines their water-related experiences, which have defined their lives for generations. The lake falling in the hands of greedy wealth mongers exemplifies that waterscapes are "intimately connected to the question of capitalism's intensive and extensive logic of expansion" (Menozzi, 2020, 2). The resource-rich water bodies have enticed capitalists, and the subsequent extraction of water resources has led to the growth of blue capitalism—dividing society "hierarchically into centre and periphery" (Foster & Clark, 2009, 187). Blue capitalism appropriates the extraction of hydraulic resources, enriching certain sections of society, and depriving most of the blue ecosystem residents of favourable conditions of living. Nonetheless, the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 urged people to bear "common but differential responsibilities" for dealing with ecological crises (Vanderheiden, 2008, 6). Dipesh Chakrabarty explains the idea of 'differentiated responsibilities':

> The expression 'differentiated responsibilities' is what brings the story that scientists tell—about the relationship between climate and earth processes—into a relationship with the familiar stories of globalization: the uneven and iniquitous history of world capitalism, the emergence of global media, and connectivity, and so on. (Chakrabarty, 2015, 139–140)

Chakrabarty's phrase "differentiated responsibilities" acknowledges existing inequities between communities and nations in terms of responsibility for depleting natural resources. Yet Ghosh (2016) notes, "Every human being who has ever lived has played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense, every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change" (115). This holds for the *Vaddis*[2] of Pulaparru village who have equally contributed to the deprivation of the lake along with distant venture capitalists. Radhakrishna, a villager, and Srinivasa's childhood friend explains greedy villagers' involvement in exploiting the resources of Kolleru:

> The collective farming went well for five or six years. Then the trouble started. As soon as everyone began to have some money each one thought he was a hero. These people began to say, why should the *Vaddis* have the fish in *Chinnagundam*[3]? The *Vaddis* said, not just the *Chinnagundam* but even the fish in the creeks you have made to let water into the fields belong to us. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 189)

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[2] *Vaddis* refers to the *Vaddirajas*, one of the castes in the village surrounding Kolleru. The *Vaddirajas* fished in Kolleru.

[3] *Chinnagundam* is derived from *chinna*, meaning small; and *gundam* meaning pond. Therefore, chinnagundam means a small pond.

A few local *Vaddis* have forcibly colonized the freshwater fish that have long fed Kolleru inhabitants. The desire for more divides the villagers into factions, each claiming ownership of all their harvests rather than dividing them equally. The prosperity of a few has led to a socioeconomic gap between those who undermine the Kolleru community's founding ideal of coexistence and others who regard the lake as their provider. This division among villagers enables outsiders to encroach on Kolleru, inflicting further environmental damage. Thus, Kolleru's demise results from recklessness on the part of certain locals who have sacrificed Kolleru for their material desires. The lure of economic prosperity leads to the establishment of fish tanks on Kolleru. The Vaddis have reaped benefits from the ponds, as Ravi, a villager, says:

> Our village *Vaddis* have flourished on much because of the fish ponds. Recently they put in a petition for an airport in our village because some fish were getting spoilt in the lorry. The Income Tax fellows came and raided their houses. In each house, they found gunny sacks filled with five hundred and thousand rupee notes under their cots. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 191)

The *Vaddis* of Srinivasa's boyhood, who wore "loincloths and had circular hair," abandoned the lake in pursuit of capital accumulation (Kutumbarao, 2020, 191). Their capitalist exploits have directly impacted the freshwater ecology, as they have degraded it with enormous fish ponds and contaminated it with chemicals.

Along with aquaculture chemicals, industrial waste from the adjacent cities of Vijayawada and Eluru has poisoned Kolleru. Pollution of the lake water has denied Pulaparru village residents clean drinking water, forcing them to fetch water from another village named Kaikaluru (Kutumbarao, 2020, 194). Kolleru's water pollution is related to the toxification of another water body, the Krishna Canal. Radhakrishna, Srinivasa's friend, explains the reason behind Kolleru's water pollution:

> Because the oxygen in the Krishna canal has gone down completely and it has emerged that the reason for it is that all kinds of waste are being led into it. From the fish food to the medicines everything is toxic waste. All that rots further and flows into the Kolleru. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 194)

Toxification of water creates an ecological rift between Indigenous people and planetary water, which is damaging to the ecosystem's flourishing. The poisoning of freshwater bodies from industrial pollutants degenerates Kolleru into "Cheap Nature," as for "Capitalism, Nature is 'cheap'" (Moore, 2016, 2). Moore (2016) explains "Cheap Nature" in a "double sense": "to make Nature's elements 'cheap' in price; and also to *cheapen*, to degrade or to render inferior in an ethico-political sense, the better to make Nature cheap in price" (2–3). These "two moments are entwined" to bolster capitalist growth (Moore, 2016, 3). The expansion of capitalist structure involves a 'hydroculture' in which "water functions as a thematic element, but also as representation and symbolic regime, product and producer of the contingent socio-ecological relations stabilizing" the capitalist and "neoliberal disposition" (Deckard, 2019, 11). The wanton commodification of Kolleru and its reduction into an abused site for commercial activities appropriate the 'hydroculture' that encourages the capitalist drive. The hydroculture promoting the depletion of the lake system includes greedy politicians who want to reduce the Kolleru waterscape to "forty-five thousand

acres, release the rest from Wetland Protection Act and take over the released fifty-five acres into their control" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 195). Releasing fifty-five acres of the lentic waterscape would allow unscrupulous politicians to exploit the released acres of the lake relentlessly. This suggests the presence of a network of intruders who occupy land, deplete natural resources, and pollute the environment. Such destructive activities isolate people from their natural surroundings, eroding the essence of the bioregion based on species kinship.

10.4 Solastalgia and Mourning the Loss of Kolleru's 'Feminine Principle'

The narrator, Srinivasa Rao, recalls Kolleru as a proud "pregnant woman" as the lake nurtures manifold species of birds and fish, brimming with "flowers of many hues, a cluster of lotuses in full bloom and wild weeds and water plants like silken tassels entwined and dancing, floating and swaying in the waters" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 2). Kolleru has drawn all the earthlings—humans and nonhumans—"into her embrace like a true mother" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 10). Kolleru is personified as an affectionate mother who nourishes her children with tenderness and compassion. Since antiquity, many Indigenous cultures have conceived the Earth as Mother Nature. Baindur (2015) argues that "[m]any rituals in agrarian communities, even in current times, represent the earth as a woman, whose fertility nurtures and produces crops" (14). The Earth provides vitality to living beings, and, under her nourishing care, earthlings are sustained. Kolleru represents Mother Earth, which binds earthlings in the tapestry of a biodiverse community, or what Vandana Shiva calls an 'Earth Community' (Shiva, 2020, 285). Shiva (2020) states that "[t]his paradigm of an Earth Community is one of the ecological knowledge as a commons, based on the understanding of the relationship between species" (285). It endorses the idea of 'Earth Family,' characterized by "diversity and relationships" (Shiva, 2020, 286). Kolleru, the nourishing Mother, is "the source of life, nourishment and learning and provides everything" for the nourishment of the "invisible living community of interrelated and interdependent beings" (Shiva, 2020, 289). This sense of indivisibility and interrelations once existed among the myriad beings of Kolleru:

> Without any reference to caste, religion or race everyone was 'our' people. 'Our village', 'our next village', 'our Kolleru', 'our man'. But not just humans, even the dogs who passed that were 'our dogs', the crows that fell in front were 'our crows', the sparrows that collected twittering on the front platform were 'our sparrows'. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 28)

The word 'our' establishes an intimate and familial connection with every being of the region, regardless of differences in caste, religion, and species. The consciousness of one Earth Family addresses the idea —"We Are All Earthlings" (Morton, 2017, 13)—overlooking social and cultural differences. Kolleru, embodying the vibrant Mother Earth, draws every being close to her, which instils in Kolleru-lings "the feeling of being close to a mothering power" (Bear, 2004, 36). Yet a decayed

Kolleru reflects humanity's failure to meet its obligations to Mother Earth. The dilapidated lake represents a violation of the planet, implying the collapse of the Earth Family. The loosening of "knots of connection" between species impairs multispecies relationships (Govindrajan, 2019, 14). The loosened species connectivity impedes Mother Earth's flourishing, which adversely impacts the well-being of all earthlings.

Srinivasa associates Kolleru's destitute condition with the loss of its 'feminine principle' of procreation and sustaining life (Shiva, 1988, 41). The thousand acres of fiercely flowing lake are diminished to a "filthy pond, a breeding ground for germs, a danger to the environment, a toxic net for birds" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 2). Kolleru is diseased and toxic, having little or no nurturing potential, because she is abused by "hands greedy for wealth," subsequently degrading her to a figure of "destruction and death" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 2). Kolleru, under anthropogenic pressure, is an abandoned mother, exploited and then allowed to die. The unprecedented misuse of Kolleru de-natures her, and the lake, in turn, de-nurtures the surrounding ecosystem. Nonetheless, Srinivasa's memory presents a picturesque view of Kolleru, as he recalls:

> There was no dearth of fodder in *Mothevarilanka*.[4] There were water plants, bulrushes, grasses of every kind and long-stemmed lotuses. Because the green fodder was so plentiful the cattle that went there would graze as long as they could, then stand and chew the cud peacefully and when they got tired they began to play with each other, chasing and teasing each other. They would graze again and then go to the *Peddagundam*[5] and drink water to their fill, play about in the water and then come back to the island and take a last graze. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 98–99)

The evocative description of cattle grazing around Kolleru once again describes the lake's past vibrance, as she now stands as a symbol of anthropogenic abuse. Srinivasa's anguish and pain stem from his association of Kolleru with a maternal figure. He perceives Kolleru as a creator and nurturer of life, but her depletion has impaired her generative abilities. Srinivasa's insistent words, "Kolleru has changed" capture his grief of losing Mother Kolleru (Kutumbarao, 2020, 89). The lake is his first teacher, who has taught him to live and struggle for sustenance. His grief is rooted in his realization of Kolleru losing her "feminine principle" (Shiva, 1988, 42). Human exploitation of Mother Kolleru exhibits the ignorance of those whose "arrogance is grounded in a blindness toward the quiet work and the invisible wealth created by nature" (Shiva, 1988, 42). Srinivasa's sorrow represents his comprehension of the disrupted relationships between the region's Indigenous people and the water body, which destabilizes human habitation.

The narrative is his "lament for the land," as he returns home to find that his "beloved ecosystem is denuded of all greenery" (Willox, 2012, 137), and the lake is partitioned for enormous fish tanks. The de-nourished condition of the lake suggests that "the existence of obligations over and above self-interest is taken for granted" in rural enterprises for developing infrastructure (Leopold, 1989, 197). Leopold (1989) insists that "land-use ethics are still governed wholly by economic self-interest"

[4] *Mothevarilanka* refers to one of the numerous islands in Kolleru.

[5] *Peddagundam* stands for deep parts of a lake.

(197). In the region surrounding Kolleru, the concept of land ethics is related to the (mis) use of the lake waters. The region's ecological health depends on the harmony between Indigenous commons and lake waters. The terrestrial space in the region is intricately tied to the lentic waterscape of Kolleru because all of the region's terrestrial fauna rely on it for survival. A damaged Kolleru, in reality, indicates harm to the entire ecosystem, encompassing aquatic and terrestrial spaces. The degenerated ecosystem, therefore, challenges residents' 'ecological conscience', a deterioration of which produces a breach in the human psyche (Leopold, 1989, 196). The degraded lake environment traumatizes Srinivasa, and within each of his memories, he feels "a fleeting sense of that first death and of that early corporeal response to mourning an ecological loss" (Willox, 2012, 138). His sense of losing his place transforms the region into a "landscape of depression" (Sandilands, 2017, 144). It "points to a complex landscape that ties together, in historically specific ways, corporeal and environmental, interior and exterior, individual and social process: it is a nodal point for biopolitical unfolding" (Sandilands, 2017, 147). The mutilated body of the freshwater lake becomes a "biopolitical unfolding" and disrupts Indigenous people's cultural imaginaries and memories (Dobrin, 2021, 2). Given its current wounded state, a relational disconnect with the memory of overflowing Kolleru evokes ecological depression and mourning. In their impoverished state, the people of Kolleru become gradually detached from the lake.

Mourning the more-than-human is a means to transcend the flawed notions of "human exemptionalism and exceptionalism that allow little or no space for considering other species as parts of the same community as ourselves at all" (Smith, 2013, 21). Further, Srinivasa's grief reveals his view of the Kolleru ecosystem as an essential component of his home and memories. However, the home he returns to is transformed and barely recognizable, exacerbating his anguish. Such despair for losing the security of one's home concerns 'solastalgia'—the "homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'" (Albrecht, 2005, 45). As Glenn Albrecht (2019) explains, the experience of detachment to place can occur as one witnesses detrimental biophysical changes: "[t]he *topos* (place or region) [is] an object that humans could love. However, it becomes hard for that love to be tightly held when the land is being blown up, scoured by a giant excavator, then dumped in a truck, train, or ship" (27). Such an assault on Indigenous habitation instils a sense of violation, rendering Indigenous people vulnerable to these earthly insults. This kind of precarity imposes "fear and anxiety among vulnerable communities, giving rise to the sense of solastalgia" (Biswas & Ryan, 2023, 41). Their prolonged exposure to environmental disruption causes distress among fragile communities, and their awareness related to the deterioration of their physical environment denies them solace at home. As Albrecht et al. (2007) explain:

> The people of concern are still at 'home', but experience a 'homesickness' similar to that caused by nostalgia. What these people lack is solace or comfort derived from their present relationship to 'home' […] Solastalgia exists when there is the lived experience of the physical desolation of home. (S96)

A community's "negative psychoterratic experiences" (Albrecht, 2017, 294) induce "place-based distress" (Askland & Bunn, 2018, 18) among its members. Not only "the scars on the physical and social landscapes," but also "a temporal rupture, manifesting as the dissonance between past experiences, present realities and future ideas of sociality and sense of self in place" underpin such distress (Askland & Bunn, 2017, 18). Likewise, Srinivasa Rao and several other villagers living in the Kolleru ecosystem experience "a deep form of existential distress when confronted by an unwelcome change in their beloved home environment" (Albrecht, 2017, 292). They endure "acute and chronic environmental desolation,", as they observe the assaults on Kolleru's waters (Albrecht, 2017, 292). The people who experience the devolution of Kolleru into a filthy pond can only grieve the irreparable loss:

> That evening they looked at the Kolleru that had vanished and thinking of the enormity of the natural bounty that was destroyed with it forever they all grieved. They realised their wrong but realised it too late. Looking at the dry, barren, lifeless Kolleru one last time and thinking of the Kolleru of their childhood they set off for their homes. (Kutumbarao, 2020, 197)

However, the homes the villagers pursue can never provide the solace they enjoyed as children under the caring guardianship of Kolleru. The vanishing of Kolleru's splendour calls attention to the environmental effects of trauma and grief. The emotionally afflicted commons must bear the tragedy of the death of the enormous water body, and they are compelled to embrace their "complicity in the death of [this] other body—however painful that process may be" (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017, 4). The region's Indigenous commons must live with their "shared vulnerabilities" with the nonhuman water body (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017, 4).

Ecological grief refers to moral obligations associated with the sense of kinship with the nonhuman world (Braun, 2017, 68). It arises from a knowledge of the inextricable connections between humans and nonhumans. Grieving and mourning over ecological damage signify the collective responsibility of humans toward the Earth community and are "way[s] of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other" (Stanescu, 2012, 568). Furthermore, ecological mourning inflects human vulnerability within the Earth system, as there is an "element of self-imposed vulnerability" (Albrecht, 2017, 296). This sense of human culpability pervades Srinivasa and his companions' psyche, as they understand their responsibility toward Kolleru and that the entire community depends on the lake. As Srinivasa's friend, Radhakrishna, laments on realizing their abandoned sense of responsibility toward their environment, "'[t]oday we have given up thinking responsibly or thinking about our villages at all. Not just us but everyone. We have all turned into voters but not responsible citizens'" (Kutumbarao, 2020, 196). Radhakrishna's statement alludes to reducing rural people to political puppets in the hands of powerful and wealthy ones. Unfortunately, their awareness of species kinship occurs after the lake has been damaged. Their prolonged mourning over the loss of the lake can transform their grief into "a politicized melancholia" (Morton, 2010a, 255), necessary for "expressing the complex feelings that may accompany an awareness of the state of human-caused climate change and the ailing health of

the biosphere" (Barr, 2017, 191). Eco-mourning, which stems from an awareness of human impacts on the Earth, emphasizes humans' responsibility to the planet, preventing them from bringing injustice and atrocities to nonhuman beings. Clewell (2004) calls for an "anticonsolatory practice of mourning," whose "commemorative forms [are] intended to provoke and hurt, rather than console and heal" (199). Resistant elegies "[compel] us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses" of recent times (Clewell, 2004, 199). Resistive narratives expressing grief over irrevocable loss are significant for instilling ecological consciousness.

10.5 Narrating Damaged Waterscapes and Fostering Ecological Awareness

Softly Dies a Lake is a representative narrative of a "lentic habitat and the violation of [its] inhabitants" (Oppermann, 2023, 47). The narrative emphasizes the human-induced disconnectedness between the lake and its inhabitants, subsequently provoking an 'ecological thought' that is "a thinking of interconnectedness" and is "a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral" (Morton, 2010b, 7). Such a practice fosters 'ecological awareness' about species entanglements (Morton, 2018, 88; Sarkar & Karmakar, 2021, 1317). Timothy Morton (2018) asserts, "Ecological awareness gives you a world in which everything is relevant to everything else, but is also really unique and vivid and distinct at the very same time" (88). The ecological awareness of the significance of human-nonhuman interdependencies allows humans to become more cognizant of their environment, which can promote ethical human activities. The elegiac story expressing grief over Kolleru's death demonstrates the narrator and his fellow villagers' heightened ecological awareness of human-water interconnections. Their eco-grief reminds local people of their role as "hydro-citizens," potentially paving the way for reconnecting with the hydroscape (Warshall, 2001, 56). The story of the lake concentrates on the more-than-human world "concerned with the diminished lives of endemic species who are either fighting to survive—especially in the tragic sites of drained lakes—or have already vanished" (Oppermann, 2023, 49). A literary representation of the lake renders its waters "visible, readable, and relatable," connecting more people to the waterscape while raising cultural awareness about the loss of a vibrant freshwater body (Oppermann, 2023, 49). The cultural consciousness "affect[s] our emotional and cognitive responses" to the lake ecosystem (Oppermann, 2019, 461). This orientation formulates ecological ethics responding to the sense of responsibility toward one's environment. The acknowledgement of such responsibility is crucial to taking resilient action against ecological damage. Narrating a damaged waterscape highlights the importance of conservation through literature and art.

Kutumbarao's story of a lake expressing environmental distress underlines the urgency to recover the Kolleru community. Rehabilitating the Kolleru ecosystem would involve the recovery of multispecies entanglements and regaining their right to a healthy environment. Kolleru's narrative "not only encourage[s] us to heed the aquatic voices that intermix biology and textuality but also emancipate[s] us as human subjects in an undivided field of existence from the strongholds of anthropocentricity" (Oppermann, 2019, 461). Humans' emancipation from the anthropocentric notion of exceptionality is necessary for recovering the Kolleru community. The community must be all-inclusive and resist corporate or state monopoly over resources. To rebuild such a community, it is vital to have a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem as a whole. This is particularly relevant to the Kolleru waterscape, which supports myriad species and thrives on multispecies interactions. The Kolleru community's basis in species kinship must be revived for it to be restored. Such an ideal prioritizes biodiversity preservation, viewing humans as an integral part of nature rather than a separate entity. Freshwater systems form a vital part of human-nonhuman interactions; therefore, their preservation is critical for the well-being of humans and other living species.

10.6 Notes

1. The word 'homocentric' is derived from the Latin word 'homo' which stands for human. Here, Dipesh Chakrabarty uses the term 'homocentric' to relate to the current epoch constituting human beings as divided political subjects. He views 'homocentric' in opposition to 'anthropocentric,' derived from the Greek 'Anthropos,' meaning human beings. For Chakrabarty, the 'Anthropos' stands for "collective and unintended forms of existence of the human, as a geological force, as a species, as a part of the history of life on this planet" (Chakrabarty, 2015, 173–174).
2. *Vaddis* refers to the *Vaddirajas*, one of the castes in the village surrounding Kolleru. The *Vaddirajas* fished in Kolleru.
3. *Chinnagundam* is derived from *chinna*, meaning small; and *gundam* meaning pond. Therefore, *chinnagundam* means a small pond.
4. *Mothevarilanka* refers to one of the numerous islands in Kolleru.
5. *Peddagundam* stands for deep parts of a lake.

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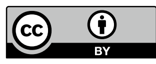

Chapter 11
Constructing Ecotopian Space as a Protest Against the Urban Worldview in Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Literary Oeuvre

Indrajit Mukherjee

Abstract Ernest Callenbach defined an ecotopian space as an ecologically perfect area or form of imaginary society, a place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of modern metropolitan life. The concept of an ecotopia serves as an appeal to avoid acts of violent aggression that are damaging to the environment and calls for a shift in cultural norms to address the present ecological catastrophe. In Bengali writer Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's (1894–1950) literary oeuvre, nature becomes a site of dwelling, a sacred locus bearing witness to the hardships of human existence in the construction of ruthless transformation. This chapter examines the complex relationship between the sacred, natural, and cultural realms in his fiction. This chapter considers how the author employed the natural world as a medium to voice his resistance strategy to the rapid growth of urbanization. This chapter explores how Bandyopadhyay purposefully emphasized the environmental thought to coalesce around the importance of conserving forests, wildlife, and flora in an era, particularly when globalization has "given rise to the threat of global warming and mass extinction" (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 7). Works to be considered include some of Bandyopadhyay's most prominent nature narratives, such as *Pather Panchali* (1929), *Aparajito* (1932), *Aranyak* (1932), and *Ichhamati* (1950).

Keywords Ecotopia · Urbanization · Environment · Temporal · Escapist · Resistance

11.1 Introduction

Give us our sylvan past back, and take away the cities of today,
    Take all the material elements of the new civilization!

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O cruel omnipotent one[1]
—Tagore (1961, p. 550).

This excerpt demonstrates how Rabindranath Tagore, enraged by contemporary civilization,[2] expressed his desire for the uncomplicated pleasures of natural objects. Human agencies have changed "the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*" (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007, p. 614; italics original). The Anthropocene epoch has enabled humankind to manipulate the terrestrial resources at will and endanger the survival of all other species. The reckless cutting down of trees, the mass slaughter of animals, the use of radioactive materials, industrial emissions, groundwater depletion, and genetic tampering with seeds have all contributed to the global environmental crisis. The postnatural world of the Anthropocene has "begun to loom on the horizon of our present" (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 36). The abolition of different species in the ecosystem, the melting of the polar iceberg, and the increasing sea levels have furnished various discussions. The only way to counter the devastating consequences of this industrial-scientific dominance is to incorporate embodied awareness of nature. Therefore, the emergence of Mother Nature as a literary discourse offers a sense of the politics of protest against rapid urbanization. It sums up environmental plunder as both an external reality caused by industry and an interior condition caused by alienation of the human psyche (Goodbody, 2014, p. 63).

The conflict between the worldviews of the countryside and the city occupies one of the central points of the debate in modern Bengali literature. Although Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is widely known for his extensive writings about nature and humanity, Biharilal Chakraborty (1835–1894) was the first to start this trend in romantic Bengali poetry. Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay (1894–1950) dedicated his life to active opposition to pro-materialist ideologies, taking a firm position against the destruction of the natural habitat. He had a profound mystical perspective of nature and identified with the vastness and beauty of nature among post-Rabindranath storytellers. As "he was at home with his village surroundings" (Muratipur village), he did not enjoy "the busy and fast city life" (Mukherjee, 1975, p. 32). As he observed the slow midday sun on dried leaves, the long shadow of banyan trees in his garden, and the unending bass wailing, Bandyopadhyay aspired to "surround the reader so that to read them is to have an experience much like suddenly recognizing that one has an environment, instead of not perceiving the surround at all" (Fletcher, 2004, p. 9).

Bandyopadhyay began his professional career as a high school teacher in Sonarpur, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, after graduating from Surendranath

[1] The original Bengali line follows: "*Dao phire se aranya, laho e nagar/ Loho joto louho lostho kastho o prasthar hey nabasabhata! Hey nisthur sarbagrashi*" (Tagore, 1961, p. 550). The translation is mine. Furthermore, Christopher Abram (2019) denotes, "since the catastrophe is […] argued to be a direct product of modernity, in fact — one way of preparing ourselves for a different possible future is to look for examples from many possible pasts" (p. 22).

[2] Bill McKibben (1989) reveals how human beings "make every spot on earth man-made and artificial" (p. 50) through capitalist impulses for the sake of urbanization. Rachel Carson (2002) notes that "pollution is for the most part irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible" (p. 6).

College, University of Calcutta. He soon departed to become the manager of the estate of Khelat Ghosh in Bhagalpur, Northern Bihar. This pristine location inspired his creative endeavours and became a model for “a meaningful place rather than an abstract place” (Bryson, 2005, p. 12). At Khelat Ghosh, he conceptualized the basic tenets of some of his remarkable fiction in the literary canon of West Bengal, such as *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* (1929), *Aparajito: The Unvanquished* (1932), *Aranyak: of the Forest* (1932), and *Ichhamati* (1950). In his literary canon, the non-human elements of nature (mountains, rivers, trees, and the like) have turned into a distinctive strategy of protest. In the fictional world of *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, the remote villagers of West Bengal express their hopes, fears, dreams, and despairs. *Aranyak*, a primitive forest in a remote corner of Bihar invigorates a sense of mystery and exuberant curiosity. In *Ichhamati*, Bandyopadhyay documents the twists and turns of a river to criticize the artificiality of modern urban living. In other words, his nature writing reflects a mutually sustainable connection between humans and nature in contrast to the Anthropocene focus on consumption.

11.2 The Notion of Ecotopian Space

According to Ernst Callenbach, an ecotopian space describes an “egalitarian society” (Mathisen, 2001, p. 59) and “a new order” (McCutcheon, 2015, p. 153) in which interaction with nature is the ultimate focal point. This “fictional, invented location” (Chaudhuri, 2019, p. 19) helps us create an emotional connection to the plants and animals of a place. In *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (1975), Callenbach gives us the impression that for ecotopians, a sense of unity between human beings and ecosystems is essential. His protagonist exemplifies his new identity in his diary after experiencing this sublime site:

This new me is a stranger, an Ecotopian, and his advent fills me with terror, excitement, and strength […] There are a lot more things about Ecotopia that the rest of the world needs badly to know. (Callenbach, 2009, p. 180)

The imaginary site of ecotopia is a strikingly equalitarian topography with intriguing environmentally friendly laws and regulations. It is no longer a prison of concretes but rather a primaeval space where even modern science and technology are also benign and serve humankind. It refers to an ecologically perfect area, a therapeutic refuge offering a compensatory escape from the chaotic urban life to “enjoy a lifetime ‘guarantee’ of minimal levels of food, housing, and medical care” (p. 102). As Weston notes in his diary, “I looked around, suddenly conscious that everyone else had been working very leisurely […] ‘Our point of view is that if something’s worth doing, it ought to be done in a way that’s enjoyable’” (p. 73). Therefore, ecotopia develops an alternative way to protest against human dominance over nature. It beckons a deeper understanding of how the hierarchical authority of America destroys the natural realm for a materialistically comfortable life. As Callenbach (2009) records:

> What matters most is the aspiration to live in balance with nature, to walk lightly on the land, to treat the earth as a mother. It is no surprise that to such a morality most industrial processes, work schedules, and products are suspect. (p. 32)

11.3 The Mapping of the Ecotopian Space in Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Fiction

Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's literary oeuvre is "about the invention and reinvention of nature— perhaps the most central arena of hope, oppression, and contestation for inhabitants of the planet Earth in our times" (Haraway, 1991, p. 1). Bandyopadhyay attacks unbridled economic development by situating his literary characters within the ecotopian space of pictorial villages of Bengal. In his fiction, the allure of this ecotopian space is such that it moulds his characters in ways such as how they pan on the twists and turns of fate while also finding isolated moments of epiphany and stillness. The imaginative capacities of these texts "have made it a vital site for the articulation of the Anthropocene" (Trexler, 2015, p. 23).

For example, in *Pather Panchali*, the ecotopian space "had scattered its riches with a prodigal hand, like a king whose bounty knows no end" (Bandyopadhyay, 1968, p. 64). The protagonist Apu is twice-born physically in the lap of a human mother (Sarbajaya) and imaginatively in the wilderness[3] of nature. The ecotopian site of Nischindipur constructs the formative stage of his mind and initiates him to new immutable truth and beauty. She teaches him to open not only the eye of knowledge but also a joyful and imaginative faculty. The mystery of the moon-blanched woodland profoundly impacted his innocent mind in those early years with illimitable sweetness. However, there is the terror of a vague menace, particularly when Apu and his elder sister Durga hear the roar of thunder, see the flash of lightning, and seem to get lost in the enveloping gloom under the open sky. As Bandyopadhyay (1968) avers:

> The lightning came again, and the eyes of the two helpless children were blinded by a stabbing blue flame which tore aside the smoke screen of the rain which hid the forest, and they stood there trapped in the terrifying pandemonium of Nature gone mad (p. 106).

Unlike Amal in Tagore's *The Post Office*, Apu views the ecotopian space as rising into inequalities and diversified by the varied exuberance of abundant vegetation. The taste of unripe mangoes or ripe custard apples and other fruits has fulfilled to cater to the joyous taste of Apu. Apu wonders how trees provide shade, how there is a struggle for existence for sunshine among the impenetrable dark thickets of wild

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[3] According to Joni Adamson and Salma Monani (2017), the concepts of wilderness have "undergirded the colonial enterprise and have justified the occupation of 'empty' continents" (p. 3). William Cronon (2009) studies how the idea of "wilderness is natural, unfallen, an antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the contributing influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity" (p. 80). Furthermore, Lawrence Buell (1995) shows, "Wherever there is wilderness, wherever there is a living river" (p. 366).

plants, and how the leaves of plants have grown pestilence-stricken multitudes. A strange sensation passes through his frame, and a thrill informs his whole being the moment he picks up a bamboo cane, moves around by the bamboo clump, and mumbles to himself in half-audible and incoherent sounds. In this way, we remain glued to a blessed sylvan ecotopian milieu and become instinctive witnesses to the unconscious growth of an innocent mind in the remote region of West Bengal. As we read:

> When one season went, and another came, the trees, the sky, the wind, and the singing of the birds told him about it. His heart leapt within him to behold the seasons and touch the changing face of the Ichhamati with new beauties (p. 283).

Therefore, Apu has represented a trailblazing foreign counterpart of Callenbach's ecological woman of ecotopia, Marissa Brightcloud. As Callenbach (2009) points out, "She has special trees all over the places, they're really important to her […] she studies their character, revisits them to see how they've grown and changed […] Even talk to them rather mutters" (p. 74).

Aparajito is "a playful fantasy that helped to capture the nostalgic and romantic mood of the country" (Brereton, 2014, p. 122). The grown-up Apu decides to visit the ecotopian space of Nischindipur to keep his son (Kajal) with Ranudi before pursuing success in his professional life. He realizes that he should not imprison a child's mind in the concrete jungle of a megalopolis. Instead, his child should enjoy the ecotopian space of the meadows and the woodlands, the flowing streams, the chirping birds, and the limitless moonlight. Apu lives his childhood again and wonders what bittersweet incense hangs upon the whispering air, what nameless far-away trees are sheltering the river gulls that send forth their honey-sweet strain. This celestial space offers him the melodious voice of a carefree duty along with the blue and boundless aerial view of the autumnal midday sun, receding and still receding to melt in eternity. Therefore, it takes us to remember William Weston's records in Callenbach's novel: "Their sentimentality about nature has led the Ecotopians to bring greenery into their trains, which are full of hanging ferns and small plants I could not identify" (Callenbach, 2009, p. 8).

The slow but steady upbringing of a child's mind through the cool, sequestered vale of this ecotopian space of West Bengal is the theme of Bandyopadhyay's *bildungsroman*. Bandyopadhyay had an exceptional poetic vision and viewed this ecotopian site through a child's vision. The whole world of this mystical space appeals to the child—the shade of the Putus and the existence of blackberries and bamboo clumps beside the cluster of mango and jackfruit trees come alive before us one after another. Kajal's sensitive heart leaps, particularly at the movement he sees how bamboo leans upon the yellow plants at the fort of which the wagtails dance. The stretch of these shrubs, plants, and trees is there as far as he can see, from the far end of the office ground along with the stand to the far end of the other side. Even his father surveyed this ecological site but never reached the end of the woodlands. Apu has only seen the path below trees hanging bunches of edible acid fruits and Menispermum creeper. Furthermore, he can communicate with those

natural objects without impediment, much like in any fairy tale, where the boundary between believing and disbelief seems blurred.

Aranyak spells out the "whole array of cultural and daily life, for what it reveals about implicit attitudes that have environmental consequences" (Kerridge, 1991, p. 530). It voices an indictment against the destruction of a large forest on the banks of the Koshi or Kushi River to accommodate the fast development of unchecked urbanization in the tribal area of Bhagalpur and Purnea, Bihar. The presentation of the ecotopian space in this text can be considered "an important solution to the awkward and dangerous social and economic changes" (Cohen, 2004, p. 53). Bandyopadhyay charts how the young graduate Satyacharan comes to destroy the forest as a contractor and falls in love with this ecotopian site of Lobtulia Boihar. Satyacharan finds his true self by watching how the world of nature has "bestowed her wealth generously on this stretch of land" (Bandyopadhyay, 2002, p. 196). He realizes this secluded site has initiated him "into the mysteries of freedom and liberation" (p. 62). He recognizes the priceless significance of "the wild *jhau* and the jungle of *Kash* […] wild bamboo cane saplings and *gajari* trees" (p. 15; italics mine) and plants numerous rare herbs and crops. In this process, Satyacharan rejects the materialist worldview of the metropolis and follows in the footsteps of Weston. After leaving his formal position as a reputed journalist within the tinsel city of New York, Weston remains to stay in Ecotopia. In his dairy Weston writes, "I've decided not to come back, Max. You'll understand why from the notebook. But thank you for sending me on this assignment, when neither you nor I knew where it might lead. It led me home" (Callenbach, 2009, p. 181).

Satyacharan's urban lifestyle initially opposes the solitude of "wilderness and natural spaces untouched by humans" (Heise, 2008, p. 30). The "ring of barren hills" of the Chota Nagpur plateau makes him marvel at "the splendour of the blood-red palash blossoms" (Bandyopadhyay, 2002, p. 55). He utters, "It was like the deserts of Arizona and Navajo in the south of America that one sees in films" (p. 57). This space captivates him, so he cannot be away from the deep forest *oikos* and its tranquil ambience for extended periods. It expresses "a move towards a more biocentric world-view […] to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment" (Branch et al., 1996, p. xiii). As Satyacharan and the tribal princess Bhanumati roam through the wilderness, he becomes attached to her and desires to live in this ecotopian space forever. Satyacharan has no choice but to destroy this magnificent creation against his will[4] by "ravaging the land and leaving most animals to gaze, still and powerless" (Goul, 2020, p. 111–112). A reality comes to the forefront, "wherever there is money or transactions of cash, loan, and receipts, the air becomes polluted" (Bandyopadhyay, 2002, p. 76). In other words, Satyacharan plays a dual part in constructing the Anthropocene both as a destroyer of the indigenous environment and a preserver of environmental discourse.

[4] Jobb D. Arnold (2018) puts it out, "for people disconnected from the land, intense experiences of land effect cannot be ignored when they directly impinge upon one's bodily senses. In this sense land effect works to innervate physiological pathways of reception; that is, it facilitates the growth of nervelike connectivity between people and the land, transmitting powerful affective energies that can flow through multiple possible trajectories" (p. 98).

The exploitative human activities regard "the world as machine and nature as dead matter" (Shiva, 2016, p. x). As a Bengali ecocritic, Bandyopadhyay describes the role of nature as a solution to environmental crises amid the "continuing presences of colonialism and imperialism" (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 42) in a science-driven society. In *Aranyak*, the unspoiled forest becomes an ecotopian space, "a place of immense practical as well as emotional and spiritual significance" (Singh, 2021, p. xix). As it leads the oppressed to live in harmony in the broader scheme of life, he explains the eviction of Nara-Boihar as a sin in the Preface of the novel. He employs the symbiotic relationship between nature and humans "as a synecdoche for a larger ideal of undisturbed natural harmony that is at best rare, and at worst wholly fictional" (Garrard, 2009, p. 8). Therefore, *Aranyak* reveals Bandyopadhyay's social criticism of colonial modernity and serves as a sombre foreshadowing of environmental justice[5] movements. As Kate Rigby (2017) remarks, the "human socio-cultural and techno-scientific progress would be rendered consistent with the ongoing interactive autopoiesis of the biosphere" (p. 121).

The river is "a source of cultural and ecological revitalization", supporting "distinct and interdependent communities that exist up and down their banks" (McGinnis, 1999, p. 70). As Bandyopadhyay spent his childhood days on the banks of the Ichhamati, it has become a significant character in most of his autobiographical works. For example, when Apu calls on Nischindipur and her many bereaved people at the end of *Pather Panchali*, he wishes to be consoled by the river Ichhamati. As Bandyopadhyay (1968) composes, "Though she [Durga] had been dead for a long time now, he always felt her near him when he was in any of the places where the two of them used to lay together, by the river" (p. 357). Furthermore, he (1999) describes this river as "a thick growth of vegetation covered the slope going up from the river bank, the grass and the undergrowth almost touching the edge of the river" (p. 437).

This river "forms an integral part of one of the most important and ecologically fragile biospheres in the world" (Joshi, 2016, p. xviii). In Bandyopadhyay's concluding novel, *Ichhamati*, the ecotopian space he draws for us is rich with the element of poetic sensibility. It stresses its lovable aspects—serenity, intimacy, and homeliness—particularly in the description of Colesworthy Grantsaheb's travels along the left bank at Panchpota in the gorgeous afternoon or the bathing scene of Nistarini Devi. As Bandyopadhyay (2012) unveils:

> A beautiful afternoon descended by the side of the backwater of Panchpota, and wild flowered scented wind became slightly warm. On the other side of the green field of aush paddy, the mountain of red cloud heaped against the setting sun. A fine feeling of quiet depth flooded his heart. That feeling takes man a long distance […] the India that he had read about in Sakuntala. (p. 15)

The free-flowing nature of this river possesses an ecotopian space in its weaving of mysterious, infinite, far-reaching, vast, and frightening beauty. It creates a sensation in our minds while intertwining our thoughts into otherworldly cosmic existence

[5] Employing a range of regional, ethnic, and disciplinary viewpoints, Adamson, Evans, and Stein (2002) suggest environmental problems from the perspectives of social injustice and oppression, illustrating that justice is a be-all and end-all to all these hazards.

inextricably. It provides an overwhelming experience to Bhabani Banerjee in his musings of solitude. Even the sahib, Mr. Shipton, has forgotten the pain of dying amid the unfathomable gifts of this ecotopian space.

Ichhamati captures the essence of the ecotopian space before urbanization had yet to acquire considerable momentum in rural Bengal. Like the river in Amar Mitra's O. Henry prize-winning short fiction *Dhanapatir Char: Whatever Happened to Pedru's Island?* (2016), this river nourishes the sensitive young mind of the protagonist's life in the same way a mother nurtures her kid. It appears to him to be a metaphor for life's never-ending flow, the way it gives birth to many trees along her banks to shelter various birds. As the narrative records:

> In the uncultivated lands near it grew up Ghentu trees followed by Kakzangha, Kunchkanta and Bonmarich, in bushes bloomed many new flowers; migratory birds sang and chirped. We have seen above the paddy field of Jolly paddy the outstretched wings of cranes flying gracefully beyond the waves of clouds, carrying roots of lotus flowers. (p. 303)

Moreover, this river brings about a playground for innocent minds to come in droves to bathe in her water or becomes a paradigm for fishermen to throw their nets for their livelihoods. Even when the villagers' lives end, the river's rippling waters sweep away their mortal remains. This river, like "a river with its water bubbling blue-black and icy between the rocks" in Callenbach's ecotopia (Callenbach, 2009, p. 9), creates a sense of local friendliness and value.

Throughout Bandyopadhyay's literary canon, the characters' yearning to return to the ecotopian space from modern city space is a recurring theme. For Apu's father (Harihar Ray), the city becomes "a strange place, and there was no one to whom he could turn for help" (Bandyopadhyay, 1968, p. 251). He feels confined within the anti-pastoral settings and the "rationalized irrationality" of urban civilization (Horkheimer, 2013, p. 86). He wishes to spend some time in silence amid green woods and the quietness of chirping wild birds beneath a blue sky. Even he cannot determine how someone can spend nearly their whole life in a filthy and stagnant pool of money and waste their energy worrying about trivial things in a city.

Apu comes into the mechanistic city life of Calcutta with "the task of earning a living in a printing press" (Ray, 1994, p. 99). It becomes "an insular place that alienated him from both nature and humanity" (Robinson, 2011, p. 29). He remembers how his former co-workers spent every day of the year in the same dismal ambience of the city. They hunch over the same cashbook, write entries in identical lefty ledgers, keep account of family expenditures, and hear the same conversation with the same familiar faces. Like Wordsworth's Lucy or Bankim Chandra's Kapala Kundala or Rabindranath's Phatik or Hawthrone's Pearl, Apu wants "to be away from the noise of the city and sitting amidst the thick, long grass by a lake" (Bandyopadhyay, 1999, p. 136). Apu even denounces the steady destruction of the ecotopian space and warns us that "one day nature would take her revenge" (p. 352). His love and yearning for the ecotopian space keep him going despite all the hurdles, mainly when tragedy occurs in the form of his wife's untimely death on the verge of giving birth to their

son. Therefore, the fictional village of Nischindipur[6] gets transformed into a kind of life-place or a "topophilia" (Tuan, 1974, p. 4). It denotes "the affective bond between people and place" (p. 4) and becomes "the means of binding together the past and the present" (Sayre, 2013, p. 106).

Apart from *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, the protagonist has a peculiar sensation of returning to the ecotopian space he left behind amid colourful flowers while his mother's face is etched in his memory in "Bangshalatikar Sandhane". In "Dravamoyir Kashibas", the titular character also returns to her picturesque natural setting after several years of residing in the urban sites of Kashi in search of her desired environment. The story "Puimancha" embodies how, after Khenti's death, the seed she rowed with the sweat of her brow grew into a plant and covered the yard with flowers and honey to attract the bees on the Poushparvan. Even though the titular plant of this short story is a symbol of hopefulness, there is no way to escape Hari's struggles in such a lovely tale. These works sometimes make readers melancholic, filling their hearts with subtle music by depicting human yearning for the ecotopian space in rural Bengal.

11.4 The Tinai Theory and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Literary Canon

The Dravidian idea of the *tinai* is "a kind of indigenous notion of ecology that has very practical aspects to it" (Romero, 2010, p. 77). It outlines the "intimately emotional affiliation of a human being to other living organisms" (Wilson, 2017, p. 249). In other words, it demonstrates the holy nexus of humans, nature, and spirit in the place-based poetry of South Indian Sangam literature. This theory offers a shared *Oikos* of the interior landscape where humans look upon plants and animals as part of their family. According to this model, human identity is not created in isolation but rather the integral relationships with other members of this *Oikos*. As a result, it offers an alternative indigenous discourse from the Global South for engaging in a dialogic space with Western ecocritical place-based models. As Nirmal Selvamony (2012) observes.

> *Tinai* is a nexus in which such entities as biotic and abiotic nature, humans and the sacred are bound to a specific geographical region. Here the relation among the relata could be characterized as a kind of inai, wherein the relata come together in a harmonious state without each relata losing its identity. (p. 23)

Furthermore, Selvamony (2007) rejects the term "environment" in the sense that it "not only puts the human subject it envelops in the centre, but also dichotomizes

[6] Lynch, Glotfelty and Armbruster (2012) embody how the dialectics of "human imagination and stories create bioregions […] that every bioregion is already filled with stories and modes of discourse […] of the values and practices […] that ordinary working people who live in that place embrace" (p. 14) to outline the eco-catastrophic situation of the climate change.

the relation between human and the environment" within the framework of cultural studies (p. xxii).

Bibhutibhusan's fiction reveals the features of *tinai* landscapes: *kurinji* (fostered hills), *marutam* (pastoral space), *mullai* (forest), *neytal* (littoral) and *palai* (desert or arid lands). The poetic connectivity of natural objects and people in *tinai* theory is glaringly evident in how the poignant Apu in *Pather Panchali* spends the whole day alone in the quiet woodland and listens to the murmur of the breeze. Even Kajal in *Aparajito* is fascinated by how the leaves of plants have turned yellow and black and pale and red in the autumnal sunshine of the fictional village of Paschim Midnapore. These two narratives coalesce around how all living things are members of the same community and must treat one another respectfully in the natural order of things. Applying the *tinai* theory of Selvamony, we propose that the titular river in *Ichhamati* or the natural milieu of any Bandyopadhyay's text engages with their *puram* existence as a producer and protector of life in the ecosystem. Furthermore, these natural elements of an ecotopian site have become interspecific agents, "already conscious of the other members of the community (*tinai*) in a value-oriented way" (Selvamony, 2016, p. 137).

Bandyopadhyay's texts can be seen as incorporating the three kinds of *tinai*. The *Integrative tinai* "integrates the sacred, nature, culture and the humans in a complex kinship, even as a family of kith and kin" (Selvamony, 2011, p. 1). It refers to the horizontal and vertical kinship of the sacred, human beings and nature. It is embodied in Bandyopadhyay's depiction of his characters' intimate relationship with the non-human objects of rural India (be it Nischindipur, the indigenous sites of Bihar or the ghats of Ichhamati). This space becomes *Hierarchic tinai* at the time power is only channelled vertically by positioning "the sacred at the top, the humans in the middle and nature at the bottom" (p. 1). The *Anarchic tinai* happens at the movement the primacy of the sacred is called into question with an emphasis on the prevailing hegemonic discourse of capitalist approaches. In *Aranyak*, the *Hierarchic and Anarchic tinai* manifest in the arrival of the urbane Satyacharan and his associates to fulfill their utilitarian values in the deep forest of Purnea. In *Ichhamati*, the businessman Lalmohon Pal underscores the aggressive, imperialist designs of capitalist propaganda after buying Mr Shipton's bungalow on the charming banks of Ichhamati. In other words, Bandyopadhyay's narratives deal metaphorically with how nonhuman others converse with human beings, equating the plights of marginalized people and plants due to the advent of urbanization.

11.5 Conclusion

Bandyopadhyay makes a scathing critique of the covetous culture of authoritarian capitalism for "creating false needs and false consciousness and "locking one-dimensional man into a one-dimensional society" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 8). Donna Haraway's (2015) question is pertinent in this context, "Is there an inflection point

of consequence that changes the name of the 'game' of life on earth for everybody and everything?" (p. 159). Bandyopadhyay pinpoints how the narrative framework provides hope and atonement to the disastrous aftermaths of the environmental plunder, the affected individuals, and the uprooted communities. The notion of mapping the picturesque landscape of the ecotopian space at the backdrop has been one of the long-standing themes in his writing. Bandyopadhyay believes that the constant devaluation of nature and non-human existence[7] takes us to the impending disaster of modern civilization. Therefore, his fictional world advises us to return to the ecotopian space to "connect organisms in an ecotone, to re-green damaged terrain and to nourish the spirit" (Coughlin & Gephart, 2020, p. 5). Like Will Weston, we utter, "The more closely I look at the fabric of Ecotopian life, the more I am forced to admit its strength and its beauty" (Callenbach, 2009, p. 103).

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[7] Deleuze and Guattari (1987) apply their notion of "rhizome" to exemplify the ecological interconnectedness of a non-hierarchical and hierarchical model. It "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills" (p. 21).

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Part IV
Popular Narratives: Myth, Travel, and Music

Chapter 12
Connecting and Creating Narratives: Interrogating Myth, Legends, and the Anthropocene in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Paddaja Roy

Abstract Myths and legends provide a narrative platform for collective dreaming. In the context of the Anthropocene, myths and legends are employed to, 'read the spaces around the protagonist by giving the natural world itself agency and identity and complexity' (Callaghan 2015, 80). Thus, along with providing a narrative framework, the use of myths and legends in storytelling not only aids us in forming a kinship with worlds other than those of humans but also offers a space to explore the idea of identity in the context of eco-precarity and the crises of the present time. This chapter investigates Indian writer Amitav Ghosh's use of myths and legends as narrative structure in *Gun Island*. and how myths and legends are juxtaposed with the spatial and temporal configuration of the novel to facilitate a platform for addressing the concerns of the environment in the precarious era of climate change and Anthropocene. This study relies extensively on Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of decentering the human concerning the planetary and the global, and Pramod K. Nayar's assessment of eco-precarity. Thus, this chapter looks into the myths and legends depicted in the novel to focus on the question of identity in the terrain of a transitioning ecological civilisation taking into account the precarious state of the environment as a result of human interference. Attempting an ecocritical reading of the text, this study contextualises the myths and legends to highlight the narrative structure as well as position the novel in the wider frame of ecocriticism and Anthropocene.

Keywords Anthropocene · Eco-precarity · Myths · Identity · Climate change · Refugee

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12.1 Introduction: Connecting Myths and Legends

"Tell me, children," I would begin, "what do our old myths have in common with geology?" "Goddesses, children," I would announce in triumph. "Don't you see? Goddesses are what they have in common." (Ghosh, 2004, 162).

The *Mangala Kavyas* are the Bengali religious texts which eulogise gods and goddesses such as Chandi, Shiva, and Manasa and tell of the power and magnificence of a particular divinity. Such texts highlight how men prosper by the worship of that divinity and suffer by denying it (Dimock 1962, 307). The sources of the *Brata Kathas* (rhymes and narratives chanted during a religious ceremony), *panchalis* (narratives glorifying a deity), and even myths and legends can be traced from the *Mangala Kavyas*. The *Mangala Kavyas*, however, follow a general narrative pattern- a conflict is created in the beginning and the *kavya* or the story goes on to narrate how the conflict is resolved by dint of sacrifice, patience, and obedience to the divinity/Gods. The mythical story of Manasa and its connection to the legend of Chand Sadagar carries a similar narration. In the story, the conflict arises when Manasa, who wants herself to be worshipped in the world, brings misfortune after misfortune to compel Chand Sadagar to accept her sovereignty. The conflict, however, is resolved by the sacrifice and patience of Behula and the eventual acceptance of Manasa's supremacy and worship by Chand Sadagar. The legend of Bonduki Sadagar and the narrative journey of Dinanath or Deen, as depicted in *Gun Island*, can also be seen as bearing a parallel narrative structure to the myth of Manasa in connection to the legend of Chand Sadagar-

> Like Chand, the Gun Merchant was said to have been a rich trader who had angered Manasa Devi by refusing to become her devotee. Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess's wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents, a place called 'Gun Island' (Ghosh, 2019, 22)

This passage which appears in the initial stage of the novel sets apace the mythical narrative that the protagonist would undertake and at the same time also highlights the devastations brought upon by nature which the novel focuses upon in the context of climate change and the Anthropocene- what is the role of a story in fighting climate change? The novel *Gun Island* invites us to consider approaches and ideas that are crucial and ongoing in the debate of ecocriticism regarding the role which human agents play in disrupting the current ecological imbalance and aggravating the ongoing climate change. This study analyses how Ghosh employs the legend of Bandooki Sadagar or the Gun Merchant and connects it to the myth of Chand Sadagar to provide a narrative structure in *Gun Island*. Myths and legends are employed to build up a narrative platform for broaching the question of the Anthropocene, issues of climate change, and identity by reading the spaces of the natural world (Friedman, 1992). Thus, along with analysing the narrative structure, this chapter highlights how myths and legends are used to explore identity in the terrain of Anthropocene and eco-precarity.

12.2 Precarious Existence and Genres of Derangement

Anthropocene has provided a new perspective to examine and understand the literature about non-human life on the planet. In "The Climate of History: Four Theses" Dipesh Chakrabarty calls for eradicating the distinction between natural and human history and speculates on the stature of human beings as a geological force in the era of Anthropocene where 'humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet' (Chakrabarty, 2021, 209). Even though humans have gained the stature of a geological force that is much larger than that of being a simple biological agent, Pramod Nayar in *Ecoprecarity. Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* talks about the 'precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster… and also about the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene' (Nayar, 2019, 7). Thus, the position in which human beings are poised at the terrain of the Anthropocene is a crucial one. The fact that environmental issues and Anthropocenic concerns have not been adequately addressed in the literature, particularly in the genre of novels, has been one of the major concerns which Ghosh broaches upon in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), where Ghosh entwines stories, history and politics to show the dearth of literary writings dealing with the climate and the Anthropocene, depravement of the ecology and the eurocentrism of climate crisis, and universal derangement where 'humanity has not only declared a war against itself, but is also locked into mortal combat with the earth' (Ghosh, 2016, 110). However, it is in his subsequent book of fiction *Gun Island* (2019) that Ghosh delineates the issues that he takes up in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.*

As Jonathan Bate interposes 'the business of literature' (Bate, 2000, 23) amidst the grim reality of melting glaciers, rising sea levels, etc. he also asserts the role of stories and myths- 'Telling stories is the characteristically human way of humanizing the big questions… Myths are necessary imaginings, exemplary stories which help our species to make sense of its place in the world. Myths endure so long as they perform helpful work' (Bate, 2000, 25–26). However, one can discern a difference in the trends of storytelling amidst nations and cultures, which has poignantly been pinpointed by Marek Oziewicz,

> For centuries we—a white, Western, self-entitled "we" posing as "humanity"—have taken Earth to be, literally, "dirt cheap": a playground for endless human expansion… The stories we have been telling ourselves about human exceptionalism (we're the image of God), human entitlement (we're masters of this planet), and human identity (we're separate from and above "nature") channelled our creativity into projects that transformed the planet—in our eyes—into a purely human domain. This is how we arrived at the Anthropocene… They legitimized but did not prepare us for the reality of a world ruled by a single species. (Oziewicz, 2022, 1)

However, when it comes to Indian storytelling and Indian myths and legends, there has always been recognition along with a sense of reverence for the non-human entities. Books and rituals dedicated to the worship of flora and fauna, non-human entities, etc. have been and are still prevalent to date in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. *Manasamangal Kavya* and the *Padma Purana*, dedicated to the snake-goddess

Manasa, celebrate how Manasa's worship gained manifestation and prevalence by narrating the tale of Chand Sadagar and Behula (Roy Choudhury, 2023). However, in the context of climate change and the Anthropocene, the ritual has also gained another significant meaning- keeping in mind that call attention to—and nurture—the cultural, social, and spiritual significance of riverscapes, and the significance of poiesis in 'formulating hydropoetics as a framework for rethinking the value of rivers, articulating the complexities of human–water relations, and confronting river-related issues in the Anthropocene' (Ryan 2022, 2), it can be surmised that the narrative of Behula-Chand Sadagar and Bandooki Sadagar provides a platform to negotiate terra-centrism by juxtaposing hydropoetics. It can also be perceived that despite the wide prevalence of snake-worship, as well as the worship of several species of flora and fauna, they are being robbed of their natural habitats in the name of development- and this is what Ghosh attempts to propagate by referring to the myth of Chand Sadagar, by retelling the legend of Bandooki Sadagar and by re-tracing the footsteps of the legend by the protagonist thereby delving into the crux of the climate crisis that culminates in the climax of the novel.

One can contend here that the legend of Mansa Devi and both Bandooki Sadagar and/or Chand Sadagar offer a prophetic foreshadowing of our current global ecological crisis of the Anthropocene for both the stories portend the resultants of mistreating nature and the necessity as well as importance of accepting as well as respecting the respective space of the non-human entities.

12.3 Merchants, Migration and Myths: Narration and Negotiation

In *Gun Island,* Ghosh talking about the relationship of humans with other life forms can be seen to adhere to what Nayar categorises as one of the numerous constituents of the discourse of eco-precarity, that is, the 'species death, with a concomitant attention to the 'wasting' of other life forms at the altar of human development and modernity' (Nayar 2019, 8). In this context Nayar also talks about another of the constituents of the ecoprecarity discourse, that is, cultural entropy that begins as ghettoes and new social hierarchies (Nayar 2019, 9) and this can also be seen encompassing the idea of both human and animal migration in *Gun Island*. However, the idea of journey and migration in *Gun Island* can be previewed as bearing parallels to the story and journey of Bonduki Sadagar, and it is in this web of narrating myths and legends that Ghosh juxtaposes the question of identity in a precarious Anthropocenic narrative.

Gun Island chronicles journeys, voyages and migrations- both mythical as well as historical, of both humans and non-human agencies, traversing through time past and present. The novel opens with the protagonist Dinanath, an antiquarian and a collector of books, ruminating over how his life gets entwined in a strange journey- the quest of tracing the footprints of the Bonduki Sadagar, and throughout the novel, Dinanath, in first person narration, informs the readers of the sights and events that marvelled his

experience and the people and characters who happened to become an integral part in his journey. Upon learning about the legend of the Gun Merchant from a distant relative, Dinanath Dutta or Deen goes to meet his aunt, Nilima and that is where he makes the acquaintance of not only the story of the Bandooki Sadagar or the Gun Merchant but also of Priya Roy, a marine biologist, who provides plenty of insight to the aquatic world. The legend of the Gun Merchant that Nilima narrates Dinanath is more than a mere story narrating how a merchant being chased by a supernatural force gains the protection of that deity upon accepting her supremacy. There is much more to the story- the story of the Gun merchant that Nilima narrates can also be seen as a conflux of various social issues- Cyclone Relief Accounts of 1970, the role of the disaster in aggravating the war of independence of Bangladesh, the destruction of human life and nature, the loss of tradition, the issue of refugees, smugglers, etc., thus the story becomes a heavy critique of the world of man and nature- and Dinanath by retracing the footsteps and undertaking a slightly similar journey as depicted in the legend, goes on to exhibit the same issues in his narration. Following that, Dinanath's conversation with Cinta, the Venetian scholar, further intensifies his interest and therefore, triggered by Cinta, Nilima and Priya's words, Dinanath visits the shrine of Manasa Devi built by the Gun Merchant in the Sunderbans where he encounters Tipu, and Rafi, and a giant black cobra, and from then onwards follows a narrative in and out of dreams and reality, unreal and real, past and present, man and nature. Ghosh has fused his narrative with several prophecies and innuendos of the unknown- when the black king cobra was about to attack Dinanath, Tipu in an attempt to save Dinanath, was bitten by the snake instead- what followed are delirious words and prophesies, instances of inexplicable beaching of dolphins, and one can trace the beginnings of the relationship between Rafi and Tipu that would intensify in the course of the novel. Even after Dinanath goes back to Brooklyn, uncanny events like wildfires, snakes and spiders, and prophesies, follow him around. Through Cinta, Dinanath makes the acquaintance of Gisa which leads him to Venice. In Venice, the main action unfolds and Dinanath is reunited with Rafi, and Rafi along with Lubna and Bilal provides a first-hand account of the problems of refugees and migration. It is interesting to note how Ghosh has dealt with both human and animal migration quite simultaneously showing how Anthropocene is posing a threat to both the human as well as non-human world. Upon learning that Tipu is on the refugee ship, Dinanath along with the other characters embark on a journey together where a spectacle of the bioluminescent storm of living beings or *bhutas* (286) and the narrative culminates into fulfilment and answers.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh knits the legend of the Gun merchant or the Bonduki Sadagar, whose story bears serious resemblance to that of the mythical story of Chand Sadagar- both the *Sadagars* or merchants bring upon themselves the wrath of the goddess Manasa by refusing to bow down and worship the Goddess, and both of them flee to other places in a futile attempt to escape her wrath. In this context, it can be stated that the legend of Bonduki Sadagar has been weaved keeping parallels to the mythical story of Chand Sadagar to provide a context of temporal substantiality- it is difficult to place the story of Chand Sadagar under a specific date, but the legend of the Gun Merchant has been connected to a dhaam or shrine, the records of which

have been found by Dinanath in the 'Cyclone Relief Accounts, 1970'- "… 'Bonduki Sadagarer dhaam'—'the Gun Merchant's shrine'. Below was the date 'November 20, 1970″ (18). But in this context, Ghosh tries to formulate another parallel that runs throughout the novel and that is the characterisation of Dinanath Datta, the male protagonist as well as the narrator of *Gun Island*. Throughout the novel, Ghosh bestows Dinanath with traits of both the Merchants- Dinanath is as recalcitrant as Chand or Bandooki Sadagar, "– but I am not religious and don't believe in the supernatural. I will not … go along with a whole lot of superstitious mumbo-jumbo" (41), and in his attempts to trace the history by treading on the footprints of the Gun Merchant, he, apparently unwillingly, becomes a part of the story that he tries to unravel. Much like the two merchants, he too is chased by snakes and spiders and encounters inexplicable natural vis-a-vis supernatural occurrences, which in turn aggravates the Anthropocenic discourse which Ghosh tries to formulate with parallel narratives of Chand and Bonduki Sadagar.

12.4 Approaching Anthropocene

While popular opinion viewed natural disasters as signs of pleasure and displeasure of gods, ancient civilisations of India and the Indian subcontinent regarded all geological phenomena as evidence of divine power and several scholars have substantiated geology with ancient religious texts (Seal 1958, Chandrasekhram, 2007). The fact that geological processes, be it a major tectonic event or coral reef formation or coastal submergence, are deemed as manifestations of Gods (Chandrasekhram, 2007) provides a new way of perceiving the non-human world. Myths are formed when wilderness and urbanisation, non-humans and humans interact. And in the process, the human agency is decentered and deconstructed. The setting of the novel moves between wilderness and human/urban spaces. The shrine of the Gun Merchant which is said to be protected by Manasa devi is situated amid the forests of Sunderban, teeming with snakes and animals, and Deen and other characters are constantly travelling from one place to another. Here, one can see that Ghosh places his novel in two spatial contexts- the wilderness and the human habitats. The wilderness, like the forests of Sunderban, aggravates the precarity that pervades the entire novel-

> The return of the wild—if it ever went away—in the social imaginary of contemporary literary-cultural texts may be read as an instantiation of the shrinking globe: the distant is no longer that distant. But it may also be read slightly differently. *The wilderness represents an irreversible, more or less global, state of precarious, disappearing Nature* … The wildlife … becomes a response to global species eco-precarity, a visual museum of disappearing lifeforms, even as it emphasizes the precariousness of all lifeforms. (Nayar 2019, 96) (author's italics).

The forest fires, the mass suicide of dolphins, wildfire, tornadoes, hailstorms, snakes and spiders travelling far from their habitats, shipworms eating up an urban space- all these instances point to the re-emergence of the Little Ice Age when everything was in disorder and this sense of precarity surrounding such instances is

pervading throughout the novel- "It's as though the Little Ice Age is rising from its grave and reaching out to us" (Ghosh, 2019, 131–132). All these incidents further lead to the culmination of the great miracle of the supernatural vision in the Adriatic Sea. This further intensifies and fuses the dichotomy of the known and the unknown, beneficent and maleficent, Man and Nature- the human and the non-human or the natural world. The world of Deen, Priya, Rafi, Tipu, and Cinthia becomes the human world which struggles to cope with and understand the natural world, the non-human or natural world, that of the flora and fauna, of snakes, spiders, dolphins, shipworm, Manasa, Madonna, and Ghosh attempts to show a fusion of both the worlds in the miracle that occurs in the Adriatic Sea. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh elucidates the use of non-human agency to provide momentum and create resolutions which progress the narration (Ghosh, 2016, 67) so much so in *Gun Island*, where the non-human or natural world becomes fundamental to evolve the narration and juxtapose Anthropocene. Bandooki Sadagar's shrine was set up in the middle of the forest teeming with snakes but it also happens to be near the routes and centres of trade and business. At the same time, forests also become the site for the unknown where the narrator, Dinanath, encounters the uncanny time and again, "It was as though I were in a forest and the whispering voices of a certain stream, or a kind of tree, were reaching out towards me, not to draw me into the spirit of the place, but rather into its living flesh" (222). Again, Manasa Devi and Madonna become the deus ex machina, and their intervention is necessary for the fusion of the two worlds that eventually culminate in the final chapter of the novel in the form of the great miracle.

One can make the assertion here that Ghosh correlates Nature with Manasa Devi in more than one way. In *Gun Island*, Nature is depicted as something beneficent and maleficent at the same time, and even Manasa Devi is represented in the same light- the Goddess has been shown as a protector of flora and fauna and also of humans; the shrine built in the Sundarbans sheltered people from the devastating cyclone- "no one from that hamlet had suffered any bodily harm; they had even managed to salvage their belongings and stocks of food from the storm … it had continued to shelter them afterwards, even providing them with clean, fresh water from its well—a rare amenity in the Sundarbans" (20). It is also a popular belief that the worship of Manasa devi fetches fortune, and it is also propounded in myths and legends. However, at the same time, Manasa is also seen to be associated with all the unnatural happenings and the devastations that befall not only Bonduki Sadagar and Chand Sadagar but also Deen himself when he is haunted by visions of snakes and spiders throughout the novel. Again, it is interesting to observe how the natural calamities have been linked to the Goddess's wrath upon man- "Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess's wrath" (22); calamities synonymously termed as Nature's wrath or Natural calamities substantiate the assertion that Ghosh has tried to symbolise Nature in the character of Manasa Devi. Reading the legend of the Bonduki Sardar and the myth of Chand Sadagar in the lines of Anthropocenic discourse, one can make the hypothesis that both Bonduki Sadagar and Chand Sadagar can symbolically be associated with capitalism, trade and harbingers of modernity-induced-pollution. The idea of angering Manasa and shouldering her wrath signifies the wrath of Nature that befell upon them for the

human activities of increasing modernization and urbanization, which has destroyed forest covers and grasslands, and even the aquatic habitats have been polluted to the core, thereby destroying habitats of wildlife and various aquatic species. Urbanisation ushered in pollution, which consequently led to climate change and in turn impacted the natural world resulting in inexplicable yet strange occurrences. The migration of animals is one such similar instance, and in the novel, both human and animal migration can be situated in the quest for survival. Bonduki Sadagar had escaped to an island where there were no snakes and had kept himself confined inside an iron walled room, but still he could not escape Nature, so much so as Deen who similarly flees from the shrine after being attacked by the snake and goes to a place where he feels he would be safe from snakes. Deen and Priya, like the migratory birds, come to India to survive the cold, but after the encounter at the temple of Manasa devi, Deen begins running away from as well as disparaging the supernatural; the supernatural, however, continues chasing him in the same manner as Manasa devi chased after Bonduki Sadagar. Deen almost resembles a refugee, much like Ali, running away from the forces of nature, in search of a new identity. At the same time, Deen while trying to walk on the footprints of the Bonduki Sadagar almost merges the past and the present, Deen constantly keeps mentioning how the Gun merchant entered his life time and again, so much so that at one point he even had visions of the Gun merchant- ‘suddenly the Gun Merchant seemed to appear before my eyes, tall, broad-shouldered, with a yellow turban, walking unhurriedly past on some errand’ (157), and even their personality began to show similar traits. It was the character of the Gun Merchant that brought so many characters together and facilitated the advancement of the plot, in the words of John J. White ‘A myth introduced by a modern novelist into his work can prefigure and hence anticipate the plot in several ways.’ (White, 1971, 11). Moreover, it was the Gun Merchant whose identity Deen unconsciously portrayed in his feeble attempts at time-travelling which leads Deen to go through a spiritual change, just like the Gun Merchant did when he accepted the sovereignty of Manasa Devi- ‘feeling of gratitude—towards the Gun Merchant, to his story, to Manasa Devi, and even to that king cobra: it was as if they had broken a spell of bewitchment and set me free’ (275).

Chand Sadagar and Bonduki Sadagar being traders and merchants, it became imperative for them to travel, but it was the non-human agency, the wrath of Mansa, that made them flee from one place to another, and that also became a sort of migration. One can also assert that Chand Sadagar might be one of those initial traders who were responsible for ‘modernisation’, the prevalent idea of modernization implies cutting trees and salvaging the flora and fauna to shelter the comfort of human settlement where the idea of ‘coinhabiting with nature’ is still regarded as ‘primitive’. The novel decenters and decolonises human agency by highlighting the precarious living conditions and drawing parallels between Chand Sadagar and Bonduki Sadagar and the popular prevalent idea of colonial modernity and development. It is to be mentioned here that decoloniality does not necessarily imply rejecting the best of Western science and modernity *through court* but it seeks to show how particular knowledge and epistemologies are devalued, decentred and reduced as being ‘traditional, barbarian, primitive, mystic’ (Schulz 2017, Mignolo, 2011: 46).

Ghosh himself provides the base of this hypothesis when he says, 'And since Bengal is a maritime land, seafaring is often a prominent feature of such tales' (Ghosh 11). The legend goes to portray that Manasa Devi was wrathful towards Chand Sadagar for the latter was disrespectful towards her. But one can form the hypothesis that the main cause of Manasa's wrath was caused by the possible destruction of the forest lands and the subsequent salvaging of the lives of the fauna, including snakes, which made Manasa, the goddess of snakes vengeful towards Chand Sadagar. The Mahabharata (Kaashidashi, 2011; Pattanaik, 2010) also has a similar instance where Arjuna and Krishna perpetrated to burn down the Khandava forest and set up the kingdom of Indraprastha, and while doing so, they fought and defeated all gods, Gandharvas and demons, including even the birds and animals of the forest, and in turn earned the wrath of Takshaka, a serpent who later takes his revenge for the salvaged destruction. Thus, the forest again becomes a scene of human and non-human interaction. Ghosh also links it to the swamps of Sunderban, further connecting places like Calcutta and Venice, the hubs of trade, in what can be seen as an attempt to link the sphere of interaction between humans and nature, as Ghosh points out "The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that's exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought" (14).

In a similar line of the assessment, one can also hypothesise that Chand Sadagar and Bonduki Sadagar were refugees fleeing from the wrath of Nature, - "The most famous of these stories is the legend of a merchant called Chand—'Chand Sadagar'—who is said to have fled overseas to escape the persecution of Manasa Devi, the goddess who rules over snakes and all other poisonous creatures." (12). Ghosh too juxtaposes two worlds, the world of humans and the world of Nature, constantly crossing ways and clashing. The dichotomies construct the narrative of the novel, "The story's appeal is… with a resourceful human protagonist being pitted against vastly more powerful forces, earthly and divine" (12), the former being the human world of Deen, Priya, Rafi, and even the Bonduki Sadagar and the latter being spiders and snakes, Nature, Manasa or Madonna. Ghosh also constantly travels between the past and the present, two temporal worlds again crossing paths and clashing with each other. It is almost as if the past is latent in the present, and a hint towards the future is almost imminent. Ghosh, through Deen, brings out the temporality of the past, he supports it with the example of how the myth of Chand Sadagar reappears now and then and is never forgotten but lives in the popular memory of the populace and is connected to the spatial context. Thus, there is another dichotomy of the myth and reality, where at a point, the myth and the reality, like the other aforementioned dichotomies, almost seem to merge. Juxtaposing the dichotomies is another of Ghosh's attempts to expound the narrative structure of *Gun Island*.

In *Gun Island,* Ghosh probes into his fascination with the 'uncanny' as a trait of the world of Nature. 'Uncanny' as a phenomenon has been linked here with precarity in a manner of bringing 'into even sharper focus the uncanny performances of these faceless bodies' (Rudge 2017). Although the realm of 'uncanny' has mostly been aggravated by the non-human entities of the natural world, Ghosh has also seeped the phenomenon in urban spaces to reflect myriad experiences- 'there is such a

'thing', a phenomenon at least repeatable and available to experience by different people at different times, and which in turn can be subdivided, identified according to the principle of genus and species, and part of which can be named therefore 'urban uncanny" (Wolfreys, 2008). The urban uncanny coupled with the non-human interference pertains to the discourses of ecoprecarity running through the novel. Even in his succeeding novel, *The Nutmeg's Curse* one finds Ghosh enquiring into the 'uncanny' where the uncanny becomes the connecting anecdote of the human and non-human agencies, "The mystery of Selamon's lamp probably wouldn't have taken hold of my mind to the extent that it did, if it were not for an uncanny intersection between human and nonhuman forms of agency" (Ghosh, 2021, 23). This mystery is aggravated further in the book. The uncanny sense of a non-human presence is prevalent throughout *Gun Island*; throughout the novel, Dinanath feels the presence of a mysterious force-

> I had an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream … I was being dreamed by creatures whose very existence was fantastical to me—spiders, cobras, sea snakes—and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other's dreams (Ghosh 212–213)

Even characters other than Dinanath could feel an inexplicable presence, Cinta could feel that 'some unknown force has given you (Dinanath) a great gift' (Ghosh 222); Cinta could also feel Lucia's presence, Tipu could hear voices, feel a presence or see a place in his seizures/visions (Ghosh 241), and even Gisa could feel Lucia's presence. However, such non-human presence goes beyond the purpose of providing a sense of uncanny and it is this quest for uncanny that takes his narrative forward and the narrative in turn becomes a platter where Ghosh serves his concerns and raises the burning issues of the contemporary world. Ghosh almost echoes Dinanath when he says in his book, *The Nutmeg's Curse,*

> I looked over my shoulder, but there was nobody there. Yet I had an uncanny sense that someone, or something, was in the room with me—a presence that was a shadow of something human and yet nonhuman. I left the house with a feeling of being haunted—not only by my encounter with that presence but also by a dim recollection of a book, a novel set in an old colonial house like the one I had just stepped out of. (Ghosh 260–261)

Deen also is haunted by the recollection of a tale and the inexplicable appearance of snakes and spiders, while aggravating the narrative, and highlighting the focus on the precarity of the living beings. Like in many other novels of Ghosh, in *Gun Island*, too Ghosh can be seen to be primarily concerned with issues of ecoprecarity. While in *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh talks about the precariousness of the sites of places like Mumbai and New York in connection to their proximity to deep water harbours, in *Gun Island*, Ghosh voices his concerns over the precariousness of the swamps of the Sunderbans- "The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they're disappearing before our eyes" (24) and the city of Venice- "They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city" (235). The eco-precariousness is aimed not only towards living beings but is extended towards the living space for the reason that living spaces such as the cities and other urban and rural centres have become so susceptible to hazards

of the Anthropocene that even the slight intimation of precariousness is enough to pose a huge threat of massive destruction of human survival. The ecoprecarity of the living spaces is proliferated by the sense of uncanny where the uncanny of the natural world enters into the architectural structures as well. The shrine of the Gun merchant being swept off by a storm, the shipworms eating up the rotten wood, the tale of the monster living in the waters of Venice, etc. add up what Nayar refers to as the architectural uncanny, 'the architectural uncanny is the effect of a shift between the certainty of a recognizable cityscape/landscape and the ambiguity of its unrecognizable inhabitants, secret spaces and crypts' (Nayar 71). The precarious lives of the bees in The Nutmeg's Curse are given a sense of ambiguity by the "*xapiri*" of the bees, who recounts in a dream vision how the bees were mistreated and so they could no longer make honey and were in danger of perishing (Ghosh 219). Thus, the narrative of the novel, while borrowing the narrative structure from the legends and myths also tries to pitch in a sense of the uncanny of the non-human world to broach upon the collective speculation of the pervading ecoprecarity in the Anthropocene.

12.5 Conclusion: Storytelling in the Anthropocene

Stories and literature have always provided narratives to not only reflect upon experiences and sentiments in myriad ways but also to broach upon burning issues of society, propagate crucial lessons and serve as a talisman for the present as well as the subsequent generations (Chakrabarty, 2016; von Mossner, 2016). There is a reason why matriarchs narrate stories to the young minds- stories and legends such as that of Manasa devi not only teach obedience but also show how to respect Mother Earth and all her creations thereby taking recognition of space and identity-

> Storytelling is ubiquitous to our species however the details of 'what' and 'how' a story are unique cultural patterns. Thinking ecologically we can associate the narrative with a long history of repeated cultural patterns and then distinguish mythology as our species tool for pattern recognition. To make an analogy: narrative is the content and mythology is the vessel (Nelson, 2013, 76)

In an era so precarious, a serious approach to the issues of climate change and the Anthropocene has been rendered imperative, and employing storytelling has been seen as an effective strategy-

> … the questions of justice that follow from climate-change science require us to possess an ability that only the humanities can foster: the ability to see something from another person's point of view. The ability, in other words, "to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person" (Chakrabarty, 2021, 378)

Gun Island sees an amalgamation of storytelling and myths and legends weaved in the narrative tapestry of fiction and the myth with the associated legends duly serve the purpose of negotiating the Anthropogenic. Thus, delineating the importance of storytelling, it can also be seen how myths can be ushered in to strategise a narrative pattern- "A myth may grip us by its imagery, and may indeed have portrayed some

natural phenomenon or process at a time when mankind had not learned to probe nature's secrets or to discover the endless properties of matter" (Kosambi, 2005, 156).

Gun Island ostentatiously performs what Ghosh preaches in *The Great Derangement*- 'storms, floods and unusual weather events do recur in my books, and this may well be a legacy of the tornado. Yet, oddly enough, no tornado has ever figured in my novels' (Ghosh 21) and in the succeeding novel, *Gun Island*, we find ample instances of the improbable, the unknown, and the uncanny which Ghosh collates with myths and legends, with the narrative and the narrator oscillating between the past and present. The myth of Manasa Devi in connection to Bonduki Sadagar and Chand Sadagar is used to provide a narrative parallel to the anthropogenic discourse which Ghosh embarks upon with the juxtaposition of the "known" and the "unknown", the "beneficent" and "maleficent" where Manasa Devi, the Hindu goddess of snakes, can be seen to represent the world of Nature, and Dinanath as a prototype of the Gun Merchant blurring the identities at times where the mythical and legendary tales and characters significantly change and alter not only the course of the novel but the development of other characters as well. Even though *Gun Island* focuses heavily on Anthropocene and climate change, myth and reality and occasionally blurs the lines between the two, the novel gains significant cultural stratification in the depiction of the issues of migration, of not only the humans but also of the animal world, thereby giving space to the agencies of nature who occupy significant yet obscure strata. Although this study focuses mainly on the use of myth and legends as a narrative method to elucidate the Anthropocene and precarity, it also opens up vistas of studying the representation of climate change in the backdrop of an eco-political discourse and invites ideas to dwell upon the representation of spaces, urban and wild, to pose a challenge against the prevalent idea of modernity- "It is not that we have not known of catastrophes in the geological history of the planet. We have, but the knowledge did not affect our quotidian sense of an innate assurance that the Earth provides a stable ground on which we project our political purposes" (Chakrabarty, 2018, 31). *Gun Island* thus becomes the site of Anthropocenic discourse, showing a power play between man and nature, where the role of man is significantly vested as the principal determinant' of the environment and thereby the planet.

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Chapter 13
Amitav Ghosh's Storyworlds for Environmental Dwelling: Multimodal Iterations and Performativity in/of *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban*

Ashwarya Samkaria

Abstract Amitav Ghosh's verse adaptation *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021) retells an environmentally conscious parable from the widely popular folk legend of Bon Bibi, the guardian spirit of the Sundarbans forest. Ghosh weaves a multimodal reiteration through his eco-poetic narration of a story written in verse for collective recitation, illuminated—not illustrated—by the painter Salman Toor, and adapted into a raag-based audio narration by the musician Ali Sethi. A collaborative spirit commingling text, image, rhythmicality, tactility, and, now, sound, Ghosh's text is not only thematically environmental. The immersive experience of engaging with such a text and its ecological impetus also posits an environmental ethic premised upon relationality. *Jungle Nama*'s intervention in humanity's interactions with the environment does not advocate environmental engagement based on the disembodied intellect in the reading of/for the world-as-planet. Instead, the text promulgates involved interaction through embodied cognition. Studying the performativity of *Jungle Nama* through eco-narratology and embodied multimodal iterations helps reveal the Bon Bibi myth's ecocritical storyworld, its non-Western ontologies, and the agentic capacity of nonhumans. The chapter concludes with an analysis of *Jungle Nama*'s epistemological relevance as a literary intervention shaping a sustainable and equitable environmental consciousness in India.

Keywords Storyworld · Eco-narratology · Performativity · Ecological consciousness · Environmental humanities · Amitav ghosh · Storytelling · Planetary · Embodiment · Bon bibi

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13.1 Introduction

Actively writing about the historical and geopolitical roots of climate change through nonfictional writings,[1] Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956)[2] has emerged as an important voice in the discourse of climate change in India. Taking sustainable environmental thinking and practice to the realm of fictional writing, his literary text, a verse adaptation titled *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban*[3] (2021), retells an environmentally conscious parable from the widely popular folk legend of Bon Bibi, the guardian spirit of the Sundarban forest and the patron deity "venerated by those who work in the forest as honey, crab or wood collectors" (Jalais, 2010, 128). The myth finds its roots in the forested region and human settlement area called the Sundarbans.[4] It continues to circulate in the sociocultural memory of the dwellers of the Sundarbans as it is re-iterated through performance (oral transmission, jatra performances, textual and visual archives)[5] and also as a ritualized oral tradition recited by the dwellers before entering the forest.[6] Addressing the reality of a planetary crisis exacerbated by

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[1] His most recent work The *Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) shows how a colonial extractionist mindset is deeply entangled with the modern environmental crisis and with today's social inequalities. His earlier work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), initially delivered at The University of Chicago as a lecture series in 2015 looked at climate change through literature, politics, and history (https://voices.uchicago.edu/berlinfamilylectures/past-lecturers/amitav-ghosh/).

[2] Born in Calcutta, Amitav Ghosh grew up in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Recipient of the Jnanpith Award, Ghosh has written numerous books and essays. Today, he is an influential voice on the climate change discourse. For more, see https://www.amitavghosh.com/index.html

[3] Throughout this paper, I write the title as 'Jungle Nama' (retaining the alphabet 'n' in lowercase) as published on the book's cover. I do this to further emphasize the jungle as an eponymous character *of* which the text is a narration.

[4] Spanning over 10,000 sq. km, an archipelago of islands and the world's largest mangrove forest between territorial lands of West Bengal in India and the southern end of Bangladesh, Sundarbans is a coastal deltic region with a population of 4.5 million people facing imminent danger due to climate change in the form of rising sea levels, cyclones, disappearing mangrove forests, erratic rainfall. For more, see *Climate Change Adaptation and Social Resilience in the Sundarbans* (2019) edited by O'Donnell, Anna, and Quentin Wodon; *Coping with Climate Change in the Sundarbans: Lessons from Multidisciplinary Studies* (2020) by Sushmita Dasgupta, et.al.

[5] *Bon Bibi Johuranama* ('The Narrative of Bon Bibi's Glory'), epic poems in Bengali exist as two print versions composed towards the end of the nineteenth century by Munshi Mohammad Khati and Abdur Rahim Sahib. Bon Bibi's folkloric myth has circulated in the public domain in the form of oral and drama-based performances and through painted scrolls. Initially, performers were local foresters but soon contemporary Jatra performers popularized the legend of Bonbibi for tourism. For more, see Bonbibi-r-Palagaan- https://www.sahapedia.org/bonbibi-r-palagaan-tradition-history-and-performance.

[6] Bon Bibi's worship does not require a priest but a person who can read the *Bonbibi Johuranamah* (a booklet that recounts her story followed by that of Dukhe, the woodcutter). Jalais mentions in her anthropological text that .

[t]he person who has made the vow to Bonbibi… needs to do the worship herself and the requirements are that she should start and end the reading of the booklet with other people reading the middle. During the usual three to four hours it takes to read the entire pamphlet, any person walking down a pathway with some knowledge of how to read is solicited by those sitting around

anthropogenic activities,[7] Ghosh re-tells, through the boundary-blurring practices of fictional imagination, the ecological basis of the Bon Bibi myth in a new medium to reiterate the message of "preserving a balance between the needs of humans and those of other beings… [and the espousal of such] essential values for this era of planetary crisis" (Ghosh, 2021, 77). His text weaves a multimodal retelling through his eco-poetic narration of the story written in verse for (collective) recitation with images sketched by the artist Salman Toor and adapted into a raag-based audio narration by the music artist, Ali Sethi.[8]

Ghosh's recitation focuses on the Bon Bibi myth's dramatic core, which imparts a lesson in limiting greed, practising restraint, and performing sustainable dwelling with humans and nonhumans. The work narrates the tale of how the redeemers, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli (her brother), hold the usurper Dokkhin Rai (Brahmin sage inhabiting the tiger's body) and the greedy Dhona (trader merchant) responsible for harassing the socially marginalised Dukhey (poor forest dweller) and for indulging in vicious exploitation and abusive possessiveness of natural resources for his own consumption. Allegorically, the story cautions against overconsumption, exploitative practices, and uneven development, reprimanding those who cause ecological exploitation. It sheds light on honouring the natural world's agentic capacity and on the need to respect marginalized and de-subjectified nonhuman and human entities. The legend of Bon Bibi has been shaped by syncretic roots as she is worshipped by all religious communities living in the Sundarbans region, regardless of their different and conflicting social and religious identities.[9] Re-perfusing the myth's textual literary representation with Bon Bibi's syncretism, Ghosh's ecopoetic narrative reflects a collaborative spirit commingling text, image, speech, rhythmicality, tactility (of the physical book), and, now, sound.[10] In focusing on the myth's ecological narrative, Ghosh states in the afterword that his narration is "yet another re-telling of a story that already exists in many iterations" (2021, 76) and is not intended to be a definitive version of the popular narrative circulating in the public discourse. Why does Ghosh return to this legend? The story's recurrence is threefold. Firstly, Ghosh has chosen a popular folkloric myth that is already in active circulation in the Sundarbans region. Secondly, this myth played a crucial role in his earlier novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Thirdly, this text describes itself as a story that is 'retold' by Ghosh. Taking a cue from his afterword, the pertinent question that arises is

the Bonbibi shrines to relieve the reader by reading a few pages… This makes it possible for anyone to occupy the position of mediator between divine power and humans. (51)

[7] Though anthropogenic activities as solely producing climate disaster are also held as a debatable point of view, see the introductory part of Dipesh Chakraborty's essay 'The Climate of History: Four Theses'.

[8] Rigorously trained in Hindustani classical music and well-versed in numerous Western contemporary music genres.

[9] See, Chanda, Ipshita (2015). Bonobibir Johuranama: A Method for Reading Plural Cultures. *The Delhi University Journal of the Humanities & the Social Sciences, Vol. 2.* pp. 51–62.

[10] A 1 h 21 min audiobook version of *Jungle Nama* narrated and performed by the US-Pakistan-born artist Ali Sethi was released in September 2021 on the audio platform 'Audible'. (https://www.audible.in/pd/Jungle-Nama-Audiobook/B09F56ZD78).

what epistemological insight does *Jungle Nama,* as a retelling of the popular cultural myth, provide, and what new knowledge can such an intervention furnish vis-a-vis environmental consciousness?

My chapter argues that Ghosh's return to reading an eco-myth by involving the reader's multiple sense perceptions to actively engage with an environmental tale is not a mere retelling but an act of performative writing that addresses current environmental catastrophes. Ghosh's iteration repurposes a myth by taking into account the ecological myth's "[p]erformativity [which] recognizes that language performs, that conventions of discourse constitute the social environments within which performances occur" (Bealer, 2012, 11). Though *Jungle Nama* is a verse adaptation of a myth that has been orally transmitted as a ritualized act and as performance proper, my chapter examines the performativity[11] *in* the literary text and *of* the literary text. By studying how readers are textually engaged in reading this environmental tale, my chapter analyzes such an interaction's environmental impetus. What do the multiple modes of iterations/utterances deployed by Ghosh as semiotic pathways through the logos, image, and sound *do* to the ecological narrative? Cognitive narratology posits how the act of reading narratives is a subjective exercise that depends on the reader's context. Rendition of stories (here, eco-fiction) holds within their contours the possibility of boundary-blurring practices that can perform the "process of imaginative transportation [which] promises to help us understand the environment from the perspective of others, and thus experience the world according to alternative environmental imaginations" (James, 2015, 2). Ghosh in an interview with *Emergence Magazine* states that "[w]isdom exists in the context of stories, in the context of storytelling, in the context of songs. And all of that is what we've lost and what we have to try and bring back"[12] (2021).

Thus, my chapter investigates *Jungle Nama*'s environmental impetus through the tropes of narrativity and embodiment. Ecocritic Erin James[13] through her concept of eco-narratology (the intersection of ecocriticism and narratology) extends narratologist David Herman's[14] concept of the 'story world' to study how narratives create access to and represent the natural world and how the mode of storytelling opens itself up to broader environmental discourses. Secondly, while the text by a disembodied representation does not qualify as performance proper, its embodied entanglements mediated through multimodal iterations by way of image, text, rhythmicality, (and

[11] For more on performativity, see James Loxley's *Performativity* (2007).

[12] Though the interview was on his latest nonfiction *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), the overarching concern is with storytelling that shifts the perspective from human narratives to recenter narratives of the land and the nonhuman. For more, listen/ see https://emergencemagazine.org/interview/beings-seen-and-unseen/

[13] Associate Professor of English at the University of Idaho. Her primary areas of concern are ecocriticism, narrative theory, postcolonial theory, and comparative literature.

[14] Professor David Herman's primary areas of interest are Narratology, Storytelling, Human-Animal Studies, Cultural History, and Philosophy and Literature. He co-founded the Narrative Project at Ohio State University.

sound) create different pathways recognizing the indispensability of embodied experience for engaging with the environment and thus, in the reading of the world-as-planet. Though the fulcrum of *Jungle Nama*'s narrative is a mythological tale with characters as archetypes, my reading shows how human and nonhuman bodies are positioned in the text. Emphasis on human embodiment carries the risk of reaffirming humanist tendencies toward exceptionalism and locating the human being as separate from the natural world. This will be countered by approaching the human embodiment of nonhuman actors and not independent of them. Recognizing the corporeality and narratorial agency of the nonhuman (here, the tiger) is equally important to destabilize the prevailing emphasis on human corporeality within anthropocentric narrativity.[15] Moreover, *Jungle Nama*'s narration of a story *of* the jungle further emphasizes the need to listen to non-anthropocentric stories. Thus, by investigating the performativity in *Jungle Nama* through eco-narratology and embodied multimodal iterations that the text deploys, I conclude this chapter by highlighting the text's intervention in shaping a sustainable and equitable environmental consciousness in India.

An important aspect of this chapter's thematic is a revisitation of how one understands the term 'environment'. Etymologically speaking, the environment stands for "state of being environed" or "to surround, enclose, encircle".[16] While such an understanding locates something as a central point around which the environment is surrounded, the field of ecology states as its first rule that "everything is related to everything else" (Commoner, 1971, 78). Emphasizing relationality helps approach the environment neither as a background space nor as a mere surrounding in terms of a centre-periphery dynamic. Such a re-thinking of the terms of engagement with the environment is crucial on three accounts. Firstly, the dichotomous construction of reality which disengages nature from culture and the self from the world to affirm the separateness of humans from the nonhuman world is destabilized. What is posited instead is an interconnectedness wherein multiple ecosystems affect each other. Secondly, it helps critique the ontological supremacy afforded to the human species.[17] Thirdly, it recognizes the presence of multiple actors (beyond humans) that make up an environment. The late twentieth-century linguistic turn dematerialized reality and disembodied relationality. The emphasis on the linguistic construction of reality that overlooks material agents and embodied modes of perception has been the failing

[15] In their essay "The Storied Lives of Non-human Narrators" Lars Bernaerts et al. study "nonhuman storytelling" to challenge the readers' conception of limitations of human experientiality, wherein "readers are invited to reflect upon aspects of human life when reading the fictional life stories of nonhuman narrators, whether they are animals, objects, or indefinable entities" (68).

[16] "The ecological insight—that these surroundings somehow might form part of an interconnected whole or system—only emerged slowly" (83) For more, see *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (2018) by Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin.

[17] Proliferated by the pedestalization of the human faculty of linguistic discursivity, usage of language as a marker of human exceptionalism, espousal of enlightenment ideals which reaffirm Cartesian supremacy of mind over body, and practice of neo-colonialist tendencies that benefit global north players through systemic oppression of the historically weak and marginalized peoples and communities.

of poststructural discourse analysis. Ecocriticism, as a field, asserts as its fundamental premise the recognition of the presence of the world's physicality beyond the linguistically determined world toward a material understanding of the nature-culture continuum. Phenomenologists too argue that embodied experience through the senses is not only crucial for motility and interaction with other embodied entities but to the structure of knowing itself. Such an entwinement re-iterates the embeddedness of the human in the environment and how more-than-human life affects human consciousness. In these terms, the environment is *constitutive of* and not something that encircles the human subject. Moreover, being attentive to nonhuman narratives acknowledges the agency of the nonhuman and its role in shaping environments. Such a shift in the understanding of the environment opens the eco-narrative to a pathway of communication more receptive to the call of environmental humanities, which "forge reconfiguration and extension of the notions of nature, agency, and materiality, which are intertwined co-constitutively in formulating new theoretical models of environmentality that coalesce human and nonhuman ecologies" (Oppermann & Iovino, 2017, 1). Thus, a focus on *Jungle Nama*'s narrativity reveals the entangled proximity of the human and nonhuman, while underscoring the urgency of sustainable practices at the centre of the environmental humanities.

13.2 Jungle Nama's Econarratorial Storyworld for Environmental Dwelling

Elucidating the 'storyworld', narratologist David Herman identifies three aspects in terms of its ecology. Firstly, readers reconstruct the narrative's events as well as the embeddedness of characters in the environment of the text's world. Secondly, comprehending narratives is an inherently comparative process that involves considering the world of the narrative in terms of what it is and what it is not. Thirdly, the storyworld emphasizes the immersive quality of narratives that transports readers to the world constructed by textual cues (2015, x–xi). Herman's usage of the word 'ecology' in explaining storyworld is noteworthy. Etymologically, ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means "household", "home", or "place to live". Coined in 1869 by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, the term *oekologie* signifies a "relation of the animal both to its organic as well as its inorganic environment" (1866). In this regard, story-world does not become a mental place of territorial occupancy in terms of exploitative occupancy. Instead, through textual cues that familiarize unknown spaces, storyworlds transport readers to different locations, providing the means to dwell[18] in such places rather than territorializing them. Storyworlds propel a mental relocation between different geophysical spaces. Thus, ecocritic Erin James

[18] I use 'dwelling' in a Heideggerian sense which "involves the process by which a place in which we exist becomes a personal world and home. Dwelling incorporates environments and places but extends beyond them, signifying our inescapable immersion in the present world as well as the possibility of reaching beyond to new places, experiences and ideas" (8). *Dwelling, Place and*

develops Herman's conceptualization of the storyworld further through notions of spatiality and physicality by focusing on how:

the modelling and inhabitation of a storyworld that narrative comprehension demands is an inherently *environmental* process, in which readers come to know what it is like to experience a space and time different from that of their immediate reading environment (2015, xi, emphasis in original).

Applying this analytical framework to ecocritical[19] literary readings by linking "material environment and their representations and narrative forms of understanding" (James & Morel, 2020, 1), eco-narratology attends to the relationship between literature and the physical environment "but does so with sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives" (ibid., 23). This conceptual lens helps shed light on how *Jungle Nama*'s ecological wisdom about the Sundarbans and its everyday environmental practices can address the modern environmental crisis in India. Historian Dipesh Chakraborty encapsulates the need for an urgent collective response to the planetary crisis by stating that "[o]ur success in developing a globally concerted response to the climate crisis […] will depend on the degree to which we can tell stories that we can all agree on" (2015, p. xiv). Econarratology's identification of the performative potential of narratives thus explores connections between the story revealed by the narrative and the environmentally responsible impressions that it fosters in the readers. Expanding the reader's understanding through imaginative immersion, econarratology establishes possible connections with real-world environmental consequences by addressing the interface between disembodied discursivity and the tangibility of real-world referents.

Ghosh points out in his nonfiction, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), that the art and the literature of our present times are complicit in concealing reality (15). He defines this era that prides itself in its 'self-awareness' as the "time of the Great Derangement" (ibid.). Though his nonfiction primarily addresses the historical underpinnings of the modern novel and its deficiency as a means to address climate change, he reflects upon the function of the narrative as an integral component of storytelling that "proceeds by linking together moments and scenes that are in some way distinctive or different… [being] instances of exception" (ibid, 22). Extrapolating "exceptional moments that serve as the motor of narrative" (ibid), *Jungle Nama* surfaces as a stringing together of exceptional moments. As a counter to the bourgeois form of the realist novel, mythic folklore offers readers a world wherein the everyday is marked by 'exceptionalism'. Etymologically, *mythos* refers to 'speech' or 'word' but it gradually separated from *logos* to adopt a fictional meaning.[20] Cutting across temporal and spatial spheres, myth

Environment: Towards a Phenomenology of Person and World (1985) edited by David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer.

[19] "[A] basic concern of ecocriticism is the process by which *space,* which connotes abstraction, is modified into *place,* which connotes value and meaning" (James and Morel, 2020, p. 11).

[20] For a historical trajectory of myth and its usage concerning social sciences and humanities, see Coupe, Laurence. *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction.* Routledge, 2005.

functions as "a fiction or an enduring story that has particular relevance to different societies at different times" (Jill da Silva, 2008, 103). For folklorists "myth is about the creation of the world" (Segal, 2004, 5). Thus, myth as a source of re-vitalizing energy iterates its potential of 'liveness' embedded within its telling. Reading myth allegorically facilitates ecocritical dialogue to render the familiar grounds of the Sundarbans and its environment slightly unfamiliar. *Jungle Nama* strings together improbable moments through the mythic trope, but does so to delineate the actual scenarios of dispossession of the poor and depletion of the earth's natural propensity to sustain. Such exploitative activities result in 'improbable' changes to the environment. Thus, myth becomes a site of ecocritical inquiry as it "invites[s] us to read the spaces around the protagonist by giving the natural world itself agency and identity and complexity" (Callaghan 2014, 80). Its revelatory and exceptional nature jolts the reader while simultaneously turning attention to the real referent, i.e., the Sundarbans, as the site of narrativity. Ecological myth voices environmental consciousness and preserves cultural ecology by foregrounding the indispensability of ecological narratives, especially those from the 'periphery' that constitute the lived experiences of foraging dwellers. This environmental negotiation, which is culturally encoded (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997), re-iterates ties between a region and its environmental moorings, linking the storied narrativity of matter with the ethos of story-telling. If the ecological wisdom in the Bon-Bibi legend archives a collective environmental memory, then, these cultural re-iterations function as a repertoire. As Ghosh stresses, if recognition is a passage from ignorance to knowledge, [it materialises]… when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld… [arising] from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself (ibid., 5–6).

Thus, Ghosh's iteration performs the folklore's ecological resonance. His work re-cognizes the awareness needed in dealing with nature. The prevalence of Bon Bibi as an environmental tale not only points to local cultural memory infused with environmental thought but also highlights the intersection of ecological myths and everyday environmentalism that can offer sustainable insights for our planetary crisis.

Spatially speaking, *Jungle Nama* is an explicitly environmental story that makes evident the relationship between human and nonhuman beings. Geographically, the Sundarbans, an archipelago that constitutes the southern ends of West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, is created by the convergence of three rivers (Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna) and their tributaries. In terms of world spatiality, the Sundarbans is the largest deltaic region, the largest mangrove forest, and the largest remaining natural habitat of the Bengal tiger. The word 'Sundarbans', which means 'beautiful forest' ('*sundar*' meaning beautiful and '*ban*' meaning forest), derives from the tree called 'Sundari' that grows in the mangrove forests. Moreover, titling his verse adaptation 'Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban' situates the forest as a character with a narrative of its own. While the text begins with the cover page and its performative markings, the prologue-like introduction provides the reader with basic information about the Sundarbans. It also sings of collective natural processes that act upon and through natural materials such as mountains (Himalayas), rivers (Ganga, Brahmaputra, and numerous streams), and forested land (mangrove forests) to create the

Sundarbans. The circuitous nature from the start of the verse to the last—"[m]any great rivers [that] rise in the Himalayas… to a vast jungle that joins Ocean and Earth" (2021, 1)— archives the cyclicality of Earth's processes that transforms the natural elements such as water and land of one region (rivers in Himalayas) into that of another region (ocean and land around the Sundarbans in Bengal). While this flow transports and transforms, the underlying idea is of the inevitable interconnectedness between forms, processes, and materials. While the first page presents a logocentric image of the Sundarbans, the verse critiques linguistic constructions that deny the materiality of reality. The eco-myth's message cautions against the extraction of natural resources that is tampering with Earth's natural processes at an unprecedented rate and scale. The allegorical narrative speaks of accelerating extractionist tendencies that are shaping the material reality of the forest and weakening the regenerative capacities of the ecosystem. Whereas Dokkhin Rai conducts himself as the self-proclaimed ruler of the forest by violently oppressing all beings), Bon Bibi functions as a counter force limiting him to a portion of the land to balance the needs of the forest. Environmental anthropologist Annu Jalais,[21] who has extensively worked in the Sundarbans and to whom Ghosh has dedicated this text, makes a pertinent observation that for the Sundarbans islanders, Dokkhin Rai represents class and caste domination:

His absolute opposition to the forest 'ethos of equality' is shown by his declaring it to be 'his' private property. He thus suddenly changes from being a sage (one who refuses material possessions) to becoming a rich zamindar who is jealous of his property (forested land and wood) (2010, 73–74).

Jalais has not only mapped Sundarbans' socio-economic and ecological exploitation, but also the region's spiritual, cultural, and religious ethos. Using the trope of memory, she recalls her first encounter with the Sundarbans at the age of eight. The performativity of her recollection emerges through the yoking together of place and storytelling. She states "I remember… many nights watching plays… the story I liked best was that of Bonbibi, the woman of the forest… sent by Allah to save people from tigers" (ibid., 12). Exploring the ties between the region, its spiritual concerns, and storytelling practices, Jalais posits that [t]he reason why the Sundarbans forest fishers believe they are tied in a web of 'relatedness' with tigers is because they have the same symbolic mother in Bonbibi, because they divide the forest products between themselves and tigers, and because ultimately they share the same harsh environment, which turns them all into irritable beings (ibid., 74).

Reading literary texts that defamiliarize real-world spaces and deploying narratorial strategies that render the familiar as strange ascribes postcolonial representation with a political impetus. It calls attention to Global South narratives in the wake of uneven development due to neoliberal policies. Moreover, postcolonial storyworlds "can provide illustrations of a locally informed and highly subjective experience

[21] Annu Jalais is an environment anthropologist whose primary area of specialisation is South Asia and her research focuses on human-nonhuman interface, social justice, migration, and climate change. She has worked extensively on the Sundarbans in terms of its ecology, forests, and its people. For more, see https://www.dakshin.org/dt_team/annu-jalais/.

of a particular space and time that is not dependent upon Western ideas of literary realism or environmentalism" (James, 2015, xiv–xv). James further posits that such an environmental engagement presents "an alternative realism that subscribes to non-Western ontologies" (ibid., xv). Mythic representation enables a pluralistic understanding of planetary discourse and, as a site of postcolonial inquiry, reflects Nixon's observation that "in a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen and imperceptible violence [exacerbated by the Global North], imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear" (2011, 15).

Jungle Nama's performativity also emerges through Ghosh's recognition of nonhuman agency. In pointing toward the environmental humanities' focus on nonhuman agency, Ghosh questions whether this is an "indication that there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought" (2016, 41). *Jungle Nama* counters the preponderance of logocentric narrativity which emphasizes the value of the written 'word' and the fundamental reliance on the written word as conveying experiences of *human* consciousness (Herman, 2011, 178). It does so through (auto)biographical stories of the jungle itself. The story (*nama*) is *of* the jungle itself. Interestingly, nama also translates into 'relation'. Exploring a relationship between story and site, story and nonhuman agency, and story and nonhuman narrativity, archives the participatory nature of matter and destabilizes the trope of literature as a site of human narrativity. Though attributing the faculty of speech to the nonhuman contradicts the realist trope since it "deviate[s] from a simple mirroring of the world outside the text" (Heise in James & Morel, 2020, 205), *Jungle Nama*'s intervention resides in the fact that, while the nonhuman communicates, it is not in anthropomorphic terms. The spirit inhabiting the tiger's body articulates not by "speaking in words, but [by] planting thoughts in their stead" (Ghosh, 2021, 33). Though the voice of Bon Bibi carries human traits, she chastises Dokkhin Rai's choice of words which embody extractionist tendencies. His language is suffused with the tendency to accumulate natural resources for his greed. The climatic moment sees a reversal in which Dukhey is befriended by Bon Bibi and given "an embrace, though not of the body, but with lines lit with the magic of prosody" (2021, 57). It is important to note that at this juncture, it is the poetic[22] metrification that also emerges as crucial[23] to perform an environmental role. The text offers a critique to rethink existing human interactions with what and how one engages with the environment. Ecocritic Ursula Heise observes that if aesthetic transformation of the real has a particular potential for reshaping the individual and collective ecosocial imaginary, then the way in which aesthetic forms relate to cultural as well as biological structures deserves our particular attention (2010, 258).

[22] I deliberately use the word poetic to point towards the Greek meaning of the term 'poesis' which stands "to make". Phenomenologist Martin Heidegger expands on this as a 'bringing forth' into creation something that did not yet exist. For more, see "The Question Concerning Technology" (1954).

[23] The performativity of the use of language will be studied in this paper's last section.

Neuroscientists state with compelling evidence that humans process stories through cognitive faculties that cannot be delinked from our bodies. *Jungle Nama*'s narrative does not elucidate the porosity between a subject's body and external environment in terms of material fluidity. However, Ghosh opens up the body by moving us towards reading the world relationally in an all-immersive manner.

13.3 Multimodal Iterations

Ghosh in an interview stated that "I wanted Jungle Nama to tap into those modes of creation that were not completely bound up with words" (Jha, 2021). Ghosh's narrative presents a multimodal pathway for creating an embodied relational dynamic between text and reader. *Jungle Nama* as a literary text responds to the notion of relationality at multiple levels. Firstly, at a thematic level, it focuses on an environmental tale about the interconnectedness of actions for sustainable planetary existence. Secondly, at the level of genre, myth provides insight into realities different from the modern realist trope and helps recognize ways of being that challenge anthropocentrisms. Thirdly, as a textual representation, *Jungle Nama* includes multivocal narratives interweaving human, nonhuman, and more-than-human articulations. Fourthly, at the level of reading, Ghosh's text interrelates word, image, sound, rhythm, tempo, and visuality to create a multimodal iteration enhancing embodied sense-perception. These different modalities work toward a collective experience as opposed to the pedestalization of the written text. Thus, the emphasis is on *how* the readers are positioned to engage with the narrative and its storyworld. Thinking through bodies within environmental engagement implicates the human as a relationality, thereby undercutting ideals of humanism that located man at the centre.[24] By enhancing embodied cognition through narrative, Ghosh re-focalizes the human body's capacity for sense-engagement within environments. Hence, from a literary perspective, *Jungle Nama*'s intervention does not take place through a decorporealized intellect but through an interaction with a body-mind[25] that is engaged in the process of reading the world ecologically.

Jungle Nama's mode of representation explores the potential of the body as an episteme. Unlike other literary representations, the material text is a performative object. The book's material body is not just a physical object held by the reader but heightens the sense of tactility. The cover jacket has a granular texture as if one were touching the skin of the animal. In touching the book, the reader comes in direct contact with the text's tactile performativity. Like an engraving, the texture of the title

[24] It contests the Western imperial project that pedestalized 'objective' reason as the rationale for development and knowledge and disregarded other ways of knowing and engaging with the world.

[25] With the purposiveness of encouraging an inclusive way of reading, it provides a nuanced representation/understanding of how consciousness arises out of the corporal body's interaction and locatedness in its particular environment. For more, see *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018) edited by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino.

'Jungle Nama' mediates a heightened sense of touch. Furthermore, the body's ontological pliability is also put to test through the intermeshing of the mythic Dokkhin Rai inhabiting the nonhuman body of a tiger. A close perusal of the same brings to light how the literary text subverts the power dynamic that inheres in the notion of the gaze. Nonlinguistic representation performs an inversion. It is the animal which gazes at the other, as it is the human entering the nonhuman's territory. The human becomes an object of the nonhuman gaze, beheld by the tiger and the spirit of Dokkhin Rai. Being sighted *by* the nonhuman narrates the tale from the nonhuman's point of view and renders the human perspective precarious. This inverted gaze steered by the nonhuman destabilizes the presence of the conventional narrator who is "always rendered in human terms to some degree, even if that narrator is nonhuman" (James & Morel, 2020, 15). However, sight is also used by Ghosh to address the exploitation of the region. This mythic retelling incorporates the scenario of an illusory play manoeuvred by the spirit to heighten the impending realisation of the finitude of the planet's natural resources due to avarice and exploitation. The (in)visibility of natural resources is akin to the slow violence of resource extraction. Dhona is unable to comprehend the mirage-like vanishing presence of natural materials engineered by the mythical forces as he wonders if "'[i]t could be that I need to find out in a dream, whether these tricks are a part of some devilish scheme'" (33). This compels him to disassociate from his reliance on the faculty of sight and depend instead on dreamlike perception. It is the dreamscape which provides a platform for human-nonhuman dialogue. A close perusal of his episode highlights how the nonhuman communicates not through the linguistic expressions of humans but through ideas instead. The dream offers an alternate channel of communication which visuality fails to provide. The narrative therefore offers a moment to re-cognize impending planetary doom.

Ghosh unsettles logocentrism by incorporating images into his narrative structure. Images which are dark, dense, and in shades of black, white and grey echo the tale's message of precarity. They re-perform the corporeal proximity that is characteristic of performative ritual traditions. While a logocentric text privileges the written word as the sole marker of communication, *Jungle Nama*'s playfulness disturbs the logos. Almost every other page includes tiger-marks scratched into the paper's surface. Dash-like lines flow towards the narrative poem, which is typeset in the centre. These markings include blobs of black ink, soaring birds, splashes, branches rooting inwards from the corner of the pages, snake-like slithering lines, gushes of wind, raging flames, ant-like scribbles, plants on the ground, bordered pages with tiger scratches on the corners, pairs of eyes seeing through the thicket, crocodiles, bees, timber, wax, afraid foragers, and blinded men. Dukhey's mother watches her son go away, Dukhey is engulfed in the thicket with the spirited tiger prowling towards him, Dhona reprimands a broken mother, and Dukhey falls over his mother's languid body. Since the myth is part of an oral tradition, Ghosh's iteration also heightens the aural aspect through metric verse. Having chosen a verse-adaptation of the folktale, Ghosh highlights the relevance of the verse meter used in the poem: dwipodi-poyar or the 'two-footed line', which has a long history in Bengali folk literature since sixteenth-century classics such as the Bengali *Mahabharat*. Ghosh explains that verses written

down in this meter are "meant to be chanted, sung and read aloud" (2021, 75). Vocalization of the meter promotes a collectivized space. While the literary text is communicated to the audience through the written word, the rhythmicality of the prose summons the oral nature of poetic myth. The reader also becomes the performer, who is perhaps reciting the tale. Ghosh's afterword reads like an address to the intended reader as the audience.[26]

13.4 Conclusion

Thus, the timely intervention of Ghosh's narrative resides in the fact that while he is retelling a known work of folklore, he is presenting a new understanding of it and a different experience of it by conjuring up a different kind of performing reader. Drawing from the stored energy of orality, Ghosh attempts to simulate the folk legend's performative features through the inclusion of images, the verse's rhythmic dwipoyar metre, and of the visuality of the narrative told. Embodied perception transforms this representation into a heuristic tool wherein the experience creates environmental immersion through multimodal iterations. *Jungle Nama* in a sense recognizes the plurality of storyworlds and the multiplicity of matter that shapes the planetary ecosystem. As Jonathan Bate observes, "the role of ecopoesis is different: it is to engage imaginatively with the non-human" (2001, 199). Addressing environmental issues through literary writing is an act of hope, that it might inspire its readers to respond proactively. Ghosh's literary representation of the Sundarbans (and its performative rituals and traditions) through a multimodal iteration mirrors the multiplicity of narratives needed at the planetary level to contest the homogenizing narrative of extractivism. In its resistance to disciplinary boundaries, the environmental humanities constitute a new pathway which recognizes the need not only to critically approach the modern environmental crisis but also to understand how the story is told.

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[26] Apart from giving additional information related to the text and Ghosh's collaboration with the visual artist Salman Toor, he also informs how the COVID-19 pandemic played a crucial role in materialising this collaboration. Ghosh gives a final thanks to Leela Gandhi, a postcolonial theorist, a published poet, and a Professor of Literature at Brown University.

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Chapter 14
The Anthropocene in South Asian Popular Music: A Critical Examination of Papon's "Waise Hi Rehna, Waise Hi Behna" Through an Ecomusicological Lens

Manvi Sharma, Ajay K. Chaubey, and Surendra Singh

Abstract Through storylines dealing with catastrophic changes, visual media has much been celebrated and appreciated for its efforts to evoke the perils of the Anthropocene in South Asia. But as the crises escalate, other cultural artefacts, especially popular songs, are being explored and harnessed by musicians, bands, and singers across the region to promote environmental awareness. Over the past decade, as popular music culture has mushroomed in the Indian Sub-continent, its extraordinary potential to grasp the attention of consumers towards environmental concerns is being utilized by renowned Indian musicians. These artists have yoked the potential of popular music to reflect issues of environment and sustainability. Exploring the trajectory and *topoi* of ecomusicology and drawing theoretical insights from it, this chapter examines singer and music composer Papon's song 'Waise hi Rehna, Waise hi Behna'—a plea for river conservation. The work brings together music and environment to address the anthropogenic environmental crisis that has gripped the Indian sub-continent. Through a detailed examination of individual sections of the song, the chapter emphasizes that the pollution of rivers in India, that Papon alludes to, fits well into Rob Nixon's understanding of "slow violence" and Dipesh Chakravarty's perceptions of the "planetary crisis." The chapter further scrutinizes the elements—ecologically-charged lyrics and cinematography—that the song employs to provoke public awareness of the human-induced ecological catastrophe. The chapter also explores the various aspects of listening to songs and music within the framework

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of ecology and environment, strengthening the argument that eco-songs illustrate music as a reliable medium to promote environmental sustainability.

Keywords Ecomusicology · Popular music · Eco-media · Anthropocene · Slow violence · Ecocriticism

14.1 Introduction

Amid the daunting realities of our time, the work of artists may prove to be more important than ever.

–John Luther Adams, *Global Warming and Art* (2003, 19).

With global warming, tsunamis, desertification, extermination of breathable air, micro-plastic pollution, and water privatization, the face of the Earth is changing with each passing year. More recently, the term ‘Anthropocene’, coined in the early 2000s by the geologist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer, has been used to denote the present age of extreme ecological instability. Followed by the Holocene, a period of great climatic and ecological stability, the Anthropocene is the current geological epoch in which human activities such as—for instance, natural resource extraction, deforestation, and fossil-fuel combustion, coupled with over-population and technological advancements—have led to the extinction of various species, making humankind a geological agent or the main determinant of environmental conditions.

Climate change, floods, and droughts are disrupting the lives and livelihoods of half a billion “economically, politically, culturally and even geographically marginalized” South Asian people (Ravichandran & Bandyopadhyay, 2019, 242). Current ecological situations in South Asia indicate that the region is heading toward mass starvation, catastrophic flooding, and other conditions that threaten human populations. Moreover, the neoliberal policies carried out in the name of ‘vikas’ (development) in the region are also problematic as they tend to strip the rural population—“the ecosystem people” (Gadgil & Guha, 1995, 3)—of their rightful ways of living by appropriating natural resources and disrupting local ecosystems.

Although scientific and technological disciplines have attempted to devise solutions to the current geological epoch through forewarnings based on research and statistics, the science community across South Asia has not been able to attract enough attention and consideration to inspire collective ecological action. This inability is attributed to the “complexities of technical language,” which create a significant barrier and hinder the translation of scientific warnings and proposed solutions into practical directives for meaningful environmental initiatives (Ghosh, 2016, 12). As climatic and environmental anxiety grips the subcontinent, it has become apparent that solutions to the ecological emergency lie not only in the technoscientific schemes but have to amalgamate technology with “ethical, cultural, philosophical, political, social, and biological perspectives” (Oppermann & Iovino, 2017, 1), to address the ecological emergency.

Given the context, can the profound challenges posed by climate change find expression within the realm of music, serving as effective tools to alleviate the ongoing ecological crisis? How are popular songs and music relevant to the Anthropocene, and, more importantly, is the discipline of musicology well-positioned to perform an environmental intervention? If so, what role can popular music play in promoting the well-being of non-human species and natural resources? The answers to these questions are apparent in American folk musician Pete Seeger's argument that "there's a lot of good music in this world and if used right, it may help to save the planet" (Seeger qtd. in Pareles, 2014). Seeger's assertion alludes to the potential for songs to serve as more than mere artistic endeavours, transforming into agents of environmental advocacy and awareness. This proposition is evident in the songs dedicated to the Chipko Movement in India,[1] particularly in the northern state of Uttarakhand, which advocates for the preservation of forests and expresses concerns for the conservation of the Himalayas. Similarly, musical compositions associated with the renowned Narmada Bachao Andolan[2] in Central India, aimed at saving the Narmada River from the Sardar Sarovar Dam project, underscore the capacity of such music to intimately connect with nature, community life, and environmental concerns. These songs persist as influential expressions within significant environmental movements, serving as both a political voice and a powerful tool.

By unravelling the inherent communicative power of South Asian music and performance, there is an exigency to cultivate a heightened environmental consciousness, encouraging sustainable practices and nurturing a collective commitment to the preservation and flourishing of natural resources in the region through popular music. This chapter, thus, explores the popular eco-music of South Asia in general, and India in particular as a platform for addressing the ecological crisis that has gripped the Indian subcontinent. Ecocritic Rob Nixon explains the confrontation of ecological harm requires that "we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal

[1] The Chipko Movement, which originated in the 1970s in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, was a non-violent resistance aimed at protecting India's forests from the increasing destruction caused by commercial and industrial activities. To counteract this environmental threat, villagers adopted a unique approach by physically embracing trees to shield them from loggers, emphasizing the principles of non-violent resistance. This grassroots movement gained momentum over time and transformed into a well-organized campaign widely recognized as the Chipko (Hug the Tree) Movement. To effectively communicate their messages, particularly to the predominantly rural population, Chipko activists utilized folk songs as a powerful means of outreach. Among these songs, the compositions of Ghanshyam Raturi Sailani, a notable writer, composer, singer, and social activist, stand out. Sailani's songs dedicated to the Chipko Movement focus on themes related to environmental conservation, with a particular emphasis on preserving forests and portraying the natural beauty of the Himalayan region.

[2] The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a well-known central Indian movement, had the primary goal of protecting the Narmada River from being dammed by projects like the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Led by a coalition of indigenous communities, peasants, conservationists, and civil rights activists, the movement aimed to address the environmental and social concerns associated with these large-scale development initiatives. Folk songs played a crucial role in the protests, with notable examples like 'Ma Rewa Tharo Pani Nirmal' (O Mother River, Your Water Is Clean), designed to sensitize the population to the issues surrounding the Narmada River and the potential consequences of the dam projects.

repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (Nixon, 2011, 10). Hence, this chapter suggests that songs are persuasive media for taking up the challenge of representation, of sensitizing the population and attempting to bridge the gap between humans and nature by 'singing' anthropogenic harm. Drawing on the insights of ecomusicology, the chapter conducts a detailed analysis of the lyrics of Indian singer Papon's song 'Waise hi Rehna, Waise hi Behna' (2019) to highlight the elements that the artist employs to raise ecological awareness. Through a detailed examination of individual sections of the song, the chapter emphasizes that the pollution of rivers in India, that Papon alludes to, fits well into Rob Nixon's (2011) understanding of "slow violence" (2) and Dipesh Chakravarty's perceptions on the "planetary crisis" (2009, 206) and "collective human agency" (2012, 10).

Papon (originally Angaraag Mahanta, b. 1975), a multi-instrumentalist, composer, producer, and singer, is one of the most distinguished and sought-after voices in India. His creative pursuits span diverse genres, seamlessly blending ambient electronica, acoustic folk, electro-ghazals, and classical sounds. Endowed with a voice that effortlessly combines mellifluence and sonority, Papon has also lent his voice to several famous Bollywood songs, further amplifying his musical influence and contributing to the rich tapestry of Indian cinema. Beyond his cinematic contributions, Papon, a nature enthusiast, uses his musical prowess to raise awareness about health, the environment, and cleanliness. Papon also lent his voice to 'Dhakk Dhakk Dharti' (2020), a collaborative endeavour with other esteemed Indian artists. Released on World Environment Day 2020, the rendition aims to underscore the significance of biodiversity, emphasizing the need for collective action to safeguard and preserve it. This environmentally conscious anthem garnered substantial support from prestigious organizations such as the United Nations and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

Papon's rendition 'Waise Hi Rehna, Waise hi Behna', enunciates a collective responsibility in addressing the environmental challenges faced by our water bodies. The melody serves as a clarion call to action, urging listeners to play an integral role in the preservation of rivers, recognizing their vital significance in sustaining civilizations. Featured in the third episode of the distinguished Indian video streaming platform MX Player's widely acclaimed musical web series, *Express Yourself* (2019), his song gained recognition for its powerful lyrics and its ability to kindle the collective consciousness of the masses soon after its release. The chapter emphasizes that, through the portrayal of the fractured human–environment relationship in the song, Papon harnesses the potential of popular music to evoke powerful responses, making it an influential platform to inspire awareness and action.

14.2 Popular Music in the Anthropocene

Popular music, a term widely used in everyday discourse, refers to "a kind of music that is readily accessible to a large number of musically uneducated listeners rather than to an elite" (Middleton & Manuel, 2001, 3). However, given the recognizability

of popular music and the need to address the environmental crisis in as many ways as possible, it is surprising that the capacity of music to reflect and effect environmental change has not been extensively examined (Allen, 2012, 192). The separation of popular music forms from the discourse of the Anthropocene and climate change reflects "the epistemological distances that separate areas of geological and musicological inquiry" (The Society for Music Theory, 2022). Popular music genres like jazz, pop, rock, hip-hop, and folk voice insights about wider social and political subjects in representing contemporary sentiment. This potential can and should be harnessed to raise environmental awareness, develop ecological sensibilities, and appeal to the conscience of the public.

In the past few years, however, environmental crises have become a focus for musicians, bands, and songwriters concerned with raising public awareness of environmental sustainability and conservation. In 2019, inspired by ecological and climate movements such as Extinction Rebellion, a group of prominent English-speaking bands, artists, record companies, and concert organizers formed Music Declares Emergency (MDE)—No Music on a Dead Planet to "call on the governments to commit immediately to fight global warming and to acknowledge the environmental impact of music industry practices and commit to taking urgent action" (Ribac & Harkins, 2020, 12). MDE also declared that "music, musicians and music businesses, through their unique cultural and economic power, can lead the way in demanding the systemic changes required to secure all life on earth" (Ribac & Harkins, 2020, 12). More recently, world-renowned rock bands such as Coldplay and Massive Attack have advocated eco-friendly sensibilities by refusing to promote their albums on tour and adopting less carbon-intensive ways of marketing their music.

In the context of environmentalism, academic critics and musicologists are more often concerned with Western music but the extent to which popular music inspires socio-political and environmental action in South Asia, during a time of elevated ecological crisis, is also noteworthy. In South Asia, popular music, with its extensive appeal and accessibility, possesses a unique ability to reach diverse audiences, cutting across various demographics and cultural backgrounds. Its engaging and relatable nature enables it to capture the attention of a broad spectrum of listeners, making it an effective tool for communicating complex issues in an accessible manner. Additionally, the emotional resonance often inherent in popular music allows it to evoke powerful responses, making it an influential platform to inspire awareness and action. Over the past decade, as popular music culture has flourished in South Asia, Indian musicians have used songs to address environmental anxieties. Numerous 'green songs' have entered popular consciousness and music apps like YouTube, Spotify, Wynk Music, MX Player and others, as popular artists focus on environmental concerns in their lyrics. This recent shift is marked by rap artist Raftaar's 'Mother Nature—Global Warming' (2014); Grammy Award-winning singer and composer Ricky Kej through his album *Shanti Samsara* (2015); Indian rock band Agnee's lead singer Mohan Kannan through his song 'Main Banjar' (2017); environmentalist Rahul Ram with his 'Pollution Song' (2019); Papon with his 'Waise hi Rehna, Waise hi Behna' (2019), a song about river conservation; and Bombay Jayashri, Kaushiki Chakraborty and other artists through their song 'Dharti Maa—A Tribute

to Mother Earth' (2020). These artists have harnessed the potential of eco-music to draw attention to the environment and sustainability in South Asia.

But with other disciplines such as anthropology, geography, and environmental studies actively contributing to the quest for effective solutions to the ongoing ecological predicament by "attempting to offer an understanding (of) the world we inhabit—and to remediating some of the mistakes we have inflicted on the planet" (Allen, 2011, 391), does popular music possess the inherent potential to shoulder the demanding task at hand? The answer lies in the recognition that despite the remarkable range and multiplicity of disciplines aiming for "ecological literacy" (Orr, 2011, 251), the subject of ecological crisis has failed to draw significant attention from the general populace—those worst affected by frequent ecological disasters. There exists an urgent need to incorporate new modes of learning and sensitizing in the discussions surrounding the Anthropocene to target laypersons, climate sceptics, environmental cynics and "passive consumers" (Emmett & Nye, 2017, 7) who seem oblivious to the consequences of the changing planet. As the frequency of ecological disasters surges, it becomes evident that there is a lacuna in comprehending and communicating the issue of ecological degradation due to the inability of academic disciplines to appeal to the ecological conscience of the public. The representation and communication of the degraded state of the Earth, thus, requires a humanistic approach to "fairly, durably, and quickly remake the human presence on Earth" (Orr, 2011, xvi) and to mitigate the 'people-planet' disconnection. The reconstruction of this link is particularly significant in the age of technological advances to not only persuade the population to reduce their carbon footprint but also to advocate for the non-human beings of the Earth whom people regard as commodities.

With the urgency of action that the environmental crisis demands, the arts and humanities have reoriented toward the environmental humanities with the production of 'ecologically conscious' literary and visual media. This ecological awareness is evident in noted literary fiction writings such as Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet Engine Laugh* (2002), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *The Gun Island* (2019), Indira Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), and many more. More recently, distinguished graphic artists have turned toward the hybrid visual-verbal mode of representation of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Most notable among them are Kartika Nair's The Honey Hunter (2014), Sarnath Banerjee's All Quiet in Vikaspuri (2015), Rambharos Jha's Waterlife (2016), Subhash Vyam's Water (2017), Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's Aranyaka: Book of the Forest (2019), and Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama (2021). In the visual media sphere, films and documentaries dealing with the environmental crisis such as Mike Pandey's Shores of Silence (2000), Girish Malik's Jal (2013), Nila Madhab Panda's *Kaun Kitney Paani Mein* (2015), *Kadvi Hawa* (2017), and Abhishek Kapoor's *Kedarnath* (2018), among others, have focused on species extinction, natural resource exploitation, short-sighted neoliberal policies in the name of development, and the deadly consequences of climate change. These works contribute to a newly burgeoning environmental sensibility in India by inculcating a sense of ecological ethics in viewers.

Though literary and visual media have been much celebrated for depicting the perils of the Anthropocene, as the crisis escalates, other popular cultural artefacts,

especially popular music, are poised for exploration through the lens of the environmental humanities. As Amitav Ghosh in The Great Derangement (2016) emphasizes, the current planetary crisis demands a shift from "traditional logocentrism" (113) to other creative forms of representation. Accordingly, it is imperative to explore the potential of songs and music in South Asia as a medium to promote environmental sustainability.

But, can the critical insights of the environmental humanities and grave issues of climate change enter the musical sphere to serve as tools to mitigate the current ecological crisis? Indeed, such questions can be addressed through the field of ecomusicology.

14.3 Ecomusicology: Theoretical Insights and Analytical Framework

The relationship between musicology, ecology, and environment has underpinned the emergence of a new field of study, ecomusicology, which Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe (2016) define as "the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms" (2). Researchers in this field view music, songs, sounds, and other sonic media, both textual and performative, through the light of ecological analysis to respond to environmental crises. Transdisciplinary in nature, the field of ecomusicology examines the sonic representation of ecological crisis, biodiversity loss, natural resource scarcity, climate change, and pollution that have been the subjects of scientific research but remain understudied in musicology. Elaborating Allen and Dawe's definition further, Jeff Todd Titon (2013) characterizes ecomusicology as "the study of music, culture, sound and nature in a period of environmental crises" (9).

Allen and Dawe (2016) further observe that the 'eco'- prefix in ecomusicology is better understood as 'ecocritical', "referring to ecocriticism, which is the study of literary and other artistic products about the environment and such cultural criticism typically takes ethical and/or political approaches" (2). Ecomusicology thus, derives its origin from ecocriticism, or environmental criticism, a field of literary studies that examines cultural texts (novels, poems, stories, films, documentaries, radio, and television) that portray human–environment connections with ethical, political, social, and activist undertones.

Ecomusicology can be characterized as an interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary field of study that engages with music, songs, and sounds from an ecocritical standpoint. As an emerging field, ecomusicology aims to develop ecological sensibility among the public; stimulate critical thinking about ecological issues, and catalyze a transition from the rhetoric of denial to a discourse of reality. These objectives are explicated in Alexander Rehding's (2011) argument that "the field derives much of its relevance and topicality from a sense of urgency and an inherent bent toward awareness-raising, praxis (in the Marxian sense), and activism" (410). The dynamic

nature of ecomusicology positions it as a catalyst for societal transformation, playing a pivotal role in raising awareness, instilling a sense of responsibility, and advocating sustainable practices for the preservation of natural resources in South Asia, specifically India.

14.4 Slow Violence and the Abuse of Indian Rivers: Papon's 'Waise Hi Rehna, Waise Hi Behna'

As India grapples with widespread pollution, floating dark sludgy layers of oil, paint, and tar covering rivers is a common sight in urban metropolises. While projects such as The Ganga Action Plan (1985) and Namami Gange (2014) attempt to improve the condition of rivers, their success has been quite limited. These limitations are underscored by the findings of the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), India, revealing that a substantial 46% of rivers in India grapple with pollution. The comprehensive study identified 311 polluted river stretches, dispersed across 27 different rivers spanning 28 states and 8 union territories. Significantly, Ganga emerged as the most severely polluted river among its counterparts (CPCB, 2022, 6). Consequently, non-governmental organizations and environmental activists have been engaged in the ongoing struggle to clean up rivers either through legal petitions forcing authorities to take action or through protests to stop the dumping of chemical waste that contaminates rivers. Recent protests have been triggered by episodes of river contamination on the occasion of Chhath Puja—a Hindu festival popularized by the people of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh after which toxic white foam has been seen floating on the river Yamuna while the devotees took a sacred dip. Media sources commented that "the hazardous foam seen floating on the Yamuna River was caused due to increased ammonia levels and high phosphate content, a result of industrial pollutant discharge into the river" (Chakravarty and Soni, 2021). The episode led to an increase in cases of typhoid, diarrhoea, and hepatitis in New Delhi, the capital of India, as Yamuna is the major source of drinking water in the state. While the visuals appeared dreadful to many, it was not the only time that the country witnessed the contamination of revered natural water resources on a mass scale. In 2017, for example, Varthur Lake in Bengaluru spat toxic chemicals, causing foam to breach the roads, and creating commotion all over the city. In 2018, moreover, the Excise Department of Dhar District of Madhya Pradesh released fifty-four drums of illicit liquor into the Narmada River (Times Now Digital, 2018).

These threats fit well into Nixon's (2011) description of "slow violence", which he describes as "formless threat(s) whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (10). Unlike "spectacular and immediate violence" (Nixon, 2011, 2), the spilling of sewage discharge, oils, chemical waste, and agricultural run-off into Indian rivers takes place often invisibly and gradually, until the river is unfit to cater to the needs of humans and other species. As Nixon (2011) further emphasizes, slow violence is embedded within "slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes"

(2), the term, when considered about water bodies reflects the long-term impacts of millions of litres of wastewater dumped into the major rivers and water bodies of India. This contaminated water not only permeates the ground, poisoning the ground water but also seeps into the drinking water, exposing the population to toxicities. As per reports, “spending enormous money, creating awareness, and building sewage treatment plants have not helped cleanse India’s polluted river stretches. The estimated polluted riverine length is 12,363 km, about 5 times the length of [the] Ganga main stem” (Sengupta, 2018).

The pivotal questions here are—how can slow violence against water bodies in India, spanning “spatial and temporal scales” (Nixon, 2011, 34), be expressed through popular music? And how can the communication of slow violence against water bodies through popular music in India provide further opportunities for environmental activists to convey the dangers of toxification to the public who Nixon (2011) calls the “casualties of accumulative environmental injury” (144)?

Singer and composer Papon’s song ‘Waise hi Rehna, Waise hi Behna’ calls attention to the explicit maltreatment of rivers through hard-hitting lyrics employed as “emotion machines” (Tan, 2011, 7). The song invokes feelings of remorse, penitence, and contriteness in the ‘collective consciousness’ of listeners. Papon’s track commences with an apology from the composer on behalf of the human species that has obliterated the most precious natural resource, water. With a voice thick with remorse, the singer pleads on behalf of the entire Indian population, which is wholly dependent on its river systems for survival;

Waise hi Rehna,
Waise hi Behna,
Waadiyon se bastiyon se mat khafa hona (Papon, 2019, 1–3).
Oh, Dear River, Stay the same,
Flow the same,
Don’t be angry with settlements, from valleys (Translation Ours).

The artist’s plea seems desperate as more than 400 rivers in India, already embattled by climate chaos and global warming, are being poisoned. With the population surging, rivers and streams in India are confronting a recent urban explosion. Apathetic and haphazard growth has resulted in the utilization of water bodies as dumping grounds for sewage and industrial effluent. In accordance with findings from the Indian Central Pollution Control Board, an alarming 63% of urban sewage discharged into rivers, totalling around 62 billion litres per day, remains untreated (CPCB, 2021, 4–5). Yet, despite the dangers of this maltreatment, mismanagement of rivers through the construction of dams and the building of infrastructure such as slums, offices and housing colonies is still propagated. This myopic infrastructural development has not only shrunken natural river channels but has resulted in an escalation of natural disasters, particularly in the form of floods. In the third line of the lyric, Papon refers to the river bodies as exhibiting ‘anger’. The metaphor becomes a powerful representation of the gravity of the devastation caused by floods. In this context, Nixon (2011) asserts that “modernity’s infrastructural invasions—by oil pipelines or massive hydroelectric dams or toxic tailings from mines—foment rage by the river bodies” (42), leading to life-threatening environmental degradation and

economic devastation. In the opening lines of the lyric, Papon (2019) pleads for the river to "stay the same" (1). With his voice resonating with lamentation, he articulates the collective remorse of humanity, acknowledging our collective responsibility in provoking the river's apparent anger. In this emotive portrayal, he assumes the role of a representative for all individuals who have played a part in the anthropogenic activities that have led to the adverse state of the river. His lyrical plea reflects a deep sense of regret followed by a yearning for restoration, encapsulating the emotional core of the lyrical narrative. Papon's lyrics suggest that "incorporating considerations of music and sound into sustainability…can engage the community and help effect cultural change" (Allen and Dawe, 2016, 9). Ecomusicology can help understand the role of human culture in confronting sustainability challenges.

As ecomusicology considers musical and sonic issues, "both textual and performative" (Pedelty, 2012, 6), it is worth noting the distinctive visual imagery that flows through the entire opening section of the video accompanying the song. The artist employs auditory and visual senses to appeal to listeners. Through pleasing representations of nature—calmly flowing rivers with crystal-clear water reflecting images of the flora and fauna that it sustains—the artist induces a romantic sense of nostalgia in the minds of the audiences. Alexander Rehding (2014) considers this nostalgia as one of the most "productive way forward for ecomusicology" (410). He further asserts that artists should take the "greatness of the past" and apply it to today's "urgent imperative to preserve and perpetuate it for future generations" (414). Rehding's argument holds true for Papon's rendition, as the imagery that dominates the opening section of the song instils in listeners longing for the lost purity and sanctity of rivers.

In the current geological era, the discourse of *Anthropos* deems everything 'non-human' as a limitless resource to be exploited. To enhance the human ability to re-think rivers critically and creatively at the same time, Papon, in the lines that follow, places the river at the centre of the narrative to remind the human race that; "Hai tere dum se hi sab Kayam' (Papon, 2019, 4),—"[I]t is only because of you (river) that everything continues" (translation ours), reinforcing the fact that South Asian rivers have sustained civilizations unceasingly. Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016) observes that "the rivers that sustain South and Southeast Asia rise in Tibet and the Himalayas; the waters that are stored there, in the form of accumulations of ice, sustain 47 per cent of the world's population: here the water-related dreams and fears of half the human race come together" (121). These rivers are responsible not only for thriving agriculture and regenerating the monsoon cycle but also have religious and socio-cultural meanings tied to them. The abuse of the river systems is fatal for India, as they are the economic backbone of the country's entire population. The Indus River, the Ganges, and the Brahmaputra have been central to the rise of civilization for thousands of years. South Asian river basins maintain ecosystems and irrigate millions of hectares of fields, thus supporting the highest population densities in the world.

The penultimate section of the verse opens with the singer narrating the violence against water bodies in India as not "sudden and immediate, but rather gradual and out of sight" (Nixon, 2011, 10). With a sense of mourning that pervades the entire

section, Papon attempts to answer the question about what happened to the river. The lyrics narrate the dreadful ordeal of the river's slow poisoning:

Ghulti jaati hain khud mein hi, Humne ye kya kiya;
Dhul ke tere paaniyon se tujhko maila kiya;
O re nadiyaan kuch toh kehna! Bas kar tu ab sehna… (Papon, 2019, 12–14).
Oh River! You are slowly degrading, what have we done to you?
We polluted you while washing ourselves with your water;
Oh, dear Rivers, Say Something! Just cease to bear it now… (translation ours).

Rivers in India are considered sacred and are personified as goddesses. The adherents of Hinduism believe that taking a holy dip into the sacred Ganga can help them to attain *moksha* (salvation). Moreover, religious idols during the festive seasons and the ashes of the dead are also immersed in sacred rivers, adding to their contamination. In expressing this environmental lament, Papon, with a voice laden with remorse, recognizes the human impact on the rivers, acknowledging the culpability of polluting these sacred rivers. The poignant phrase "Dhul ke tere paaniyon se tujhko maila kiya" (Papon, 2019, 13),—"[W]e polluted you while washing ourselves with your water" (translation ours), encapsulates the acknowledgement of the dual roles played by individuals—seeking purification through the river's sacred waters while inadvertently contributing to its pollution. In an era where repeated pleas for attention to safeguard rivers have been disregarded, the artist earnestly implores the river to speak for itself. The sentence "O re nadiyaan kuch toh kehna! Bas kar tu ab sehna" (Papon, 2019, 14),—"[O]h, dear Rivers, Say Something! Just cease to bear it now" (translation ours), conveys a sense of desperation, urging the rivers to no longer endure the persistent harm inflicted upon them. His appeal emphasizes the urgent need for acknowledgement and intervention to address the deteriorating state of these vital natural resources. Papon goes beyond a mere plea for environmental awareness; he personifies the river, imbuing it with a voice that beckons for recognition and calls for immediate action to desist its degradation. Nixon's concept of "attritional violence" (Nixon, 2011, 2), finds a clear expression in the penultimate verse as humans consider rivers as commodities that are bound to fulfil their material needs and spiritual aspirations. Papon's verses evoke human hubris and encourage listeners to expand their awareness of the definition of harm by looking "beyond the immediate, the visceral, and the obvious in our explorations" of ecological crisis (Davies, 2019, 2).

The concept of slow violence not only finds sonic representation in Papon's composition but also surfaces in the visuals of decay and gradual dilapidation, accompanying the song. Shifting the imagery from panoramic riverside landscapes to polluted river water, the cinematographer allows the listeners/viewers to envisage the contrast between the river unharmed by human interference and the river laden with waste and chemicals. This visual-verbal-musical interaction conveys the menace of river water contamination in India and also instantiates the fact that songs intensify the human response to environmental issues by emphasizing the emotional dimensions of human-nature kinship. The employment of visual and rhetorical registers also reflects what Amitav Ghosh describes as one of the greatest challenges of the

Anthropocene—the representation of the scale of the threat and the engagement of disciplines other than the sciences and technology.

In his essay 'Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,' Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) asserts that in the Anthropocene, "humans, collectively, have an agency in determining the future of the planet as a whole" (9). In another essay 'The Climate of History: Four Thesis', he further articulates that "humans can become geological agents only historically and collectively… when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself" (Chakravarty, 2009, 206).

These assertions find their representation in the ante-penultimate section of the song, which motivates people to understand their negative impacts on their environment and reclaim their agency in an ecologically stable future. Papon exclaims.

Sadiyon se jiske daaman mein kheli tehzeebein;

Jaane kitne yug simte hain uski lehron mein;

Hone denge naa yun bojh hum uska seena… (Papon, 2019, 6–8).

Many cultures were cultivated for centuries in your foothills;

Know how many eras are confined into your waves;

We will unburden you forever from pollution… (translation ours).

Papon evokes a profound connection to the river, attributing it to the role of a bearer of traditions and a witness to the unfolding of countless eras. The use of the phrase "Jaane kitne yug simte hain uski lehron mein" (Papon, 2019, 7),—"[K]now, how many eras are confined into your waves" (translation ours), suggests the river's enduring role as a repository of cultural and historical productivity. The crisis of river pollution, as suggested by Papon, should be understood not simply as humans attaining agency for their own sake but rather as understanding the responsibility, they have towards these rivers that have sustained societies for centuries. In the subsequent lines, Papon, with a voice radiating positivity and determination, proclaims, "Hone denge naa yun bojh hum uska seena" (Papon, 2019, 8),—"[W]e, will unburden you forever from pollution" (translation ours). The "We" signifies "collective human agency" (Chakravarty, 2012, 10), and underscores the shared responsibility of humanity to address and ameliorate environmental issues, particularly the pollution affecting the river. The artist's positivity conveys the idea that if humans, acting collectively, have been instrumental in causing adverse changes to the environment, they also possess the capability and duty to initiate positive transformations. The stanza raises the question: What have we done to the most precious natural resource—water? In response, the composer embellishes his performance with sighs and lamentations that dominate the whole stanza along with visuals depicting the stark contrast between healthy and polluted landscapes. This call-and-response arrangement presents an opportunity to push the song towards a passionate ending, leaving listeners with a sense of responsibility and agency. As the stanza ends, it leaves an inedible impression on the audience, fostering a heightened sense of responsibility and agency. The song becomes more than a musical piece; it transforms into a call to action, compelling listeners to reflect on their role in safeguarding and preserving the inevitable natural resource of water.

14.5 Conclusion

With intensifying ecological degradation, it becomes evident that popular music involving pop, rap, and fusion can be an efficient tool to evoke feelings of sympathy and identification with the more-than-human world. As a solution to the representational problems of the Anthropocene, as raised by Nixon and other ecocritics, the field of ecomusicology, bringing together nature, culture and music, offers a potent tool to create new collaborative environmentalism that enhances the ability of the public to comprehend scientific discourse, which is often employed to communicate the environmental crisis.

In such a context, numerous musical artists in India have attempted to depict this environmental emergency through songs that address the wide range of concerns that dominate the age of "The Great Derangement" (Ghosh, 2016, 1), thus, inspiring socio-political-environmental action. Papon's song 'Waise hi Rehna, Waise hi Behna', by the same token, highlights the exploitative activities that have led to the slow poisoning of rivers in India. As Aaron S. Allen (2013) notes, "ecomusic(ology) can offer fresh approaches to confronting old problems in music and culture via a socially engaged scholarship that connects them with environmental concerns" (2), 'Waise Hi Rehna, Waise Hi Behna' offers a public musical pedagogy that highlights various aspects of river degradation and conveys the urgency of water pollution to the public. Throughout the song, the artist employs ecologically charged lyrics and impactful visual imagery as tools to attract public attention and, in doing so, incite collective environmental action. Not only does the singer appeal to his fellow humans for the conservation of rivers, but he also places the streams at the centre of the narrative, constantly entreating them to flow and restore themselves to an unsoiled state. Papon's work, thus, harnesses the potential of ecomusicology to raise awareness and devise solutions in times of escalating crisis in India's diverse water systems.

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