

Preface

This book is as much about Indian philosophical traditions as it is about nature. The interweaving of both these themes is inevitable, not only because they are conceptually related but also because as a researcher I am profoundly related to both. The beginnings of this project are based on my interest in nature and in Indian philosophy. I spent a few years of my life living in the Himalayas, studying philosophy in a traditional way. During those years I experienced a deep relationship with the environment around me. A strong sense of commitment to a vision of an ethical human–nature relationship became a guiding value in my life. My struggle to find newer ways of thinking and articulating my experience led me to study psychology first and then move on to philosophy.

For my Ph.D., I wanted to study the relationship between origins of Indian philosophical thought and nature. In the very first conversation I had with my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Sundar Sarukkai about nature in Indian thought, I poured out a torrent of ideas about conserving nature, eco-ethics and people's attitude to nature. He listened patiently and then stopped me with a simple question. He asked "What is this nature you are referring to? What is nature in the Indian traditions?" What was supposed to be a short answer to this question, turned out to be the background question for my doctoral thesis. This book is a later version of my thesis that contributes to this question, "What is nature in Indian philosophy and culture and what do we do after we find that out?"

When I started out, my study was unorthodox and there was no clear disciplinary boundary. This was both a challenge and an advantage. The challenge was to keep the work descriptive and conceptual and yet not devolve into a discourse of prescriptive culturalism. The advantage was that I had an opportunity to produce a work on Indian philosophical thought and relate it to something contemporary like ecological ethics. The book reflects this struggle and balance in its various sections. In the course of my work I found that cultural geography as a discipline, in a way links the contemporary ideas to the pre-modern philosophical concepts of nature. It was also evident that certain ideas around Indian Ethics would also have to be examined and recast into the ecological ethics problematic.

Though I worked with Sanskrit texts, my approach was not that of a Sanskritist. I was familiar with traditional methods of reading Indian philosophical texts and had a working knowledge of Sanskrit. I was thus able to access the texts, using a conceptual approach. To create conceptual categories from Indian texts is to engage in an act of translation. In this method, I am deeply influenced by the work of my supervisor Dr. Sundar Sarukkai.

On the other hand, I must confess working with only some philosophical texts felt incomplete and so I included some cultural traditions such as medicine and literature to my study. I felt that this enriched the philosophical themes.

A part of the pragmatic approach to my topic comes from the tradition of environmental science and wildlife conservation, which were my earlier career paths. My co-supervisor, Dr. Anindya Sinha, regularly challenged my ethical claims and helped me make those crucial links between philosophy and conservation biology. The final two chapters of this book are a reflection of the attempt to make this work conceptually relevant to the discourses of nature conservation and place the themes within the larger context of today's ecological crisis.

Many references and earlier work from Western philosophical traditions were available on the subject. Kate Soper's *What is Nature?* was an important influence on the way I structured this book around themes. For sources from Eastern traditions, I relied on many smaller yet relevant papers by eminent philosophers working on Indian philosophy such as J.N. Mohanty, B.K. Matilal, Purushottama Bilimoria, Vasudha Narayan and others. *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, an edited volume of essays by J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, gave my research a legitimate ground in the discipline of environmental philosophy.

The book also includes some chapters that were not a part of my original thesis. These chapters have been extensions of the same work undertaken in part during the spring courses on environmental philosophy that I teach my Master's students at the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University. The questions and discussions on this subject have led to extensive work on aspects of cultural geography and literature in this book.

While writing this book, I made a deliberate choice about not using gender neutral terms, particularly when I refer to earlier work by authors on nature. The choice of the word 'man' as against 'human' is a point to be deliberated on, particularly since a substantial part of this work focuses on eco-feminist issues. Karen Warren, whom I briefly met at a conference in the US, spoke to me about the importance of not neutralising these references which have engendered our understanding of nature and culture.



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