

REVIEW ARTICLE

*Ethics of Nature in Indian Environmental History**

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Abstract

This article considers the formation of moral and ethical worlds in India, drawing largely on cases reporting on modern times, as people interact with or imagine the landscapes in which they live. Questions of ethics, and how they are animated in practical existence through the experience of emotional ties and affective attachments to nature, near and far, have not always informed the writing of environmental history in India. In contrast, scholars in disciplines other than history have often paid attention to ethical and religious ideas about landscape and nature. This review argues that ethics of nature are developed in historical processes of community formation and identity-expression or self-making that occur in and through the imagination and experience of the natural world in

* Acknowledgements: As I have worked on environmental law, jurisprudence, and litigation in twentieth-century India, over the last few years, I have encountered a rich vein of dispute that has focused attention on ethics and its relationship to religion and politics, as well as scientific rationality. So it was a welcome surprise when Norbert Peabody suggested a review article based on several new works on the relationship between religiosity and the environment in India. I thank him first, and foremost, for that invitation and his subsequent shepherding of this rather long and complex engagement with the literature that has left me greatly educated. Two anonymous reviewers for *Modern Asian Studies* were kind and perceptive, and their comments have certainly improved this article, even if they have not always altered its content or style. I am also grateful to Radhika Govindrajan and Sahana Ghosh for timely research assistance, and to Yale University for the triennial leave in autumn 2013 that allowed me to finish up the article in the midst of research travel. Sections of the argument and materials discussed here were presented to audiences at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, and to the South Asia Centre, the London School of Economics and Political Science. Various interlocutors at these venues—Amita Baviskar, Chitra Joshi, Rashmi Pant, Mahesh Rangarajan, Tanika Sarkar, Mukulika Banerjee, Alpa Shah, Laura Bear, Rajeev Bhargava, Matthew Engelke, Fernande Pool, and several students at both places—helped clarify specific ideas and provided useful leads towards further reading. I alone remain responsible, however, for any errors and omissions that continue to diminish this article.

religious and political action. Historical perspectives on these topics are useful and necessary, even as careful examination of how affect and worship shape attitudes to being in particular landscapes can enrich the understanding of meaningful relations to landscape and nature in environmental history. The argument is developed by a close examination of a handful of recent studies that have provided an empirical basis for this synthesis, review, and conceptual elaboration of the ethics of nature in India. The article considers the formation of ethical ideas and practical values of nature in realms of worship, natural resources management, rural development, conservation science, natural resources policy, and legal disputes relating to nature protection in India.

Introduction

About 15 years ago, a series of conferences at the Harvard Divinity School considered the place of ecological thinking in world religions. Some of these discussions appeared in volumes published subsequently, including a couple that dealt with Indic religions.¹ Mary Evelyn Tucker, one of the organizers of the conference, and a moving spirit behind such work over the last two decades, wrote, then, about the need to recognize environmental crisis as also a moral and spiritual crisis, which requires ‘broader philosophical and religious understanding of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in lifecycles and dependent on ecosystems’.² This article responds to the very interesting body of work that has since emerged, largely in social anthropology and religious studies, but also in environmental studies, and occasionally in social history, where the agenda outlined by Mary Evelyn Tucker and her colleagues seems to have received some sustained empirical attention across different locations in India.³ It

¹ Christopher Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (eds), *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2000); Christopher Chapple (ed.), *Jainism and Ecology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2002). See also, for Buddhism, Rita M. Gross, ‘Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65, 2 (1997), pp. 333–353; Lucas Johnston, ‘The “Nature” of Buddhism: A Survey of Relevant Literature and Themes’, *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, 10, 1 (2006), pp. 69–99.

² Mary Evelyn Tucker, ‘Series Foreword’ in Chapple, *Jainism and Ecology*, p. xiv.

³ Though not reviewed here, such work can include, from a more religious studies perspective: Eliza Kent, *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and David Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). From the perspective of a more political interest in the formation of ethics and community

also considers how scholars may examine the relation between ideas of nature, attachments to natural landscapes and non-human life in those landscapes, and the construction of ethical standards and moral values for human action and existence in nature in the current historical moment in India, when a variety of concerns and movements seem to urge such examination.

So, even as this article moves into a consideration of the selected cases to build its argument, it begins with some of the ethnographic stimulus that draws this author into the wider discussion. The argument itself may be briefly stated at this point. This article contends that ideas about what is nature, what are its properties, and what are its gifts to human life are formed in a dialectical process whereby ethical standards and moral values for the conduct of human life are also constructed at personal and communal levels of existence. These ethics of nature, as they are discussed here, are practical, so they are shaped by the daily struggle to fashion a life of dignity and meaning; they are also formed through attachments to nature as recognized among other forms of life and the inanimate world. These attachments are fostered, nourished, or challenged, in practices ranging from worship to resources management or political struggle, and combine emotional ties of belonging and utilitarian connections to earth, water, and climate from which livelihoods are crafted in interactions with nature.⁴

The ethics of nature may simply be understood as a set of abiding concerns and guiding principles that humans ponder, articulate, and deploy in their interactions with the non-human world, even as they fashion their own sense of identity and purpose in the world. Over a series of summers that this author spent travelling in the central and

identity responding to nature conservation, this list could include Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005). See also Jeffrey G. Snodgrass, Satish Kumar Sharma, Yuvraj Singh Jhala, Michael G. Lacy, Mohan Advani, N. K. Bhargava, and Chakrapani Upadhyay, 'Lovely Leopards, Frightful Forests: The Environmental Ethics of Indigenous Rajasthani Shamans', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, 2, 1 (2008), pp. 30–54. And in social history, Julie Hughes, *Animal Kingdoms: Hunting, the Environment, and Power in Indian Princely States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴ Understandably the reader may search for more precise definitions and differentiation of large and weighty terms like ethics, emotion, virtue, and worship, as well as nature. Without plunging into lengthy surveys of what these terms may mean over time and in varied contexts, this article uses them in commonsensical ways while pointing to, where it appears necessary, relations between ethics, morality, virtue, worship, and attachment in the course of developing the argument.

western Himalaya since 2011, debates over such ethics of nature came to the fore in a number of ways. In the summer of 2013 an elderly Pahari man gave his views on the calamities in Garhwal, caused by flash floods that wreaked havoc in many places holy to Hinduism in that region of the Himalaya. He said, very calmly, '*abhi to aur bhi pralay ayega, Delhi tak ayega, bahut atyachaar ho raha hai*' (there is still more dissolution to come, it will come to Delhi, there is so much oppression). Though clearly pained by the suffering in his homeland, what appeared to concern this white-haired man the most was the moral vacuum into which the deadly floods had surged. In a previous year, as scientists, activists, farmers, and government officials reflected together on the dilemmas of conservation and livelihoods in the Himalaya, they confronted the notion of payment for ecosystem services, and the possibility that lands where agriculture was being abandoned in the middle Himalaya could be set aside to earn environmental merit and financial rewards for hill villages, serving to mitigate climate change by letting these areas revert to woody vegetation and wild-animal habitat.⁵ This, of course, would be at the cost of local livelihoods from agriculture and allied occupations.

Be it individual rumination on the environmental disasters unleashed by social amorality, or collective deliberation on respecting nature and human dignity in communal strategies for conservation and development, the current moment in India seems filled with efforts to consider the looming question of how moral and ethical worlds are formed and change as people interact with or imagine the landscapes in which they live. Another important place where an ethics of nature is prominently under discussion and consequentially invoked is in the higher courts of India, especially the Green Benches of the Supreme Court, and the National Green Tribunal where a series of cases have compelled the elaboration of jurisprudence on environmental ethics.⁶ In a variety of public spheres, then, contemporary struggles over nature conservation, questions about the articulation of citizenship in the Indian experience with democracy, and debates over inclusive and culturally sensitive economic and social

⁵ These examples are drawn from the author's travels and participation in Himalayan research initiatives over the last few years, from Kumaon and Garhwal in Uttarakhand to Nepal.

⁶ The emergence of environmental jurisprudence in the Supreme Court of India over the last few decades is discussed elsewhere in some detail, analysing litigation since the early 1980s. See K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Environment, Law and Democracy in India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 70, 4 (2011), pp. 905–928.

development are infused with ethical concerns. In fact, the Supreme Court, in elaborating its own environmental jurisprudence has come close to enunciating an ethics of nature that is of interest to the larger argument developed in this article. Ethics of nature, for the purpose of organizational clarity, is discussed separately in terms of both religious and political ethics in what follows. In writing about the ethics of nature in India, it will also be necessary to consider the place of religion in environmentalism more generally.⁷

Environmental thought in India, as it emerged in the aftermath of the establishment of India as a secular, socialist republic, always had a troubled relationship with religious environmentalism, which was viewed as potentially exclusionary. It could not create, so it seemed, a common cause that was multi-ethnic or multi-faith. Writing on ecological nationalism, however, indicated that patriotism and regional pride could produce shared ethics of stewardship across groups otherwise divided by various forms of social stratification and differentiation.⁸ Religiously imbued ideas about valuing and protecting nature require careful analysis, if we take affect, emotion, and ideas about virtue seriously. And it is through these modes of being in and concerned about nature that it may be possible to consider the ethics of nature in any effort to join the wider discussions on ethical life in India. The challenge, of course, is to consider, together, personal or self-directed ethics alongside collective ethics that connect to the material world and public life.⁹

⁷ Religious environmentalism is a late twentieth-century phenomenon. For the purpose of discussion here, and to distinguish it from ethics of nature, religious environmentalism, a more deeply historical disposition, may be defined as a blending of environmental values and values derived from faith-based traditions that prompt people to work for nature conservation and sustainable models of living in the world.

⁸ See Gunnell Cederlof and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods, and Identities in South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Thin Nationalisms: Nature and Public Intellectualism in India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45, 1 (2011), pp. 85–111.

⁹ Several works are helpful here, both for their specific South Asia orientation and wider theoretical stimulation. A potted list would include Anand Pandian and Daud Ali (eds), *Ethical Life in South Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); James Laidlaw, 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, new series, 8 (2002), pp. 311–332; Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford Blackwell, 2001); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989); Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*

Nature, in this article, is what humans have made of it. This is not the place to revisit the complex debates that have ensued across disciplines on the social construction of nature—when it started, how ineluctable it is, or what in the unsullied wilderness may have escaped the defining social embrace—but suffice it to say, with Simon Schama, that transformative human intimacy with nature is not just a phenomenon of industrial life: for most of the common era ‘it is this irreversibly modified world, from polar caps to equatorial forests, that is all the nature we have’.¹⁰ For our purposes, here, it is also less relevant to consider the periodization and character of human influences on nature; this article does not, therefore, dwell on the debate currently raging around the concept of the Anthropocene.¹¹ With these caveats in hand, let us, then, begin, with some recent higher court judgements in India, to explore how these ethical concerns have surfaced in the highest courts.

The highly visible public debate on ethics of nature, and efforts to adjudicate them, is useful here to set the stage for the wider discussion of the question: how may the ethics of nature be parsed

(London: Duckworth, 1981); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988).

¹⁰ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 7. See also David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996); William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Noel Castree, *Nature* (London: Routledge, 2005); Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004). For an excellent discussion of the problem with nature–culture dichotomization, from the perspective of anthropological engagement with cognitive science, see Maurice Bloch, *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially the chapter entitled ‘Nature/Culture Wars’, pp. 44–78. And for a discussion more from the perspectives of aesthetics, see Yi-Fu Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993).

¹¹ The rush of recent writing on the Anthropocene can be most easily reviewed in the new journal by that name. See, for instance, Bruce D. Smith and Melinda A. Zeder, ‘The Onset of the Anthropocene’, *Anthropocene* (2013), and James Syvitski, ‘Anthropocene: An Epoch of our Making’, *Global Change*, 78 (March 2012), pp. 12–15. The original formulation came in Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, ‘The Anthropocene’, *IGBP [International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme] Newsletter*, 41 (2000), pp. 17–18. See, for relevance to writing environmental history, Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Eurozine* (2009), 10.30.09. He, of course, argues that humans have become geological agents in nature since the late twentieth century, which he differentiates from interactions with nature that have existed, as suggested by Schama and others, since human organization into social forms in deep historical time.

in terms of religion, politics, and history? The trip through these legal disputes and judicial elaboration of ethics is not merely to situate the review in specific scholarly interests. It serves the valuable purpose of identifying the strands of analysis that will be taken up here. In foregrounding religious and political ethics, other kinds of ethics of nature, generated in fields like bioethics, or the ethics of inter-species justice, are bracketed. And this is not simply a move of convenience. To examine how people, in their own lives and in their public actions, navigate the relationship between self-directed and world-facing ethical questions, it is helpful to make this inquiry primarily about religious and political concerns. And that is also the way the evidence seems to point in moving, admittedly rather quickly, through the court cases that will be discussed in the next section.

Environmental jurisprudence and ethics of nature

For some years—a decade at least—many people, including the Dongria Kondh of Odisha, have struggled with the spread of bauxite mining in the region. Conflicts over mining resulted in a series of cases that reached the Supreme Court of India.¹² For our purposes, the decision given by the Court, on 13 April 2013, disposing off the writ petition on mining in Niyamgiri, Orissa, is pertinent.¹³ In this decision the court recognized the cultural consequences and moral hazard of destroying Niyamgiri, a site sacred to the Dongria Kondh. The Court took cognizance of the claim that the identity of the Dongria Kondh depends on the continued existence of the Niyamgiri Hill and the forests on top of the hill.¹⁴ This order is in consonance with

¹² The plight of the Kondhs, a Primitive Tribal Group, as classified by the Government of India, in the face of relentless pressure to mine their lands, was brought forcefully to the attention of the Court in Usha Ramanathan et al., 'Site Inspection Report: Bauxite Mining in Kalahandi and Rayagada Districts (Orissa Mining Corporation)' submitted to Ministry of Environment and Forests, 26 February 2010, available from the International Environmental Law Research Center, document w1003.pdf on www.ielrc.org/, [accessed 8 November 2014] (hereafter Ramanathan Committee Report, 2010).

¹³ Judgement dated 18 April 2013, in Writ Petition (Civil) 180 of 2011 in Supreme Court of India, by Justice K. S. Radhakrishnan for a Divisional Bench consisting also of Justices Aftab Alam and Ranjan Gogoi. I am grateful to Kacnhi Kohli of *Kalpavriksha* for sending me the full text of the judgement (hereafter Judgement in WP(C) 180, 2011).

¹⁴ Judgement in WP(C) 180, 2011, p. 36.

the 2010 finding of the site inspection report to the Forest Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, which noted that Niyamgiri was a Kondh sacred space, where ‘they congregate to worship—thirteen times each twelve months, they said’.¹⁵ In the destruction of their sacred space not only was their worship vitiated, their very way of life, guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, was placed in grave risk, something they, the Kondh villagers, were acutely alive to and anxious about.¹⁶

In earlier rulings the Supreme Court had already extensively pronounced on the need to respect constitutional provisions to protect the dignity of and provide distributive justice for Indian Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwelling Groups. In those rulings the Supreme Court had concluded that tribes have great emotional attachments to their lands.¹⁷ And in a later decision that had examined the applicability of the Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act to scheduled areas, the Supreme Court upheld its extension to such areas.¹⁸ The Court ruled that in all cases Gram Panchayats should determine the best ways to advance development without surrendering the cultural traditions and autonomy of all groups resident in their jurisdiction.¹⁹ Citing both constitutional obligations of the state and international conventions that India may or may not have signed, but which endorsed values that accorded with Indian moral and constitutional principles, the Supreme Court concluded that ‘STs [Scheduled Tribes] and other TFDs [Traditional Forest Dwellers] residing in the Scheduled Areas have a right to maintain their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned

¹⁵ Ramanathan Committee Report, 2010, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁷ *Samatha versus Arunachal Pradesh* (1997) 8 SCC 191.

¹⁸ The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, was passed to include villages in Schedule V areas as notified in the Constitution of India, in the coverage of local self-government institutions created by Panchayati Raj. This law made the *gram sabha* (an assembly of all adult members of the primary habitation cluster), and not the administrative village, pre-eminent in crucial matters of self-government, including land control, disposal of minor forest produce, and a number of other key resources. For a thorough analysis of the working of this law, and its actual provisions, see Ajay Dandekar and Chitrangada Choudhury, ‘PESA, Left-Wing Extremism and Governance: Concerns and Challenges in India’s Tribal Districts’, Unpublished Report (New Delhi: Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, 2010), available online at: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?267052>, [accessed 8 November 2014].

¹⁹ *Union of India versus Rakesh Kumar* (2010) 4 SCC 50.

or otherwise occupied and used lands.²⁰ And that in view of this right the state has a duty to ‘recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interest so that they can effectively participate in achieving sustainable development’.²¹

In the preceding 15 years the Supreme Court had also already developed a version of the sustainable development principle as part of its own jurisprudence. The judicial principle seemed largely derived from the Court’s reading of the relevant environmental sciences. Those decisions that were crucial in the development of this principle highlighted the preservation of ecological balance and identified well-preserved forests, lakes, and mountains as essential to that balance.²² The role of meaningful nature, or an ethics of nature, which in cases may be read from religious associations with particular landscapes, in achieving any kind of sustainable development, becomes more explicit in this landmark judgement of April 2013. Such ethical principles, grounded in attachments to land that are produced and anchored in affect, emotion, and worship, are brought into the sustainable development jurisprudence by combining evaluation of the Constitutional provisions to protect the right to worship, with the provisions of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996.

It is ironic, perhaps, that the very vein of bauxite, which came to be known as ‘Khondalite’ after the local residents who led the British geologist to first discover it a century ago, should now threaten their very existence. As one investigation of the proliferation of mining in India recently notes, realizing the full scope of Vedanta’s aspirations in the area could deforest 660 hectares, dry up nearly 100 streams, and threaten the flows in vital rivers like Vansadhara which feeds the plains below.²³ The secular appeal of these considerations has combined in this case with ethical concerns that arise from the profound loss experienced by the disruption of personal and communal worship.

²⁰ Judgement in WP(C) 180, 2011, p. 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²² *Narmada Bachao Andolan versus Union of India* (2000) 10 SCC 64; *Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board versus Professor M. V. Nayudu* (1999) 2 SCC 718 was distinguished in the later decision; *Hinch Lal Tiwari versus Kamala Devi* (2001) 6 SCC 496 speaks directly to land forms and water bodies as providing the healthy environment that in turn assures the quality of life guaranteed under the Indian Constitution.

²³ Roger Moody, ‘The Base Alchemist’ in Rakesh Kalshian (ed.), *Caterpillar and the Mahua Flower: Tremors in India’s Mining Fields* (New Delhi: PANOS South Asia, 2007), pp. 83–101, p. 92.

Large-scale land conversion and displacement also removes sacred village sites, and this has been described in strong terms as cultural genocide.²⁴ This is the context in which the ruling becomes significant: perhaps not acknowledging the effects of industrial occupation of farm and forest as cultural genocide but certainly recognizing the erosion of cultural rights granted to all Indian citizens as a diminution of their citizenship.

The judgement goes on to note that the Constitution guarantees ‘the right to practice and propagate not only matters of faith or belief, but [also] all those rituals and observations which are regarded as an integral part of their religion. Their right to worship the deity Niyam-Raja has, therefore, to be protected and preserved.’²⁵ The Supreme Court further noted that the Forest Rights Act and the Panchayati Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act require *gram sabhas* (village councils) to deliberate on the impact of forest conversion or land use change carried out in service of economic development activity on the cultural integrity of the Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwelling Groups. The Supreme Court concluded that ‘we are, therefore, of the view that the question [of] whether Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers, like Dongaria Kondh, Kutia Kandha and others, have got any religious rights i.e. rights of worship over the Niyamgiri hills, known as Nimagiri, near Hundaljali, which is the hill top known as Niyam-Raja, have to be considered by the Gram Sabh’.²⁶ Arguably, reification of Kondh culture is a necessary outcome of such cultural reasoning in court orders. But it is noteworthy that the issue, both in the Ramanathan Committee Report and the court order that relies on it, appears more one of ritual practice and affective ties to a landscape that are vitiated when the landscape is irreversibly altered.²⁷

To implement this decision the Odisha government drew up a schedule to hold these *gram sabha* meetings in 12 villages. As per the Odisha government’s decision, *gram sabhas* were conducted in seven villages of Rayagada district from 18 July to 19 August and five villages of Kalahandi from 23 July and 30 July. In the first of

²⁴ Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, ‘Agya, What Do You Mean by Development?’ in Kalshian (ed.), *Caterpillar and the Mahua Flower*, pp. 24–46.

²⁵ Judgement in WP(C) 180, 2011, p. 76–77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁷ What is interesting here is that ritual practice, which can and does change over time or across subgroups, always requires the affective connections that lend it meaning and spiritual power. And it is this relationship between ritual and emotion or affect that is recognized in the legal proceedings.

these meetings, held in Sherkapadi village in Sibapadar *gram panchayat* in Rayagada district, an overwhelming response vehemently opposed the proposed mining in the Niyamgiri hills.²⁸ The Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti demanded that *gram sabhas* should be held in all the 112 villages of Niyamgiri instead of just in the 12 villages chosen by the authorities. This is a view that was also endorsed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, judging by the response of the minister, V. Kishore Chandra Deo, to the schedule announced by the Government of Odisha.²⁹

Let me turn, now, to another set of cases where an ethics of nature is articulated by, in this case, the National Green Tribunal.³⁰ In this matter, as well, an application by a federation in Arunachal Pradesh was allowed for further consideration as it opposed hydroelectric power development in the region. The grounds specifically were the threat to both ecological security and the cultural integrity of the Mon region inhabited by the Monpa indigenous community of Tawang District of this northeastern state of India.³¹ Such a line of reasoning, which alludes to ecological fragility and cultural integrity being inextricably linked, is still, however, not the common form taken by those building their argument on an ethics of nature in most cases that appear before the higher courts, special tribunals or constitutional courts. More typical is the view that emerges out of the public trust doctrine, evaluated in another matter before the National Green Tribunal which pertains to the perennial questions being raised about the conservation of the Western Ghats. In this matter the National Green Tribunal took cognizance of the claim that governments have a statutory obligation to protect the environment, especially those that are indisputably national treasures or rare ecosystems, like biodiversity hotspots, and that citizens have a constitutional right to such conservation as part of the assurance of a good quality of life.³² Even while recognizing that the National Green Tribunal may not direct governments to act

²⁸ 'Tribal's emphatic "no" to mining in Niyamgiri hills', *The Hindu*, 18 July 2013.

²⁹ 'First Gram Sabha says "no" to Niyamgiri mining', *The New Indian Express*, 20 July 2013, as reported by the Express News Service, Bhubhaneswar, on 19 July 2013.

³⁰ The National Green Tribunal was created as the successor body to the National Environmental Appellate Authority in 2010 and has been deliberating in New Delhi and several other regional offices since then, though in earnest only in the last two years. Its benches are composed equally of judges and other administrative, scientific, and environmental experts.

³¹ Order dated 14 March 2013, in M.A. 104 of 2012 arising out of Appeal 39 of 2012 before the Principal Bench, National Green Tribunal, New Delhi, pp. 57–58.

³² Order dated 18 July 2013 in M.A. 49 of 2013 in Application 26 of 2012 before the Principal Bench, National Green Tribunal, New Delhi, pp. 38–40.

in particular ways to fulfil their obligations, it further noted that the Supreme Court and high courts are not so restricted.³³

The relationship of the National Green Tribunal to the Supreme Court in fashioning environmental jurisprudence or the imbrication of environmental values in fundamental rights are not topics that can be taken on here. The relationship of jurisprudence to an ethics of nature is, however, salient, and through it I wish to return to a consideration of the history of such ethics, their debate, and development.³⁴ In sum, as the discussion moves from these few court cases and the landscape of ethics that they seem to reveal, it is possible to see that the ethics of nature is currently taking shape along several lines. One such line is the relationship of religious practice and belief to cultural rights that may include the preservation of particular natural forms. Another line explicitly engages a politics of dignified livelihoods and the ability of communities to shape and engage in such livelihoods. And a third line is identified, as in the case from Arunachal Pradesh, when courts are asked to arbitrate claims where both environmental and cultural conservation are interlinked. Lastly, a fourth line—the one that may be most developed in the ethics of nature that is elaborated in environmental jurisprudence—is detected in the development of public trust doctrine, and the idea that citizens have a fundamental right to environmental amenities as part of the right to life itself. In what follows, this article will pursue the religious and political strands with particular attention, and in all cases argue that the historical development of ethical standards, moral values, and embodied practices for imagining and being in nature requires analytical attention. If nothing else this may facilitate grasping the unity of practical and symbolic modes of being in nature.

³³ Ibid, pp. 35–36. With reference to Supreme Court decisions that recognize both normal restraint on courts giving direction to governments to legislate or make particular policy, but also their exercise of extraordinary and original jurisdiction to provide interim direction pending appropriate administrative or legislative action. Relevant cases are: *Dahanu Taluka Environment Protection Group & Another versus Bombay Suburban Electricity Supply Co. Ltd. & Ors.* (1991) 2 SCC 539; *Commissioner versus Griha Yajamanula Samkhya & Ors.* (2001) 5 SCC 65; *V. K. Naswa versus Union of India* (2012) 2 SCC 542; *Vishaka & Ors. versus State of Rajasthan & Ors.* (1997) 6 SCC 241; and *Court On Its Own Motion versus Union of India* (2012) 12 SCALE 307.

³⁴ In the larger body of work, of which this article is a part, I discuss in more detail the ways in which courts, in exercise of their original constitutional jurisdiction, are in close engagement with public culture and values, including ethics of nature, and contribute to the construction and circulation of those ethics through their judicial practice and accumulated pronouncements on rights to nature, obligations to care for it, and so forth.

On the interplay of landscape, tradition, and virtue

Multi-stranded ethics of nature, found in a number of other cases as well, are constitutive of regional landscapes where the play of ecological and cultural values or virtues may display some variance. So, for instance, in the case just mentioned, the spark is provided by the Madhav Gadgil Committee report on the Western Ghats submitted in 2011, and the activism of the Goa Foundation that was inspired to seek its implementation, with ecological issues being emphasized over cultural ones.³⁵ In the case from Arunachal, as already noted, cultural and ecological issues are intertwined, and there are yet other cases (to be discussed further in what follows) of a regional imagination informed by an ethics of nature that mostly affirm the religious salience of the landscape and its ecology.³⁶ This has been described as a sacred geography in some contexts, a term that, for one eminent commentator, evokes ‘a living landscape in which mountains, rivers, forests and villages are elaborately linked to the stories of gods and heroes. The land bears the traces of the gods and the footprints of the heroes. Every place has its story, and conversely, every story in the vast storehouse of myth and legend has its place.’³⁷

Many Indic traditions are deeply familiar with the notion that every place has its story and that every story references places. The terms ‘*sthala purana*’ and ‘*mahatmya*’ are just particular examples from one set of traditions that identify this pervasive notion.³⁸ How, we may ask, can this relationship between stories and places be explored to derive some understanding of the ethics involved? Here, this article will follow Alasdair MacIntyre to suggest one possible way forward. In his seminal investigation of the history of ethics, admittedly only focused on the

³⁵ Ecological issues are different from cultural ones in that they refer to biophysical processes in nature that, for the sake of the argument, are unmediated by social and anthropogenic influences. This is a distinction that can be found in scholarly and policy literature, and certainly in government reports and court submissions.

³⁶ See Madhav Gadgil et al., *Report of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel*, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, 31 August 2011, and contrast its concerns with those of the World Wildlife Fund Vrindavan Conservation Project, initiated in 1991, and recently discussed in Mukul Sharma, *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012), pp. 146–184.

³⁷ Diana Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Harmony, 2012), pp. 4–5.

³⁸ *Mahatmyas* are texts of praise that sing the hymns and tell the stories of how the *tirthas* (places of spiritual crossing) became sacred, and enumerate the benefits of pilgrimage. This definition is provided in Eck, *India*, p. 9.

European traditions, MacIntyre writes, ‘man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal . . . [and] . . . becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth’.³⁹ This accords well with much in the characterization of many Indic traditions, too.⁴⁰ Such storytelling, so this article contends, underscores the importance of narrating landscapes to learn and remember their qualities and inculcate the attachments that connect humans to nature and develop an ethics of nature in that relationship. And when sacred landscapes take shape as uniquely interconnected regions, they exhibit an ecological principle not alien to, maybe even supportive of, comprehending other interconnections across the same regions.

This last point is well illustrated in a series of examples that can be found in Diana Eck’s magnificent survey of sacred geography in India. She notes at the outset that even the remotest of Hindu shrines, some dating to the first millennium CE, which may remain snowbound half the year, are ‘not singular, but part of a complex fabric of reference and signification’.⁴¹ And she goes on to point out that a network of Sufi shrines, starting from the second millennium CE, created an alternate sacred geography that was shared, to some extent, across denominations and faiths. At innumerable *dargahs*, like Hindu *tirthas*, regional networks of varying dimensions were elucidated. ‘These dargahs developed much of the ritual idiom of Hindu shrines . . . people bring flowers . . . they have *darshan* . . . they return home with a kind of *prasad*’.⁴² Thus, not only was the sacred landscape etched by the network of shrines, in this case different traditions were brought closer together as worshippers traversed the same landscape and participated in some of the same peregrinations as they experienced the landscape and connected with it on a spiritual plane.

³⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 201.

⁴⁰ Short of creating a long but unavoidably incomplete list of works that might support this point, allow me to just point to two key works. One, which explores divinity in animal form, amply informing both the transmission of ethics through storytelling and the nascent presence of ethics of nature in such boundary-testing forms of the divine, is Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman’s Tale: The Message of a Divine Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). The other, which links most thoughtfully the telling of stories of gods, heroes, and deities to the emergence of regional imaginations, is Anne Feldhaus, *Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

⁴¹ Eck, *India*, p. 11.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 92.

Eck also reminds us that there is no obvious incompatibility between secular and sacred geography, as they represent sensibilities that can co-exist and reinforce each other. She gives the example of Pandit Nehru writing to Chou En-Lai, in 1963, about the Himalaya and India's northern borders, by invoking the Rg Veda, the Kena Upanishad, the Mahabharata, and the poet Kalidasa's 'Kumarasambhavam'.⁴³ This example illustrates well the claim, returning to MacIntyre, that 'there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things. Vico was right and so was Joyce. And so too of course is that moral tradition from heroic society to its medieval heirs according to which the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into our virtues.'⁴⁴ Stories, we can safely adduce, that might connect modern sentiment to other traditions to activate a sense of shared virtues. These, moreover, are virtues that are present in several identities, in this case at once both of religious community and secular nation.

These virtues include the generation and sustaining of ethics of nature through various actual and imagined journeys and distinct embodiments that make landscapes and their characteristics intimately familiar within particular traditions.⁴⁵ Such an account of virtues is important because it combines self-knowledge and perfecting practice in the world—alluding to the social life of the self—and such a view of the individual in search of the moral social existence pervades all forms of ethics. It unites religious and political ethics, if one sees the former as intensely personal and the latter as always social. It is

⁴³ Eck, *India*, pp. 65–66. In this letter he wrote, 'one of the earliest Sanskrit texts . . . the Vishnu Purana . . . makes it clear the Himalaya formed the frontier of India'. See Historical Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, 'Himalayan Frontiers' in Rana Satya Paul (ed.), *Our Northern Borders* (New Delhi: The Book Times Company, 1963), pp. 19–25. Cited in Eck, *India*.

⁴⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 201.

⁴⁵ The terms 'virtue' and 'tradition' are used here in the spirit of MacIntyre's own usage, which are surprisingly amenable to concordant reading in the spirit of several Indian traditions of defining virtue or deliberating on its defining principles. For MacIntyre, 'the virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the good internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good'. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 204. MacIntyre also rejects the tradition–modernity opposition. It is possible, he says, to think of a living tradition that would be 'an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition'. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 207.

also useful because it enriches any discussion of rules, morality, and (for that matter) legally defined rights and duties that proliferate in constitutional polities of the sort India established in the mid-twentieth century and where rights-talk is ever more prominent and pervasive in all aspects of life.⁴⁶ Following MacIntyre in this fashion enables an argument for a higher and wider conception of good than most moral philosophies enabled by modernity can provide. It follows that a tradition is required and it is animated by practices, rules, virtues, and individual lives, keeping it dynamic and debated.⁴⁷

This article is not the first effort to rely on MacIntyre to initiate a discussion about ethical life in India or South Asia. A valuable collection of essays already opened this inquiry, a few years ago, and helpfully created a set of discussions built around historically and anthropologically examined cases.⁴⁸ Introducing the collection, Anand Pandian and Daud Ali argue that ‘anthropological and historical approaches clarify three essential aspects of ethical practice: their work upon the body, the practical traditions and historical situations that sustain them; and their claims upon collective life’.⁴⁹ They go on to note that ‘in many South Asian moral, religious, and literary traditions, affective disposition such as compassion and devotion surface as essential means of negotiating ethical action’.⁵⁰ It is worth noting, further, that Indian traditions also have a long history of developing catalogues of virtues by discussing virtuous characteristics, more readily observed in plants or animals, that personify wisdom, munificence, courage, or loyalty. Refinement of conduct, in these traditions, is a practice that engages species other than human as well.

Considering these and other aspects of the production and sustaining of virtue, the historical and anthropological approach taken here can be extended to another aspect of ethical practice, which is the ethics of nature, or those aspects of virtuous tradition that connect

⁴⁶ Here MacIntyre is in agreement with Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978). See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981, p. 112.

⁴⁷ See Michael Fuller, *Making Sense of MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), for a fuller discussion of the idea of tradition in MacIntyre’s thought than I can offer here.

⁴⁸ See Anand Pandian and Daud Ali, *Ethical Life in South Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Anand Pandian and Daud Ali, ‘Introduction’ in Pandian and Ali, *Ethical Life in South Asia*, pp. 1–18, quote from p. 5.

⁵⁰ Pandian and Ali, *Ethical Life in South Asia*, p. 10.

ethical practice to the non-human world in mutually sustaining ways. For it is certainly the case that compassion and devotion play a big part in shaping and sustaining ethics of nature or dispositions towards non-human life and even inanimate objects constitutive of nature in several Indian traditions. To deepen this discussion the analysis will turn first to what earlier was separated out as the religious ethics of nature. This will allow us to attend more closely to virtues invoked by ideas about devotion, compassion, and even renunciation, when they are examined in the context of ideas about nature and, as has become more relevant in more recent times, the elaboration of environmental ethics.⁵¹

Religious ethics of nature

If we grant, in the spirit of engagement with the ideas about traditions and virtues put forward by MacIntyre and those who have adapted his thought to the consideration of ethical life in South Asia, that the historical provenance of particular ideas and their amendment is central to the endurance of traditions, it also becomes necessary to track the commingling of ideas that might produce a religious ethics of nature in India at different times.⁵² Clearly, when discussed as religious environmentalism, this ethics of nature is a product of twentieth-century thought, though its work in India is done in dialogue with older traditions.⁵³ Such dialogue can come in several forms.

As Martha Selby notes, in early Tamil poetry, many examples can be found that suggest human emotion and desire were being ordered and disciplined 'with networks of referents, symbols and indices culled

⁵¹ This aspect will receive more attention later in this article when it is more centrally focused on the political ethics of nature and environment. A somewhat sharply dichotomized discussion contrasting Western and Eastern environmental ethics, and first-world adaptations of Eastern traditions for environmental ideas advanced in the global North, may be found in Ramachandra Guha, *How Much Should a Person Consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁵² In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 355–365, MacIntyre explicitly recognizes tradition as argument extended through time where tenets are redefined in conflict with criticism that is external to tradition and through internal debates within the tradition.

⁵³ Emma Tomalin, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity: The Limits to Religious Environmentalism* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 5.

from the environment'.⁵⁴ Such literature raises important questions by using plant and animal behaviour to comment on human practice and reflecting on human nature through the character of animals and plants. In this way the dialogue can also take the form of scholars extracting ethics of nature or environmental values from literature and religious texts from classical times.⁵⁵ In one fine example, Martha Selby discusses the ways in which the ethos of animals can be attributed to humans, as in the Kurinci poems of Kapilar.⁵⁶ She is suggesting, in her commentary on these classical poems, that we move beyond concerns with anthropomorphism and zoomorphism to examine the formation of ecological selves in relation to the environment.⁵⁷

While the literature on classical and early modern periods is fascinating, if limited, we are more concerned with the modern period here. In India the dialogue in the last century has also generated a small industry on whether Gandhi can be read as an environmentalist.⁵⁸ All treatments of Gandhi as an environmentalist are aware of his orientation to Indian, especially Hindu, traditions as a source of inspiration to cultivate dispositions like humility, simplicity, respect for all forms of life, and frugal living.⁵⁹ Gandhian or other, the Indian experience provides many and diverse examples of this dialogue between lived tradition and new values. Religious tradition, mediated by local interpretations of wider and older traditions and the political engagements in which they are inevitably caught, is also active

⁵⁴ Martha Selby, *Tamil Love Poetry; The Five Hundred Short Poems of the Ainkurnuru* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 14.

⁵⁵ Laurie Patton, 'Nature Romanticism and Sacrifice in Rgvedic Interpretation' in Chapple and Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology*, pp. 39–58; Lance Nelson, 'Reading the Bhagavad Gita from an Ecological Perspective' in Chapple and Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology*, pp. 127–164; Philip Lutgendorf, 'City, Forest, and Cosmos: Ecological Perspectives from the Sanskrit Epics' in Chapple and Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology*, pp. 269–290.

⁵⁶ Selby, *Tamil Love Poetry*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19. See also Lorrain Daston and Greg Mittman, *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and John Knight, *Animals in Person: Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Intimacy* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

⁵⁸ Vinay Lal, 'Too Deep for Deep Ecology: Gandhi and the Ecological Vision of Life' in Chapple and Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology*, pp. 183–212; Ramachandra Guha, 'Mahatma Gandhi and the Environmental Movement' in Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (eds), *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan, 1997), pp. 153–168.

⁵⁹ We now know that Mahatma Gandhi developed his ideas about frugal living early in his career as an activist for social justice, while still in South Africa. See the brilliant study by Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi Before India* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

in producing new affective and emotional attachments to landscape, animals, and ethics of care.⁶⁰

Activists, often, display most clearly the embodiment of the living tradition as they reflect on the process by which ethics of nature must emerge from a refashioned sense of self that includes a rethinking of religious traditions as well. Anil Agarwal, India's famous environmentalist, offered one such reflection when he wrote, 'I could not understand people without understanding their culture, including their religious faith. My respect for all cultures, including their faiths and secular practices, began to grow.'⁶¹ He concludes by suggesting that Hinduism's eclecticism holds within it the possibility of reform, and a reformist Hinduism can promote 'simple living, respect for each other, and respect for nature'.⁶² Another example may be found in a case study from Jainism. James Laidlaw notes that there is vigorous debate on the content of Jain tradition sparked by the embrace of environmental or animal liberation movements. So, while some regard Jainism as a privileged tradition for developing a religious ethics of nature, so to speak, others believe active development of an ethics of nature might bring Jainism back to its original tradition.⁶³

In an excellent discussion of veganism among Jains, Laidlaw further notes the different ways in which compassion is understood in Jainism and in an organization like People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, which has engaged Jains through conferences, advertising in their publications, and working with students, to promote veganism. The ideas of compassion that inform People for Ethical Treatment of Animals and Jain views of preventable animal suffering may appear similar on the surface but vary on closer examination. So when young Jains wish to participate in campaigns to improve the lives of farm animals, it does require them to re-order their hierarchy of beliefs about virtue and does ultimately lead them to rethink what it means

⁶⁰ An outstanding illustration of this last point may be found in Radhika Govindrajana, 'Beastly Intimacies: Human-Animal Relations in India's Central Himalayas', unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 2013.

⁶¹ Anil Agarwal, 'Can Hindu Beliefs and Values Help India Meet its Ecological Crisis?' in Chapple and Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology*, pp. 165–179; quote from p. 171.

⁶² Agarwal, 'Can Hindu Beliefs and Values Help India meet its Ecological Crisis?', p. 178.

⁶³ James Laidlaw, 'Ethical Traditions in Question: Diaspora Jainism and the Environmental and Animal Liberation Movements' in Pandian and Ali, *Ethical Life in South Asia*, pp. 61–80, p. 62.

to be a good Jain.⁶⁴ Again, if ecological ethics often argue for interspecies equality and a worldview where humans surrender their powers to dominate nature so as to allow the flourishing of non-human life, Jain ethics of nature may not distinguish between human and non-human life with such ease, instead recognizing the need to reduce both on the planet and realizing that in various lives people move between human and non-human forms. The basic point is that there is limited overlap between Jainism and environmentalism, and the catalogue of virtues that would define a good, eco-friendly Jain remains under negotiation.⁶⁵

Such a dynamic view of tradition, its embodiment, change, and the production of virtues can take us past the debates on whether Eastern religions, especially Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, are more likely to inculcate environmental sensibilities.⁶⁶ Critiques of these ideas, though, abound both in religious studies and social anthropology scholarship.⁶⁷ Briefly, in the latter, the argument runs that the intrinsic value of nature is not implied in nature worship. The mere presence of sacred elements of the natural world in religious traditions do not fashion an environmental ethic. Religious environmentalism in India has been attacked for its romanticism (the celebration of primitive ecological wisdom following a tradition established by Verrier Elwin among others),⁶⁸ but also suspected of hewing too close

⁶⁴ Laidlaw, 'Ethical Traditions in Question', pp. 71–73.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 77. This point is well taken, and, as argued here, consistent with MacIntyre because even as he identified stable elements of traditions to include cosmology, conceptions of self, and lists of virtues, he also insisted that traditions are sustained through narration and practice. In that process all aspects remain under deliberative inspection and undergo alterations. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 349; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 175–189.

⁶⁶ An excellent example of what is meant here can be found in Ann Gold, 'Malaji's Hill, Divine Sanction, Community Action', *Context: Built, Living, and Natural*, 3, 1 (2006), pp. 33–42.

⁶⁷ Tomalin, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity*, pp. 4–10, provides a useful survey of these critical engagements. See also Rich Freeman, 'Gods, Groves, and the Culture of Nature in Kerala', *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 2 (1999), pp. 257–302; Kelly Alley, *On the Banks of the Ganga: When Wastewater Meets a Sacred River* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Emma Maudsley, 'Hindu Nationalism, Postcolonialism, and Environmental Discourses in India', *Geoforum*, 37, 3 (2006), pp. 380–390; Meera Nanda, *The Wrongs of the Religious Right: Reflections on Science, Secularism, and Hindutva* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2005); and Lance Nelson (ed.), *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁶⁸ On Verrier Elwin, especially the deep respect with which he wrote of tribal religions in central India and their role in cultivating highly developed ethics of

to the stance of the Hindu Right and its attempts to valorize Hindu civilizational values to the exclusion of non-Hindus in plural India. But these debates reify the traditions they find either irrelevant or, worse, the source of darker shades of politics. It is more accurate and useful to think of religious environmentalism as generating a 'comprehensive and coherent narrative through its blending of expressive attitudes towards nature with an expressive style of religiosity'.⁶⁹

Religious ethics of nature, then, can also refer to a spiritual turn at times occasioned by disaffection with industrialized societies, whereby an eclectic combination of values, from varied traditions, results in a coherent attitude of concern and respect for nature.⁷⁰ Much has been written about romantic and utilitarian ideas that informed early movements in Victorian England or the post-Civil War United States for the protection of nature, rational management of natural resources, and the preservation of splendid diversity in wilderness.⁷¹ But values like humility and respect for non-human life, or ethics of co-existence and tolerance, and practices of frugal living, non-material or post-material attitudes, are all in need of examination for their religious and spiritual anchoring. Emma Tomalin provides two contrasting Indian cases that help us do this. One is the Rainbow Movement, from the United States, which arrived in India via Acharya Rajneesh followers. The other is the Vrindavan Conservation Project that seemed grounded in regional Vaisnava tradition and Krishnabhakti.⁷² It is this association of Braj with all aspects of Krishna worship that made possible an ambitious conservation project for which funding was secured from the World Wildlife Fund.⁷³ It is useful to remember that this is less a project celebrating a pre-industrial golden age when people lived in harmony with nature,

nature, see the wonderful biography by Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁶⁹ Tomalin, *Biodiversity and Biodivinity*, p. 12.

⁷⁰ A broader version of this point can be found in Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁷¹ For a short but elegant reminder of the moral values present in the utilitarian and romantic ideas about nature that developed in European thought, especially via influences from different strands of Christianity, see Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*, pp. 214–218.

⁷² Tomalin, *Biodiversity and Biodivinity*, pp. 121–149. Writing about Braj, Alan Entwistle referred to it as 'the Hindu equivalent of a "theme park" ... for devotees seeking tangible stimulus for the imagination. This was so even in the sixteenth century when devotees came to Braj and mapped everything out.' See Alan Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: E. Forsten, 1987), pp. 103–104.

⁷³ Tomalin, *Biodiversity and Biodivinity*, pp. 142–143.

but more a project in restoration ecology, that wishes to recreate what mythic texts and lyric poets described Vrindavan to be—an arboreal idyll. Seen in terms of the ethical styles that Charles Taylor describes—theism, disengaged reason, and romantic expressivism—Tomalin suggests the Rainbow Movement displays the second, and the Vrindavan project the first, with both of these movements connecting in their own ways to the third style.⁷⁴

When we reflect carefully on the range of dialogue underway between traditions and contemporary civic engagements, it is evident, as Pankaj Jain suggests, that both ascetic, or renunciatory, and affective—that is, more devotional—traditions generate ethics of nature that inspire latter-day environmentalisms, particularly through the richly textured connections between the human condition and nature that they created in earlier times.⁷⁵ As a noted anthropologist of traditional forms of ecological knowledge has observed, ‘all societies that have managed natural resources well have done so in part through religious institutions and ritual practices’.⁷⁶ It is certainly the case that the environment as a philosophical and social concern has only recently engaged thinkers from Indian religious traditions.⁷⁷ This can be said of most other religious environmental ethics too, for all of them have been forged as religions confront environmental crises. Religious traditions have, in the last 50 years, been interpreted to provide their faithful with pragmatic frameworks to make meaning of nature. World religions and local faiths have been re-examined through their texts and practices to clarify what might be the appropriate human situation with respect to nature. Here, Jain ethics offer a useful distinction between mendicant disposition and lay ethics, the latter being more flexible, in allowing the resolution of conflicts.⁷⁸

Similarly we could pay more attention to worldly values in Indic traditions. Rivers, as Anne Feldhaus observed, are as likely to signify wealth, food, love, and children, as they are sites of ascetic

⁷⁴ Tomalin, *Biodiversity and Biodivinity*, p. 147; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 495.

⁷⁵ Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance to Sustainability* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 5–16.

⁷⁶ Eugene N. Anderson, *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief and the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 7.

⁷⁷ For Jainism the point is well made by John Cort, ‘Green Jainism? Notes and Queries Toward a Possible Jain Environmental Ethic’ in Chapple, *Jainism and Ecology*, pp. 63–94. And Tomalin, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity* makes a similar point for Hinduism.

⁷⁸ Cort, ‘Green Jainism?’, p. 71.

renouncing and spiritual quest. Geographical awareness can arise from administrative arrangements, physical geography, or images and stories but it is always central to the formation of cosmology.⁷⁹ Feldhaus writes, 'a river allows people to conceptualize as a whole the land across which it flows, and to give that land religious value'.⁸⁰ For instance, the legend, across texts and oral tradition, that has the Godavari entering the ocean in seven streams links the process to the seven sages of Saptarisi, and thereby to Ursa Major, the seven-starred constellation.⁸¹ As she goes on to show with discussions of pilgrimage and the travel of deities, Maharashtra is then produced simultaneously as several overlapping regions of which only those who traverse and imagine it, or tell it and remember it, are vividly aware. Others may be oblivious, even as they inhabit a different but intersecting region, or they may have a dim awareness that does not come from the combination of imagining, travelling, remembering, and retelling that makes the region come alive.⁸² The point, reflecting on what we learn from the example of Maharashtra's imagined landscape, is that the interaction of environmental ethics (as they may arise in such landscapes) with their sacred geography might, at times, produce a religious ethics of nature that might have non-sectarian modalities but operate on sectarian principles of inclusion.

A contemporary example of this process at work can be seen in the Swadhyaya movement founded by Pandurang Shastri Athavale.⁸³ Pankaj Jain tells us, 'the mission of swadhyaya is to generate and spread reverence for humans, animals, trees, earth, nature, and the entire universe'.⁸⁴ In 30 years since the mid 1970s, 25 tree temples had been built, regenerating barren lands, in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Over a thousand devotional farming sites, and tens of thousands of water harvesting structures have been built, largely in the semi-arid regions of the western and central states of India. Evidently Athavale based his teaching on Upanishadic ideas of seeing divinity in every particle,

⁷⁹ Anne Feldhaus, *Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18. This can happen most often in the origin narratives of rivers, as Anne Feldhaus shows from her careful analysis of the Mahatmyas of rivers in Maharashtra.

⁸¹ Feldhaus, *Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India*, p. 27.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 214–219.

⁸³ An extended case study of this movement may be found in Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, pp. 17–49.

⁸⁴ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, p. 31.

including inanimate nature. Trees, in his account, exemplify the values enshrined in the Gita, of giving dutifully all that you can without expectation of return. Thereby trees live an ethical principle that humans can absorb. The inherent qualities of trees can inspire virtue in humans.⁸⁵

Swadhyaya activists had social agendas like building peace between Hindus and Muslims after the terrible violence and killings in 2002 at Godhra by organizing inter-communal tree-planting activities in graveyards and cremation grounds. The ethic at work here is one that recognizes the ways in which different forms of life are bound together, and realizes that the same divinity moves through human and nature alike. After discussing animal care, water harvesting, sewage treatment, and farming in the swadhyaya tradition, Pankaj Jain concludes that swadhyaya *prayog* is a form of environmental activism.⁸⁶ They do not label their work as environmental projects, but they sustain natural resources in thousands of Indian villages, offering glimpses of an environmental sensibility that animates nature made meaningful by particular combinations of spirituality and practical social action that improves the land, water, and the lives that depend on them.

In one village, also in western India, under the influence of a strong and authoritative leader, a comparable combination of constructive work and faith seems to be hard at work. Mukul Sharma writes, 'today Ralegaon Siddhi village looks fresh and green in a district that is hilly, dry and dusty ... the villagers have also shown an ability to learn things and manage a series of projects, artefacts, and technologies. They have successfully grafted the drip irrigation system, solar panels, and gobar-gas plants.'⁸⁷ The transformation, Sharma argues, was achieved by high levels of cooperative labour provided by villagers to restore land, water bodies, and conserve energy or generate power from renewable sources found locally. Anna Hazare rebuilt the village and its natural assets even as he restored a temple, also long in a state of decay. 'Anna believes the rebuilding of the temple gave people an emotional unity, a sense of oneness, an awareness of their identity ... the village temple slowly turned into a place of village meetings, weddings, and other religious ceremonies.'⁸⁸ He did not hesitate

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 33.

⁸⁶ Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, p. 48.

⁸⁷ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, pp. 59–63.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 72.

to play on these processes of spiritual unification and attachment to secure the participation of the villagers in the development and conservation projects that needed their labour and land.

A similar perspective, one that neither celebrates nor rejects sacred groves uncritically, can be established for tree protection as well.⁸⁹ One thing to consider is that the *devarakadu* (sacred forest) may well have been cultivated rather than protected, with a view to providing all the plants that would be needed in the ritual cycle at temple and domestic shrines. Plant diversity in this instance may reflect more accurately religious expectations and less any endemic biodiversity that might have been present in the woodlot long before it was designated a *devarakadu*.⁹⁰ The case studies provided by Tomalin on sacred forests and rivers show there is an active dialogue between nature conservationists, religious heritage conservationists, scientists, and actual users of forests and rivers about how to find an ethical *métier* for the work they do in imbuing nature with meaning to either protect it or destroy it.⁹¹ For many years, actually centuries, Bishnoi villagers in Rajasthan acted to protect animals and plants, including suffering fatally for their efforts throughout the last four decades. All this can be traced to teachings from their *guru parampara* emerging in the eleventh century CE.⁹² Unlike Athavale's new movement, the Bishnoi sustain their commitments through legends retold over centuries and values enacted in the midst of changing pressures from government, tourists, and commerce.

Based on his fieldwork in southern Rajasthan, Pankaj Jain also writes about a relatively new ritual of sprinkling saffron to protect several forest areas.⁹³ Saffron is associated with renunciation in aspects of Hindu tradition, but has also come to be the chosen colour for mobilizing political allegiances to Hindu chauvinism.⁹⁴ In this case, though, neither of these symbolic associations of saffron seems to be relevant. It is more a localized practice that appears to

⁸⁹ Albertina Nugteren, *Belief, Bounty, and Beauty: Rituals Around Sacred Trees in India* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) provides examples of the interaction of material and symbolic values in sacred groves. Also see Ann Gold, 'Why Sacred Groves Matter: Post-Romantic Claims' in Diane P. Mines and Nicolas Yazgi (eds), *Village Matters: Relocating Villages in the Contemporary Anthropology of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 107–129.

⁹⁰ Tomalin, *Biodivinity and Biodiversity*, p. 155.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–175.

⁹² Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, pp. 50–77.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–92.

⁹⁴ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, p. 7.

produce the requisite collective sensibility and commitment required for community service. Resembling activities organized under joint forest management elsewhere under government schemes, in these areas Bhil farmers select community members to act as forest guards, restrict green felling, fairly distribute deadwood, and sustainably harvest Non Timber Forest Products and grass. The interesting dimension, for our purposes, is that Bhil practices are grounded both in *adivasi* proximity to nature and local variants of Hinduism of the sort that informs the work of others.

The recent studies provided by Jain and Tomalin, then, lend substance to the idea that through their interplay with each other, and their interaction with modern ideas about nature conservation or environment protection, Indian traditions make available a portfolio of virtues and various templates for virtuous conduct. Contemporary practice is replete with examples where ascetic models that renounce material desire may help curb consumption, but devotional models produce the love of nature that leads to care, protection, nurture, and flourishing. These may be Indian instances affirming what MacIntyre more generally asserts when he says, ‘what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained’.⁹⁵ Environmental questions that have brought to the fore ethical discussions of nature have also brought to the fore the process of identifying these local forms that he writes about. They have also made possible, occasionally, very different traditions of virtues to be united when thinking about the practices that are more likely to sustain nature as part of the generative community.

From religious to political ethics of nature

In making the transition from examining religious ethics to the political ethics of nature, it is helpful to begin with a consideration of a striking example of this last point—how different traditions of virtues are amalgamated and then torn apart through ethics of nature as they interact with the environmental and political conditions of daily life. We refer here to the fine-grained study of life in the Sundarbans provided by Annu Jalais. She ‘identifies how economy,

⁹⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 245.

religion, and politics bring about conceptual and ethical changes in the Sundarbans islanders'.⁹⁶ And this happens, as she describes in vivid detail, in the processes of dwelling and inhabiting, as well as symbolically interpreting the occupational hazards in the landscape. These everyday processes of life in this region provide crucial roles to deities, spirits, demons, and supernatural forces, through whose mediation livelihoods and communities are crafted and managed.⁹⁷ Frequent and violent cyclonic storms, the lack of drinking water, and limited agrarian possibilities in the landscape make the Sundarbans a harsh environment, which, its inhabitants argue, has the effect of making them irritable and aggressive, as it does the tigers who reside in this region; thus humans and animals face similar moral challenges in this difficult terrain.⁹⁸ As Jalais notes, these moral and ethical concerns diverge quite a bit from those of many conservationists, who see Sundarbans residents as basically a threat to the habitat of tigers.⁹⁹

The everyday experience of land and forest, in the process of making a living, and socio-religious worldviews, combined in the Sundarbans to produce the sense of affinity and dissimilarity in which community formation took place.¹⁰⁰ Those who worked in forests and along the rivers, fishing, were more likely to be endangered by animals—tigers, crocodiles, snakes, and sharks—and they also evoked in their speech

⁹⁶ Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics, and Environment in the Sundarbans* (Delhi: Routledge, 2010), p. 8.

⁹⁷ Such pragmatic and spiritual inhabitation, and the patterns of cognition and representation that it calls forth, have been studied a lot in social anthropology, but I want to note here the work of Tim Ingold as particularly relevant. See Tim Ingold, 'The Wedge and the Knot: Hammering and Stitching the Face of Nature', in S. Bergmann, P. M. Scott, M. Jansdottir and H. Bedford-Strohm (eds), *Nature, Space and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 147–161; Tim Ingold, 'Epilogue: Towards a Politics of Dwelling', *Conservation and Society*, 3, 2 (2005), pp. 501–508; Monica Janowski and Tim Ingold (eds), *Imagining Landscapes: Past, Present and Future* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

⁹⁸ A similar point, from recent work, is also made in respect of the Uttarakhand Himalaya. Radhika Govindrajan notes, writing about the coeval status of humans and animals in the landscape in a positive, enabling vein, that 'animals too draw power and agency from a landscape suffused with divinity . . . like humans, the subjectivity of animals thus derives special meaning from its attachment to sacred places'. See Govindrajan, 'Beastly Intimacies', p. 5.

⁹⁹ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, pp. 8–9 and p. 148.

¹⁰⁰ Religious symbolism of the struggles through which a living may be wrested from a landscape is an important way in which an ethics of nature is constructed. For a discussion of the symbolism itself, and how it invests the daily routine with meaning, see various articles in Phillippe Descola and Gisli Palsson (eds), *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996).

and beliefs an ethos of equality between humans and animals, and across gender, faith, and economic classes.¹⁰¹ Jalais goes on to suggest that occupations produced shared cosmologies that conflicted with the forms of community that might be articulated by caste, ethnicity, or world religion. A related point is that religious practices shift with occupations and Sundarbans residents of the same community self-identify as Hindu or Muslim at different historical moments based on their current occupations. In the same household different generations may have identifiably Hindu or Muslim names, and this was explained as all depending on the forest deity—Bonbibi—for whom Hindus and Muslims were all her children.¹⁰²

It is important to see how arguments about living and working with nature in the Sundarbans often turned around the nature of faith and worship. Thus, becoming Vaishnavite may have helped some islanders identify with *bhadralok* aspirations and a form of civility, but the process of transforming their tradition also steeped these people in ritual practice that may not always, at least to other islanders who were the worshippers of Bonbibi, have come from the heart. In any case, the topography of Bonbibi worship also placed it more firmly in the lived landscape. Little shelters erected in honour of Bonbibi, Jalais points out, were always along pathways, in forests, and along banks of rivers. She writes, ‘as night falls, the islanders sit in little groups and worship Bonbibi by reading aloud her story from the *Bonbibi Johuranamah* . . . they act and sing the story . . . (of this) mediator between Allah and humans, between village and forest, and between the world of humans and that of tigers’.¹⁰³ In practical terms, as part of everyday forest entry, the work of mediation between nature and people is done by a group of crab collectors and fishers, who had visions of Bonbibi and found their vocation as tiger charmers.

Across otherwise divergent contexts, these embodied practices of translating ethic into conduct bear interesting resemblances that do suggest the invocation of certain pan-Indian traditions. When Mukul Sharma discusses rules and morality, he notes that elaborate strictures on conduct, including vegetarianism and abjuring alcohol, were inculcated through the moral authority derived from readings of Hindu tradition linking physical health and spiritual wellbeing. Such personal discipline combined with a service ethic, via *shramdaan* (the

¹⁰¹ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 52–56.

¹⁰³ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, pp. 68–69; quote from p. 69.

gift of labour), to generate support for rural development projects that were also couched as the cultivation of respect for earth, the source of all natural bounty. In this sense a nature ethic, in very pragmatic terms, was also developed in personal practice and collective work.¹⁰⁴ The rules and restrictions observed by the villagers in Ralegaon Siddhi resemble the self-imposed strictures of forest workers in the Sundarbans. As small groups arrived by boat in the forest, their rituals of checking the earth were always performed in crouched position, showing total deference, seeking forgiveness from the forest and its denizens for intruding. Disposing of waste, performing ablutions, even eating food, in the forest was prohibited. A disposition of respect and mendicancy was cultivated to return safely from the forest without incurring its wrath.¹⁰⁵

Jalais goes on to provide an account of the dynamism and contested nature of tradition and the associated debate on efficacy and virtue as certain groups within the Sunderbans start worshipping the fierce Hindu goddess, Kali. For both government officials in the forests, usually hiding in their fortified offices for fear of tigers and crocodiles, and relatively new migrant workers engaged in prawn seed collection, Bonbibi was either a figure of fun or alien as a result of her Islamic origins, and they turned to Kali instead. Such a shift in worship was expensive, for Kali asked for elaborated ritual and animal sacrifice. Jalais observes that Kali-worshipping prawn seed collectors were mostly Hindu women, entering a largely male domain made sacred in pantheistic terms by deference to Bonbibi. A risky occupation demanded, so they argued, a violent cosmic deity. Kali also provided access to modernity as a *bhadra* goddess worshipped in high caste homes and the offices of the forest guards.¹⁰⁶ The polyvalence of Kali also drew attention to the many worlds the Sunderbans islanders had to negotiate daily, between the lived landscape and the circulation of extracted value in networks of profit and merit making that extended far beyond the islands into regional social hierarchies and international markets.

These kinds of shifts in worship, and the adoption of spiritual practice that realigns primary social relations while also reordering relations with nature, are political, if not always overtly so. They produce, therefore, a political ethics of nature that bears a connection

¹⁰⁴ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, pp. 72–89.

¹⁰⁵ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, pp. 76–86.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–124.

to religious values, which might appear more instrumental as it gets more enmeshed in the realm of formal politics. And such entanglements between the religious and political ethics of nature can produce a dissonance between religious values and practices that have desirable environmental outcomes. They may also strengthen certain forms of religious community, which in India not only seem ineffective for environmental protection or conservation, but also produce patterns of social exclusion that militate against the pluralism envisaged in a secular constitution and democratic politics. These latter concerns are well investigated in a fine study of Hindu environmentalism as espoused in the realm of organized party politics.¹⁰⁷

Mukul Sharma quite correctly observes that the themes organizing Hindu nationalist views of the environment, which he defines as eco-variants of nationalism, primitivism, naturalism, and Brahminical models of an eclectic tradition, 'are not always translated into concrete political solutions to environmental problems'.¹⁰⁸ They, we could add, practise inventions of traditions of the sort observed elsewhere, too.¹⁰⁹ It is not simply, though, about reifications or distortions of religious sentiment, belief, or practice leading to lack of efficacy in political or tangible real-world outcomes. The disjuncture between perceptions of phenomena, and hence the ethical universes that they derive from, is lived as an unresolved contradiction by individuals. This, too, is the subject of recent inquiry. The dissonance between the sacredness of India's great rivers and their pollution by human and industrial waste is one that has been explored by scholars and activists. People, Eck tells us, however, distinguish between *shuddhta* (purity) and *swacchata* (cleanliness) or *pavitrata* (purity) and *gandagi* (dirtiness).¹¹⁰ And in this way, they maintain, however tenuously, a distinction between what the river is intrinsically, and what it becomes when it is burdened with what humans leave behind or dump into it.

Discrepant personal perspectives are not the only challenge when it comes to combining the religious and political ethics of nature. As Sharma shows, in his case study of the protest against the Tehri

¹⁰⁷ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹ See Cort, 'Green Jainism?', where he notes this in his account of a Jain Studies Conference he attended.

¹¹⁰ Eck, *India*, p. 185. See also Alley, *On the Banks of the Ganga*, on this point with reference to the Ganges; and David Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), with reference to the Yamuna.

Dam in the Indian Himalaya, problems persist even in large-scale and overt mobilizations. Sacred geography is made explicit in this movement, and invocations written for the occasion, and named Ganga *stuti* (veneration by recitation) by local poets, are ritually recited in political rallies. Others, drawing on legitimacy derived from asceticism endorsed the same ideas, including the notion that all Indian land, water, and vegetation originated from the sacred Himalaya.¹¹¹ Movement leaders talked about geology and religious aspects of the Himalayan region in the same breath, and they worked hard 'to use scientific knowledge to explain their perceptions of imaginative and emotional truths'.¹¹² But this attempted unification of rational and affective modes of protest created, he opines, a vehicle for the entry of Hindu nationalists and their communal agenda. Not only, then, was an ethic of nature difficult to achieve, it also became mired in exclusionary forms of cultural nationalism and anti-plural politics.

Sharma's detailed study takes us from social movements across an entire region to green regeneration in one town. As he shows, restorative projects, exemplified by the Vrindavan Project, which began in the mid-1990s under the auspices of both the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the World Wildlife Fund, faced their own dilemmas. Of the many Krishnas worshipped in India, it is Krishna 'the rigorous, moral, military, and masculine adviser of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* [who] welcomes pilgrims into the *Krishnajanmabhoomi* complex'.¹¹³ Pilgrims are also faced with the most unsanitary conditions of unremoved garbage, and municipal sewerage and drainage woefully inadequate to the demands placed on the town. The river Yamuna is heavily polluted by industrial effluents and the forests in the area are mostly depleted. The dissonance between spiritual quest and material context could not be starker. In a similar situation in Varanasi, Virabhadra Mishra, both a *mahant* at Sankat Mochan Temple and professor of Hydrology at Banaras Hindu University and long-time resident of Tulsi Ghat in Varanasi, describes this very sharp dissonance as his motivation to launch the Sankat Mochan Foundation and the Svaccha Ganga Campaign.¹¹⁴ Sometimes the scientific and religious valuation of the river generate

¹¹¹ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, pp. 113 and 121.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹¹³ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, p. 151.

¹¹⁴ Eck, *India*, p. 186.

inner conflict in the individual, and the religious ethics of nature that this may well bring to the surface can be a force for seeking solutions to environmental problems. Similar awareness is found even among less educated residents of Vrindavan, when speaking about the Yamuna.¹¹⁵

In this troubled, yet sacred landscape, the programmes of the World Wildlife Fund Vrindavan Conservation Project included planting trees, creating nature clubs and community awareness, organizing citizen's action and river watches, alongside the protection of sacred groves. They worked alongside utopian narratives about Vrindavan created by others, which may have resembled little the landscape they imagined, but followed in a tradition that was traceable at least to early modern times. And these, in turn, were about making a place that was redolent with the fragrances of a particular religiosity. Describing these concurrently occurring processes of making Vrindavan and simultaneously creating an ethics of nature, Mukul Sharma identifies accurately how nature is made visible through the lens of cultural heritage.¹¹⁶ But, as we saw in the case of the transition from Bonbibi to Kali worship in the Sunderbans, the regeneration of Vrindavan through the iconography and devotional energy of Krishnabhakti does marginalize both Dalits and Muslims, who are also among the original Brajbasi. This leads to the conclusion that 'Krishna is at one level one of the symbols of discord and resistance, the adoption of his image leading to the exclusion of certain groups from the conservation project.'¹¹⁷

Ultimately the translation of religious ethics into the political ethics of nature creates a slippage, a zone of ineffectiveness, a chasm into which the best of intentions fall, and personal awareness does not, it seems, build into a social consensus that might produce durable transformations in the environment. Having patiently described the geographies of Shiva *bhakti*, Devi worship, village deities, major Vishnu temples, and the pastoral playgrounds of Krishna and his *leela* (play), Eck also remarks on the devastation caused by industrial development, pollution, and, most recently, climate variability in India. She concludes that 'on the whole, reverence for the ways in which the divine saturates the world of material nature has not yet let to a widespread cultural and religious resistance to environmental degradation'.¹¹⁸ This evident frustration or puzzle returns us to

¹¹⁵ See Haberman, *River of Love*.

¹¹⁶ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, pp. 158–162.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹¹⁸ Eck, *India*, p. 444.

a more careful consideration of how exactly religious ethics and political ethics together foment contentious situations and create conditions for misdirected state policy or simply state neglect of pressing environmental problems.

Ethics and identity

The active construction of religious ethics of nature is never without conflict and contestation. But as contention becomes more overt, it also spills more clearly into the domain of politics and in several ways. Transitions in the affective realm can produce specific patterns of interaction between what is regarded as virtuous conduct in various traditions and related modes of managing landscapes. It is to a consideration of these processes that I will now turn. This will lead to a discussion, in particular, of nature as wilderness and cultural heritage and, thereby, as both resource and threat for national identity. These topics tend to bring into sharp relief the pervasive theme of protection that came to dominate the way in which nature was incorporated into contending nationalisms influencing nature conservation projects. But what needed protection, and the inability of governments to articulate coherent regimes or legitimations for nature protection, remains a great source of frustration for conservation advocates and scientists.¹¹⁹

Ardent conservationists are the first to accept this in their candid moments. Vivek Menon writes, for instance, that 'there is no doubt that it is difficult to quantify nature conservation, simply because we know so little about its many aspects, including about the species that we would like to conserve ... scientists often settle for sampling techniques but even these must yield multiple year data using comparable methodology for any trends to be discerned'.¹²⁰ The noted tiger conservationist, Valmik Thapar, wrote a decade ago, reflecting on his long and intense engagement with the world of governmental and international policies and programmes for tiger conservation during the 1990s, that 'one century has just ended, another has just started, but as a conservation community we have totally failed.

¹¹⁹ For a recent example of the many critiques along these lines, see Meghna Krishnadas, Umesh Srinivasan, Nandini Velho, and Sachin Sridharan, 'Turning the Page in Forest Governance: Science and Bureaucracy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xlvii, 50 (10 December 2011), pp. 10–13.

¹²⁰ Vivek Menon, 'Will need a clairvoyant to count the croaks', *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 15 August 2003.

The government, the ministry, the states, the NGOs, and people like myself ... we are totally impotent because there is hardly any effective mechanism of wildlife governance and enforcement.¹²¹ This despairing comment was made despite the fact that between 1988 and 2000 India went from having 54 national parks and 372 sanctuaries, which covered 109,652 sq km or 3.34 per cent of the country's geographical area, to 566 Protected Areas, covering 153,000 sq km or 4.66 per cent of India.¹²²

The growing trade in animal body parts and skins, and the intransigence of varied interests in forest lands and other territories included in Protected Areas, illustrate not only rampant commerce and uncontained consumption, as some conservationists describe it. The increasingly hazardous confrontations between farmers, foresters, wild animals, conservationists, and their political representatives provide evidence of the breakdown of a moral order. This tenuous order seemed to be in place in the heady times of Indira Gandhi, in which varieties of ethics of nature and nationalism converged in the service of expanding wildlife conservation infrastructure. In contrast, many conservationists, we might say, wish to develop secular ethics of nature protection grounded in rational arguments for inter-species co-existence. And they wish to promote approaches that draw on the power of scientific inquiry and innovation to provide a sceptical way forward.¹²³

We may well ask: how is it that the ethics of nature, in modern times, is reduced to the human organization of protection and sustainable use of non-human life and elements? The idea of protection can include, among others, activities pertaining to wildlife protection, flood protection, livelihood protection, the protection of rights, and the protection of health. We have already discussed the protection of nature as part of wider religious or spiritual ethics of nature in the preceding section. Now it is suggested here that the paternalist outlook of the nation-state leads to the presentation of all aspects of life in the language of protection. Looking back to the colonial antecedents of these ideas of protection, existing studies abundantly document that the protection of forests from fire was one of the earliest examples.

¹²¹ Valmik Thapar, 'The Big Cat Massacre', in Valmik Thapar (ed.), *Saving Wild Tigers, 1900–2000* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p. 396.

¹²² Menon, 'Will need a clairvoyant to count the croaks'.

¹²³ M. D. Madhusudan et al., 'Science in the Wilderness: The Predicament of Scientific Research in India's Wildlife Reserves', *Current Science*, 91, 8 (2006), pp. 1015–1020.

The organization of the protection of nature from the ill-informed and reckless farmer (or worse, the hunter-gatherer or swidden cultivator) was another persistent theme of colonial and national policies over the last hundred years.¹²⁴ Protection was always, of course, also the language that masked acts of expropriation. Resources, livelihoods, homes, and futures were taken away, by national and regional states from their citizenry, in the name of protecting everything from soils, to species, to sacred spaces, and citizens themselves. This has led to new kinds of conflicts and vulnerabilities.¹²⁵ One of the most striking and pointless forms of conflict is the exacerbation of clashes between people and wild animals in parks or urban centres.

The leopard that unexpectedly crossed boundaries around the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai, a few years ago, killed ten people and, in doing so, highlighted the plight of victims of leopard attacks all over the country.¹²⁶ While this represents the threat of wild animals in the city, a somewhat contrived phenomenon, farmers confront the same dangers more often now than before, as the formation of parks and farm abandonment combine to rapidly turn lived landscapes into wilderness in some areas like the western Himalaya.¹²⁷ The number of deaths increases dramatically if those caused by elephants, nilgai, monkeys, and tigers are added to the list. State governments have found it expedient to draw attention to these incidents as they are seeking resources from the Government of India to cover the increasing costs of paying compensation for lost lives, livestock, and crops. Malign consequences of environmental protection

¹²⁴ The studies now available that support this statement are too numerous to list in full, but key examples can be found in Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *India's Environmental History 1: From Earliest Times to the Colonial Period* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011); and Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Environmental History of India 2: Colonialism, Modernity, and the Nation* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011).

¹²⁵ See various articles in Anne Rademacher and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Ecologies of Urbanism in India: Metropolitan Civility and Sustainability* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Shifting Ground: Animals, People and Mobility in India's Environmental History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014). Impressive recent case studies include Arupjyoti Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Alf Gunwald Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage* (London: Routledge, 2012); Uday Chandra, 'Negotiating Leviathan: Statemaking and Resistance in the Margins of Modern India', unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Political Science, Yale University, 2013.

¹²⁶ Aarti Dhar, 'Man-animal conflicts a major concern for states', *The Hindu*, 8 August 2004, p. 10.

¹²⁷ Govindrajana, 'Beastly Intimacies'.

and nature conservation, or flood protection, have created, then, a new series of negotiations between fiscally impoverished states and the centre. They present new opportunities in an older relationship whereby the union government provided relief and rehabilitation assistance to state governments after natural calamities. As this example suggests, the politics of nature works in support of ecological nationalisms as well as forging new webs of connection between national states, ideologies that support them, and plural societies that relate uneasily to those ideologies.¹²⁸

Ecological nationalism may well be viewed as a combination of cultural nationalism, religious beliefs, and environmentalism that produces a political ethics of nature. This process is well illustrated in the study of the Sunderbans by Jalais. She discusses the emergence of the Sundarbans tiger, first as pest and vermin in colonial times, and then as a national icon that proved to be inconveniently savage, with a predilection for human flesh. In their own and very different styles of reasoning, both conservation science and government programmes for wildlife protection created a narrative about transgressive tigers confused by human manipulation of their landscape. They lost their moral compass in the brackish inter-tidal waters. Meanwhile Sufi pirs, fakirs, tiger charmers, Bonbibi worshippers, and others who described an ethics of nature in which poor islanders and hard-pressed tigers lived in respectful and compassionate accommodation were steadily discredited. This process was not only given voice by cosmopolitan and powerful figures associated with conservation or government, but revealed also the aspirations to regional and national communities, formed in practices of becoming modern, that informed Sundarbans islanders acting through new religious and political ethics of nature.¹²⁹

Scholars, when commenting on the proliferation of nationalist movements and their, often violent, consequences around the world since the 1990s, have focused on cultural nationalism in different ways. For some, like Anthony Smith, the evidence points in one compelling direction. Forms of social unrest and political mobilization that have dominated the terrain of political action over the last

¹²⁸ We have referred elsewhere to the neologism ‘ecological nationalism’ and its use to discuss varieties of nature-mediated ideas of national affiliation. See K. Sivaramakrishnan and Gunnel Cederlöf, ‘Ecological Nationalisms: Claiming Nature for Making History’, in Gunnel Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods, and Identities in South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 1–40.

¹²⁹ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, pp. 176–212.

20 years indicate the resilience of cultural nationalism or the enduring power of ethno-symbolic associations.¹³⁰ Others, as a useful summary by Craig Calhoun shows, continue to resist the idea that nationalism cannot easily be analysed in terms of power relations arising from processes of modern state formation. Economic globalization following the extended world economic slowdown of the mid-1980s unleashed new patterns of state formation, they argue.¹³¹ For Calhoun, resolutely state-centric approaches that ‘underestimate the many changes in patterns of culture that preceded and paved the way for nationalism’ smack of a debilitating thin-ness in the analytic frame.¹³² For the purpose of this argument it would suffice to state here that state-centric and state-renouncing nationalisms, often couched in the language of religious affinities to the nation, have both produced political ethics of nature.¹³³

An example of how state-centric nationalism works to produce political ethics of nature through a language of religious affect is found in the rise of Hindu environmentalism as defined by certain political parties in India. Mukul Sharma writes about this by exploring Anna Hazare’s constructive programmes in Ralegaon Siddhi, the movement to oppose Tehri Dam, seen by many as the embrace of Hindu environmentalism by Sunderlal Bahuguna of the earlier Chipko Movement in the Indian Himalaya, and the Vrindavan-Mathura reforestation project backed by the World Wildlife Fund. Through a study of these cases he shows how the idea of pollution, prominent both in environmental discourse and the basic tenets of

¹³⁰ See Anthony Smith, ‘The Resurgence of Nationalism? Myth and Memory in the Renewal of Nations’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 47, 4 (1996), pp. 575–598.

¹³¹ A point well illustrated by Annu Jalais, in her discussion of the impact of globalization and religious nationalism on Sunderbans dwellers, who moved away from Bonbibi worship to traditions more closely aligned with Hinduism and Islam. She writes that Hindu women engaged in prawn seed collection were active in global trade and worshipped Kali in a form stripped of all benign aspects. These activities both aligned then with new forms of cultural nationalism and state formation, but also allowed them to subtly reverse gender and economic hierarchies. See Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, p. 143.

¹³² Craig Calhoun, ‘Nationalism and Ethnicity’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19 (1993), pp. 211–239.

¹³³ The term ‘state-renouncing nationalism’ is used following T. K. Oommen, ‘Demystifying the Nation and Nationalism’, in Geeti Sen (ed.), *India: A National Culture?* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003). He defines it as ‘characterized by demands for cultural and fiscal autonomy within the federal polity’. *Ibid.*, p. 271. Also see Calhoun, ‘Nationalism and Ethnicity’, p. 235, for a discussion of ethnic nationalism as a form of group identity internal to, or crosscutting, state boundaries.

many Hindu variants of Indian social thought, is available to forms of Hindu nationalism for exclusionary political purposes. He notes, 'in the discourse of right-wing environmentalism pollution is additionally understood as the defilement of our natural, social, and cultural worlds by all that is declared unwanted, unwelcome, and alien'.¹³⁴

The work of Mukul Sharma shows the possible appropriation of religious ethics of nature in any landscape for religious and cultural nationalism. Such appropriation or rejection is also employed to produce spiritual orientations toward nature that blends faiths, or at least those that might have shared traditions. Thus selective appropriations may merge tenets, dispositions, values, and beliefs from Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and even Sufism. Let me turn to another realm, one of *adivasi* belief and practice where, caught in the politics of indigeneity, votaries of secularism and other world religions have questioned *adivasi* worldviews, if they have not romanticized them.¹³⁵ It is the state-renouncing aspect of *adivasi* ethics, both religious and political, and inevitably of nature, that is of particular interest here, as a contrast to the state-centrism that is present in Hindu nationalism, or secular and scientific ethics of conservation. Drawing on her research on Munda peoples in Jharkhand, Alpa Shah argues that institutions of community formation and leadership in these *adivasi* regions stem from a desire to keep the state away, and are derived from a cosmology that intimately weaves together the sacred and secular.¹³⁶

What they illustrate in terms of an ethics of nature comes to the fore once the elephant became the state symbol of the new state of Jharkhand, and Saranda forest was named an elephant sanctuary by the state government.¹³⁷ These moves placed forms of ecological nationalism that might be at work in the activities of the government and the perspectives of *adivasis* in their villages, struggling for livelihoods and cultural integrity, at odds with each other. This conflict was further complicated by indigenous rights and

¹³⁴ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, p. 17.

¹³⁵ An excellent overview of these issues can be found in Alpa Shah, *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010); see also Daniel J. Rycroft and Sangeeta Dasgupta (eds), *Indigenous Pasts and the Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi* (London: Routledge, 2011); as well as Bengt G. Karlsson and Tanka B. Subba (eds), *Indigeneity in India* (London: Kegan Paul, 2006).

¹³⁶ Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, p. 43.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

adivasi activists seeking to promote forms of *adivasi* religion based in nature worship as both ancient and different from Hinduism, expressive of an ethics of nature, in Sarna *dharam*, that bound local communities together in a distinctive idiom.¹³⁸ A defining aspect of this ethic was peacefulness and co-existence of all forms of life. And this was contrasted to the violence and displacement inherent in state-directed conservation, a topic profusely documented in the scholarship on nature conservation over the years.¹³⁹ This *adivasi* ethics of nature also, in its elective, democratic, and creative or inclusive spirit, not to speak of devotion, joy, and celebration as affective ways to be in nature, was unique in another respect. It stood in relief to the joyless rule-following or disciplined resource management that might be achieved, temporarily, in community based conservation programmes or schemes in which governmentalized communities contained them, or placed them in the fringes of protected areas in a hierarchized relation to the charismatic or other endangered species for whom the centres of parks were reserved.¹⁴⁰

But, Shah argues, this is a partial and somewhat romantic account of *adivasi* ethics of nature in Jharkhand. Forest protection, enforced vigorously since the 1970s, had created conditions for increased wildlife, especially elephants which routinely destroyed crops and injured villagers visiting the woods for various necessities. Young,

¹³⁸ Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, p. 109.

¹³⁹ A few notable examples would include Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts (eds), *Violent Environments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Donald Moore, Jake Kosek, and Anand Pandian (eds), *Race, Nature and the Politics of Difference* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003); Daniel Brockington, *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Paige West, *Conservation is Our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006); and, in India, Vasant Saberwal and Mahesh Rangarajan, *Battles Over Nature: Science and the Politics of Conservation* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2005).

¹⁴⁰ Various studies of community conservation or protected areas management reveal the disciplinary and restrictive nature of these programmes, especially for the forest- and wildlife-dependent people in whose lands these parks and reserves come to exist. See, for example, Arun Agrawal, *Environmentalism: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005); Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007); Tracey Heatherington, *Wild Sardinia: Indigeneity and the Global Dreamtimes of Environmentalism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010); Stephanie Rupp, *Forests of Belonging: Identities, Ethnicities, and Stereotypes in the Congo River Basin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); and Liza Grandia, *Enclosed: Conservation, Cattle, and Commerce Among the Q'eqchi' Maya Lowlanders* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

and sceptical, Mundas found it hard to venerate these elephants that had to be chased out of fields and sometimes culled.¹⁴¹ These findings in Jharkhand are confirmed elsewhere, too.¹⁴² Similarly, whether repudiating Hindu nationalists, or efforts of *adivasi* activists to sanitize their rituals to present the peaceable nature love that symbolized their ethics, Shah found her Munda informants, not unlike the forest workers of the Sunderbans, in a more ambivalent and complex relationship with nature.

It gave them sustenance, it was venerated, and was home to deities and sacred spaces, but it was also the source of misery and calamity, and home to spirits in need of placation and deference. She writes, 'today, animal sacrifice is the central ritual component of every ritual ... if blood sacrifices were not performed the spirits would bring disease, famine, even death. To the Mundas, the festivals were not about worshipping an autonomous nature ... in the form of trees and flowers; rather they were about appeasing spirits that are intimately a part of their environment.'¹⁴³ Cultivation, they argued, was an intrusion, for which penitence had to be shown by making sacrifices.¹⁴⁴ Intimate relations are established with proximate deities through sacrifices. Often these gods and spirits who demand animal offerings might live within a larger sacred landscape where they co-exist with other gods and goddesses of high Hinduism where ritual offerings are usually less bloody.¹⁴⁵

These are the elements, then, of a more nuanced and dialogic ethics of nature, in the *adivasi* world, that may produce what Shah refers to as 'sacral polity'. It is state repelling, or renouncing, because this kind of polity inspects the principles informing the establishment of

¹⁴¹ Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, p. 111–114.

¹⁴² K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Conservation Crossroads: Indian Wildlife at the Intersection of Global Imperatives, Nationalist Anxieties, and Local Assertion', in Mahesh Rangarajan and Vasant Saberwal (eds), *Battles over Nature: Science and the Politics of Wildlife Conservation* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pp. 388–417; and, more recently, reporting on evidence from Uttarakhand, Radhika Govindrajan, 'Beastly Intimacies', pp. 161–172.

¹⁴³ Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, p. 117.

¹⁴⁴ This, of course, is the complementary perspective to one where sacrifice is occasioned by a sense of being attacked from outside and it is to repulse the intrusion or incorporate it. See Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 31–32. The same ritual can be used to 'cure specific ills and on a non-specific basis to reactivate the right order of man in society and nature' (p. 37).

¹⁴⁵ This point is very well illustrated in the discussion of the concepts of *dev bhumi* and *balidan* across Uttarakhand, in Govindrajan, 'Beastly Intimacies', pp. 45–68.

modern states and finds them inadequate and unsuited to culturally relevant political structures locally.¹⁴⁶ These are the struggles, like the one about Niyamgiri that was referenced earlier in this article, where, ultimately, locally and historically, emergent ethics of nature have to confront ideas about nature that are part of a more expansive and travelling imagination. In Niyamgiri a series of historic village council decisions seem to have decisively rejected, during the monsoon season of 2013, the more powerful itinerant and invasive values that national and regional concerns may have supported. This was a process made possible, in part, by the working of Indian democracy and constitutional courts.¹⁴⁷ But, as we learn from another recent study from the Indian northeast, this was not always the case. Shillong Peak, or Lum Shyllong, is sacred to the Khasi people, yet it is now mostly denuded. In this case, the destruction of the very hill forest that fed the streams and springs, which in turn delivered water for drinking and farming, was explained as a trespass that could not be prevented by Khasi people who had, in the meantime, lost their own way.¹⁴⁸ Yet, the landscape of Meghalaya is the inspiration for rival ecological nationalisms, narratives in which its rich forest heritage and abundant rainfall may be invoked in service of different allegiances, some to the region and others to the nation-state.¹⁴⁹

These controversies erupted in the region with the implementation of the 'timber ban' in 1996 as an outgrowth of the initial matter pertaining to violations of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, in southern India, on which the Supreme Court had entertained public interest litigation.¹⁵⁰ This case, along with a series of others, has emerged since the late 1990s to become part of an ongoing complex of forest cases.¹⁵¹ They direct us to the shifting understanding of the

¹⁴⁶ As she describes it, religious and political ethics of nature combine in Munda lives across Jharkhand to create a moral order that is endorsed by spirits resident in nature and that is egalitarian and reciprocal, promoting a 'new kind of concept of democracy emerging from a sacral polity'. Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, p. 190.

¹⁴⁷ See Syanatan Bera, 'Palberi adds another no to mining in Niyamgiri', *Down to Earth*, 26 July 2013, <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/>, [accessed 20 November 2014]; and Anonymous, 'Editorial: A Glimmer of Hope', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVIII, 3 August 2013.

¹⁴⁸ Bengt Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's Northeast* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2011), pp. 4–6.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–14.

¹⁵⁰ *T. N. Godavarman Thirumalpad versus the Union of India*, Writ Petition WP(C) 202 of 1995, in the Supreme Court of India.

¹⁵¹ The other key cases were *Center for Environmental Law, WWF-I versus Union of India*, WP(C) 337 of 1995, Supreme Court of India, and *Naveen Raheja versus Union of India*, WP(C) 47 of 1998, Supreme Court of India.

highest courts on this question of rights to forested land, regional and national concerns for conservation and livelihood, and the ethics of nature involved.¹⁵² The effects of this ban on felling in Meghalaya and the variety of local responses to it are discussed in detail in many studies. Notably, they take us through national commitments to regional autonomy and special status for the northeast, as respecting the peculiar genius of hill tribes in the region, and the unique forms of property ownership and forest management that had emerged in the region.¹⁵³ In the face of such intense debate about conservation activities in the northeast, the discovery of unparalleled biodiversity has proceeded alongside renewed interest in ideas about sacred geography across the region.¹⁵⁴ It also led, of particular interest to this article, to a revival of interest in sacred groves.

Even as ordinary Khasi began to reflect on why they had allowed their sacred forests to dwindle, activists began to look for ways to regenerate these groves. They linked its traditional sacredness to ethical concerns that listed very modern ecological and economic values like biodiversity, gene pools, botanical museums, and ecotourism. Young people like Tambor Lyngdoh, who combined roles as secretary of the Hima Mawphlang, the traditional political body of the region, and president of the newly established community forest network of Meghalaya, acted as the intermediaries, deploying legitimacy gained in one sphere to mobilize resources for the other.¹⁵⁵ These efforts could not be sustained; diffuse references to attenuated tradition could not counter the very real and inexorable processes of resource extraction that were underway across Meghalaya.

This was a frontier, in that sense, where landscape ethics was a subject of ardent debate, but its regenerative possibilities were under severe stress.¹⁵⁶ The point to note here is that the combination of ethics and identity plays out differently at different scales of association, integration, and organization. In both the examples of Jharkhand

¹⁵² A fine discussion of these cases and their overall implications for emerging judicial perspectives on nature conservation and sustainable development can be found in Shomona Khanna and T. K. Naveen, *Contested Terrain: Forest Cases in the Supreme Court of India* (New Delhi: Society for Rural Urban and Tribal Initiative, 2005).

¹⁵³ Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*, pp. 86–106.

¹⁵⁴ Ambika Aiyadurai, 'Wildlife Hunting and Conservation in Northeast India: A Need for an Interdisciplinary Understanding', *International Journal of Galliformes Conservation*, 2 (2011), pp. 61–73.

¹⁵⁵ Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*, pp. 107–114.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 269–287.

and in Meghalaya, the elaboration of the political ethics of nature, partly in the language of religious ethics, takes place in the context of renegotiating the place of region in the nation. These are places where *adivasi* or indigenous identity is being constructed amid struggles over homelands, sacred geographies, and natural resources that are being commodified apace. The logic of protection and that of stewardship may be at odds here at the level of community or nation, but so opposed also are the dispositions of control and deference at a more personal level. In short, struggles to establish self-directed and world-facing ethical standards in interactions with nature are ongoing, even as they intersect, and generate fractured codes of conduct.

Conclusion

In this wide-ranging reflection on the Indian experience we have considered both personal and collective ethics of nature, as they are expressed in religious ideas and practice, political and social action, and in the realm of law and government. At the outset this article proposed that the discussion would cover religion, politics, and history. In what has gone before, the interweaving of religion and politics in the construction of ethics of nature, should have been well illustrated. That such co-production of religious and political selves, in religious and political practice, is always a historical process is something initially signalled in this article by resort to the philosophical formulations of Alasdair MacIntyre. His terms—traditions and virtues—indicate strongly the historical perspective that is always important when thinking about the emergence of ethics and the patterns of their debate, circulation, persistence, and enactment in small and large situations.

General conditions shared by all humans on earth are always experienced and understood in historical consciousness and theories of mind that bring cognition and interpretation of the world together into a simultaneous process of grasping and evaluating the conditions of life and the purpose of living. This is what Yi-Fu Tuan conveyed in writing about cultural history as always being about the material transformation of nature.¹⁵⁷ Such transformation is grounded in ethical perspectives and they are, in turn, often based in religion.

¹⁵⁷ Tuan, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*, p. 15.

In the spirit of the point being made, Maurice Bloch also suggests that we find a way to combine social and cognitive approaches to the study of religion, and perception more generally. This is because the social is found in the cognitive capacities of humans but not in a simple evolutionary sense. This combined socio/cognitive plane of consciousness ‘which supplements and sometimes competes with the connectedness of kinship, is fuzzily available to our consciousness’.¹⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the work of Bloch, the historical dimension is made more explicit. He writes that human cognition should be viewed as a process that combines historical change and individual cognitive developmental transformation occurring together.¹⁵⁹ In his own words, this is further clarified in these terms: ‘the specificities which human history creates should not be thought of as merely creating an environment for people but also, to a certain but significant extent, creating the very people who live within that environment’.¹⁶⁰

In the realm of religion and its role as a source for ethics of nature we examined numerous examples, which could have been discussed as anthropomorphism. This would not have been a particularly illuminating perspective, so we did not go down that road. For, as experts on this topic have observed, anthropomorphism and animism appear in religion because they are plausible interpretations and also the means of influencing things and events.¹⁶¹ It appears ‘humans face a world that is complex and finally inscrutable, and in which the most important components are human, [who] are capable of concealing themselves, and are conceived as essentially unobservable . . . a world with which we are prepared to deal by theory of mind, by related sensitivities to such diverse phenomena as motion, faces, and apparent traces of design, and by corresponding capacities for social action’.¹⁶² Ethical perspectives on nature emerge, inevitably, to grapple with the challenges posed by these processes, where cognition and the making of meaning are in a tight embrace.

¹⁵⁸ Maurice Bloch, ‘Durkheimian Anthropology and Religion: Going in and out of Each Other’s Bodies’, in Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw, *Religion, Anthropology and Cognitive Science* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), pp. 63–80; quote from p. 78.

¹⁵⁹ Bloch, *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁶¹ Stewart Ellliott Guthrie, ‘Anthropology and Anthropomorphism in Religion’, in Whitehouse and Laidlaw, *Religion, Anthropology*, pp. 37–62, see, in particular, p. 56.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

They are made practical in sacred geographies, as we saw, or geographies of religious and ethical imagination, where virtues are inculcated, respect is part of the disposition, and inter-species justice and mutuality are recognized as positive values. Another way to think of these ethical landscapes is as alternative geographies. These are cultural and historical modes of being in nature that interpret the environment in the light of the successes and failures of modernity and its enterprises of social transformation. They propose that ‘we need more sympathy for the earth, a widening of our understanding of the world that incorporates feeling with thinking, moral values as well as scientific principles’.¹⁶³ This idea is located in the Indian experience by the distinguished scholar of religion and landscape ethics, Ann Gold. She argues that expressive and ritual traditions may reveal meaningful connections between humans and the landscapes that feed their bodies and minds.¹⁶⁴

Gold goes on to express very well, for the purpose of this article, the ethics of nature that can be found in what otherwise appear to be contending values—those of villagers, environmentalists, scientists, and government resource managers—especially when they seem to be in perennial discord. We have to, instead, identify and work with the political and moral continuities between humans and their physical world. She describes various Rajasthani ways of establishing these continuities like ‘a talking tree that appreciates human values; a stone bent by reverence; a poisonous snake emerging to dispatch a greedy hunter; absence of animal disease effected by human cooperation and ritual. In these Rajasthani ways of consuming, conceiving, and controlling the environment we have encountered neither rural idylls or oneness with nature, nor agonistic struggles of self-maximizing human beings against a hostile tropical wildness’.¹⁶⁵ Rather we should see, as this article has argued, for India more generally, a continuing dialogue between available tradition and contemporary virtues; a process of constructing an ethics of nature through reflection, expression, attachment, emotion, and renunciation—or at least efforts at detachment—that unfold in historical time and places. These are processes with consequences for personal and social futures

¹⁶³ John Rennie Short, ‘Alternative Geographies: From Cosmography to Geography’, in Philip Arnold and Ann Gold (eds), *Sacred Landscapes and Cultural Politics: Planting a Tree* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 27–34.

¹⁶⁴ Ann Gold, ‘Story, Ritual and Environment in Rajasthan’ pp. 115–137, in Arnold and Gold (eds), *Sacred Landscapes*, see, particularly, p. 131.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

that are constantly the subject of personal practice and social action, government policy and judicial decisions. They are about meaningful transformations of nature as traces of cultural history.

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