Chapter 1
World Views and Issues Around Nature

Abstract This chapter explains the background to the conceptualisations of nature. It starts with a general historical overview of world views of different ancient civilisations about nature. The introduction then lists the philosophical issues and themes that are prominently in discussion around the concept of nature and the relationship of human beings to the non-human world. These themes and issues will form the context for further discussions in the succeeding chapters.

Keywords Nature · World views · Conceptualisation of nature · *Physis* · *Tzu-jan* · Woman and nature

1.1 Introduction: Diverse World Views of Nature

The world we know of and inhabit as living beings is our planet Earth that we sometimes call our home. The Earth with its resources such as air, water, and soil sustains us and other forms of life. Many writers have remarked that life as it occurs on this planet is a rare and wondrous thing. Sages in ancient India have even composed hymns in praise of this life force and said that it is the essence of all creation. While all of us acknowledge and recognise the uniqueness of ourselves and the cohabitants of our world, as of now, we seem to be strangely neglectful of the very resources that sustain us. The demands that we impose upon our planet are causing the depletion, pollution, and wasteful destruction of habitats, water, and air. In a short period of our human history, as a species we have transformed our habitat in many irreversible ways. When we ask the question as to what is it that sustains us and what are we are dependent on, the sages in pre-modern India would have said "life". Instead, today we would easily use either of these two words that are closely related—nature and environment—to talk of our dependency. Not only are we aware that we depend on nature, we are also clear that we are altering and changing it in many ways. We talk of destroying nature, polluting our environment, or causing an ecological crisis to refer to the state of crisis we, as humanity, believe

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ourselves to be in. Though "nature" and "environment" are used interchangeably in common parlance, specifically the term environment is associated with a somewhat functional definition. It is our surrounding that provides us conditions for growth and development and also is a source of danger and destruction. Sometimes, the environment (in ecological sciences) is described by scientists as consisting of both biotic and abiotic components of our planet.

The second term "nature", however, is not that easily defined or interpreted. This term is linked to many interpretations and discourses—culturally, politically, and scientifically. The study of the concept of nature has become the foundational enquiry of a relatively new discipline of philosophy called environmental philosophy. The scope of environmental philosophy is to understand the relationship between human beings and their environment from different perspectives including the belief and knowledge that communities hold about nature, their ethical, and moral interest towards nature and the various pre-suppositions that exist in such perspectives.

The history of the idea of nature and the history of our relationship to it have been influenced by a number of sociological, historical, cultural, and political factors. There is also a growing interest in studying these contexts to understand the implication of such influences on human attitude and behaviour towards nature. Brennan and Lo (2010) write:

> A great deal of work has theorised the pathology of contemporary environmental crises suggesting that some of our underlying cultural, religious and political beliefs and attitudes are responsible for our behaving badly towards the environment. In other words, our religious worldviews, our basic political and social ideas, are not environmentally innocent (p. 7).

One could also say that these conceptualisations are not only influenced by the sociocultural contexts of various communities of people, but one can also posit that they would also vary according to the language sensibilities of these different communities. Various thinkers have attempted to trace the history of the idea of nature (Collingwood 1945) and the conceptualisations and discourses around nature (Soper 1995) and its position within the framework of political ecology (Latour 2004). Many overviews of conceptualisations of nature that have been published as edited papers (Callicott and Ames 1989; Marshall 1992; Leiss 1994) deal with specific perspectives, regional interpretations, and periods of history.

A brief review of literature in environmental philosophy brings to our attention the various meanings and interpretations of nature, during different periods of time even within the same culture. What this survey indicates is that the idea of nature was linked closely to what one may call a "world view" of these civilisations. The world views were inclusive of idea of nature in a holistic sense and these conceptualisations predate our current understanding of nature.

Brunn and Kalland (1995) point out that concepts such as nature and others are powerful, multifaceted abstractions. Conceptualisation of nature straddles the objective world we inhabit as well as our subjective experience of it. They suggest "The qualities of our environment conceived by such concepts, are products of

human consciousness as much as they are universal and objective" (p. 9). To unpack the nuances of the concept of nature and explore its extensions and implications is significant, particularly in non-Western traditions of thought. However, one would also have to contextualise such conceptualisations within the larger framework of existing interpretations of nature and also within the contemporary eco-ethical issues such as conservation and sustainability. We could begin this exploration by first examining some earlier understandings of nature and the environment in pre-modern traditions.

One finds that traditional philosophies of nature were concerned with the metaphysics of nature and humanity, cosmological narratives, and theories of the creation of the natural world. Besides rich descriptions of the natural world and its composition and components, many of these traditions included conceptualisations of nature that were related to particular historical, religious, and cultural contexts, within which such ideas emerged. We find that many of the later developments of conceptualisations and nature find their roots in some of these ancient pre-modern traditions.

1.2 Early Greek Views

Early Greek philosophers such as those of the Myelasian School and others subscribed to the view that "matter" and "life" are inseparable. This view is referred to as the hylozoic view. The Greeks believed that there are natural things that are self-produced, as opposed to things produced by skill, and that all of these natural things constitute a single "world of nature." These things could be collectively spoken of, since they shared other qualities besides naturalness. One such important property of these natural things was that they were all made of a single substance or material.

Copleston (1962, 1993, p. 21) calls the philosophy of this period as "instances of abstract materialism". He writes that the world, according to most of these thinkers, was made of an essential, imperishable stuff. He also suggests that these early philosophers assigned the idea of a primitive element being "the stuff" of the universe, though they were not materialists. This stuff was not just limited to the physical matter, but was also the stuff of thought and souls. It was substance and power, and it was also divine. It lacked any particular quality such as solidity, liquidity, or gaseousness. In this cosmos, which was made of this one-stuff, man and nature were in a continuous hierarchical order. The Pythagorean school was pantheistic in its basic outlook. Since they believed in the transmigration of souls not only across the human body but also across animals, they abstained from eating meat.

If that is so, then all life is akin, and the kinship of nature is another Pythagorean tenet. It went further than we might think, for the animate world extended further for them than it does for us. They believed indeed that the universe as a whole was a living creature (Guthrie 1950, p. 34–35). The term physis, translated by Romans into the word natura, represented a conceptualisation of "origin and growth of the

universe in its entirety". The concept of nature was "physis" that existed in contrast to "psyche"—the life principle. Pojman (2003) suggests that a change did not occur in Greek thought:

> But this narrowing of physis in the direction of "physics" did not occur in the way that we imagine today. We oppose the psychic, the animated, the living, to the "physical." But for the Greeks all this belonged to physis and continued to do so even after Aristotle. They contrasted it with what they called thesis, thesis, ordinance, or nomos, law, rule in the sense of ethos (p. 1192).

Later, the same principle is contrasted with the artificially made human products: "The meaning of physis is further restricted by contrast with techneē—which denotes neither art nor technology but a knowledge, the ability to plan and organize freely, to master institutions (cf. Plato's Phaedrus). Techneē is creating, building in the sense of a deliberate producing" (p. 1192).

Another significant point is that nature as physis was never equated directly to the earth or the earth—goddess Gaia. McClure (1933, p. 120) confirms this: "No Greek ever identified physis with the earth." However, the name of this ancient goddess is now used in a specific movement of ecological thought that originated from the recognition that the earth is one of the rarest planets we know that can sustain and support life. A resurrection of the concept of the Gaia as a living organism (often called the Gaia hypothesis) has resulted in strong appeal for environmental ethical behaviour. Lovelock (1982) explains the main ideas of his hypothesis thus:

> We have since defined Gaia as a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet. The maintenance of relatively constant conditions by active control may be conveniently described by the term 'homoeostasis.' (p.10)

Since the Greek tradition bequeathed its conceptualisations to Western traditions of thought, further descriptions will be surveyed in Chap. 2.

1.3 Early Indian Views

In the archaeological evidence found in the Indus valley excavations, a seal portrays a seated figure surrounded by many animals. Many of these seals portray only animals such as the bull or the elephant, and trees and leaf motifs. Thapar (2002, p. 84) suggests that these seals could have been used for stamping packages or as identification of merchants or supervisory managers. However, the representation of non-human elements in the seals of one of the oldest river valley civilisation draws our attention to an understanding of a world that is not exclusively human.

Some of the earliest views of nature in Indian thought are found recorded in textual traditions called the Vedas. Beginning with the worship of nature gods and reverence hymns to the earth, a large part of the belief system of these earliest

thinkers was deeply influenced by close observation and contact with nature. Marshall (1992, p. 2) refers to the Vedas as having "a life-affirming and earthy naturalism" parallel to their deeply spiritual messages. He writes "At the same time, the Ṛgveda ('Songs of Knowledge') reveal an intimate bond between the believer and his or her environment, a sense of kinship with the spirit that dwells in all things". Macdonell (1927, p. 2) describes the phenomenon of nature gods in Vedic mythology: "The foundation, on which Vedic mythology rests, is still the belief, surviving from a remote antiquity, that all objects and phenomenon of nature with which man is surrounded, are animate and divine". The Vedic hymns also certainly demonstrate a love for the beauty of the environment. A number of metaphors and descriptions of the natural world are linked to eulogies. Some rituals described in the Vedas are invoked in many traditions of thought and persist in rituals and practices.

One of the most noteworthy ideas around the concept of nature found in the world views of the Vedic period is that of the substantive oneness of all creation, described first in the spiritual sections of the Vedas called the Upaniśads. With the development of Hinduism, we find various traditions of thought continuing to engage with nature, both spiritually and morally. Many philosophical schools in India that engaged with the concept of nature in later period were influenced by the ideas of the Vedic period. Some of them will be discussed in detail in the forthcoming chapters.

1.4 African Views

As with the case of Indian thought, it is certainly unfair to club the diverse streams of African thoughts into a monolithic "African view of nature". However, African scholars have suggested that it is possible to trace some common ideas among the various tribes, peoples, and communities of the region. Although most communities believe in a God, the African view of nature is described as an inclusive notion, with the tribe, person, and land forming a single unit. Nobles (2000, pp. 280–281) notes that the two fundamental operational orders among the different tribes of Africa are the ideas of being one with nature and the notion of survival of one's people. He writes "Hence the African experience defines man's place (role) in nature's scheme" (p. 281). Callicott (1994) unpacks the understanding of this "bio-communitarianism" further:

> An African's identity, nevertheless, is not confined to his or her role in the community. African social psychology is not modelled on the anthill, the beehive, or the termite colony. Each individual is a distinct person, with his or her unique blend of personality, needs, desires, talents, and destiny. But, far more vividly than in the modern Western worldview, individuality is not only counterbalanced by community identity but one's unique individuality is defined in part by one's social relationships and expressed through social interaction (p. 166).

1.5 Chinese Views

The Chinese concept of nature can be understood from the ancient philosophy of Taoism prevalent towards sixth century BC. This philosophy stressed the idea of living in harmony with nature. In contrast was the Confucian world view that promoted a strict hierarchy of nature and human beings. Both these philosophies drew their inspiration from the principle of *Tao*, sometimes called the "natural way", which was conceptualised as a flowing and creative process consisting of the two complementary forces, *Yin* and *Yang*.

Marshall (1992, p. 9) contrasts the two schools and their different perspectives: "The Confucians celebrate traditionally 'male' virtues like duty, discipline and obedience, while Taoists promote the 'female' values of receptivity and passivity". He points out that the "former wish to dominate and regulate nature; the latter to follow and harmonize with it". Marshall (1992, p. 9) also points out that this struggle between the two world views is still with us. According to him, the Chinese phrase that is translated as nature is *tzu-jan* (also written as *tsu-jan*) and this refers to the idea of spontaneity, a creation that happens by itself without the creator. This stresses upon the perspective that nature is self-created. In Lao-Tse, the following passage speaks of *tsu-jan*: "Man is based on earth, the earth is based on heaven, heaven is based on the Way (Tao) and the Way is based on nature (*tsu-jan*)" (Lao-Tse, quoted in Tellenbach and Kimura 1989, p. 153). The school of Taoism had a view of nature that required one to relate to nature without pretences (Parkes 1989): "The tao way of relating to nature is to see through and withdraw the ego-generated anthropomorphic projects that vitiate our relations with natural phenomenon, allowing us to live in what Chuang-tzu calls 'a full view of heaven [T'ien]" (p. 80).

According to Taoist thought, the world is a sphere divided into sections represented by *Yin* and *Yang*, which is described as oriented in particular directions.

> The world is a circle (or a sphere) divided along two planes. The vertical cleavage goes from north (seen as down below) to the south (up above): on the left-hand side is Yang, on the right-hand, Yin. The other cleavage is horizontal and marks off an upper half, which is Yang, from a lower half, which is Yin. As a result, the sphere is divided into four parts: the southeast is Yang, and the northwest is Yin the other two parts are made up of Yin and Yang combined, with the northeast sector, according to the Chinese, that of Yang in Yin, and the southwest that of Yin in Yang (Robinet 1997, p. 9).

According to Robinet (1997), *Yin* and *Yang* are not mystical male and female energies as is popularly understood. They are "lines of force", interacting with each other in complex and contradictory ways. She clarifies

> We might well say that Yin and Yang are two extreme poles, two ideals with only a conceptual and didactic existence. They do not exist in the world, but all things tend toward them to one degree or another. They govern a liturgical division of the universe and its double generative process. They are the basis of the difference that gives rise to attraction, as well as of all development and the multiplicity produced through their combinations (p. 9).

Taoism places the human at the centre of the cosmos and urges the formations of interconnections that will lead to a relationship between the aspirant and the cosmos, a rediscovery of what they call the prime mover: "… the purpose of Taoism is to create a clear and close union between the interior and exterior world. The exterior world is understood above all as consisting of Nature, the cosmos, the natural world, and only secondarily of human society" (p. 18).

Chinese neo-Confucianism is regarded by Tucker (1991, p. 62) as having a cosmological sensibility that is characterised by holism and dynamism. The microcosm and the macrocosm coconstitute the unified nature which is seen as interrelated. Many texts such as the *I-Ching* elaborate on the different aspects of these correspondences and correlations (Tucker 1991). She explains "Within the context of correspondences the relation of oneself as microcosm to the universe as macrocosm is a central theme arising directly from the underlying idea of organic wholeness" (p. 63). According to Wei-ming (1989), the Chinese conceptualise their cosmos as composed of *ch'i* that can be translated as matter-energy (p. 71). He adds that the universe is viewed as a chain of being, an "all-enfolding harmony": "It means that nature is all-inclusive, the spontaneously self-generating life process which excludes nothing." The word *tzu-zan*, used in modern Chinese captures this meaning, claims Wei-ming (1989, p. 71). Such transformation of the universe is not linear. In this conceptualisation, nature that is ever-expanding "exhibits three basic motifs: continuity, wholeness, and dynamism". Unlike the Taoist thought, the world is not a sphere. Ming suggests that Chinese cosmogony is an open system that can be referred to as spiral or cylindrical but as transformational. He claims that the ever-expanding universe of transformation does not lend itself to geometric metaphors (p. 71).

1.6 Japanese Views

According to Shaner, there are three distinct traditions of philosophy in Japan that have had influence culturally: (1) Buddhist philosophy (from Korea and China); (2) Confucian philosophy (from China); and (3) Shintō (which is indigenous). The Japanese term that corresponds to nature is "shi-zen" or "*ji-nen*" (Tellenbach and Kimura 1989). The term is derived from the Chinese term *tzu-jan* and almost corresponds to its meaning in many ways. Hubertus Tellenbach and Bin Kimura (1989) point out that before this term was used in Japanese, there seemed to be no single concept of nature that was inclusive of all natural things. They suggest that there was a term *onozukara* which represents "an objective state which begins of itself without any external mediation" (p. 153). They explain that this in contrast to the subjective state that someone carries into completion, a state of human contrivance called *mizukara* (p. 156). According to them, *shi-zen* has an original Japanese meaning that "… names something like 'mountain, river, ocean, plant, animal, rain, wind etc.,' signifying therefore a way of being, which exists without human intervention" (p. 157).

The indigenous tradition of Japan encouraged an attitude to nature that did not seek to read meanings beyond the simple and direct perception of nature. This "non-symbolic attitude" to nature was 'natural' in the sense of its purity, sincerity, and simplicity (Tellenbach and Kimura 1989). Nature thus had intrinsic value within this world view.

We find that in all of the above discussions, there are two themes that may be of interest to us. One recurrent theme is the idea of the celestial bodies, stars, and the planet Earth and the description of the creation of the cosmos that figure predominantly in narratives and explanations of these world views. In other words, the attempt of these ancient scholars is to give an explanation of the process of creation, provide an exhaustive list of the various elements of the cosmos, and describe how they are subject to a natural order or control. The second theme that may be of greater interest to philosophers of nature is the place of the human being within the grander scheme of the cosmos. We find that many of pre-modern philosophies also laid great emphasis on describing the relationships between elements and beings, while ordering and classifying them. We shall see in Chap. 2 how some of these attempts were to have a great impact on the idea of nature.

At this point, a note on the objectives of this book may help the reader find coherence in the various chapters and themes within. The book conceptually shifts between two themes. Firstly, there is an attempt to distinguish the conceptualisation of nature in Indian traditions of thought, largely through selected texts from the body of philosophical literature available in Sanskrit. A few references to other traditions that are oral or landscape-related traditions will also be taken up for discussion as they are significant to some themes and cannot be ignored. Secondly, there is an attempt to engage in some speculations about how these conceptualisations would make sense in contemporary environmental context. There is of course a possibility that such speculations may not have any direct implication for the ecological crisis, but it is hoped that they will stimulate newer and nuanced ways of thinking about nature. Such understanding may also indicate future directions for conceptual change and ideas around eco-ethical action. Further, pragmatic interventions can be then derived from eco-ethics, informed by alternative conceptualisations. There is of course in such a project, an implicit philosophical objective, that of resolving philosophical and conceptual issues within environmental philosophy itself. Before we go on to explore the idea of nature in some detail, we must explore some of the key issues around the conceptualisation of nature that are of interest to us today. These questions may form a framework or a background for us to understand how one could discuss conceptualisation of nature in Indian traditions of thought. Understanding some of these issues will also enable us to foreground some debates around the concept of nature.

1.7 Issues Around the Concept of Nature

We have seen very briefly the diverse interpretations and meanings of nature in various civilisations of the past. Today, however, we find that most (if not all) of these types of conceptualisations are no longer prevalent in the way our modern world thinks and discusses nature. Environmental philosophers in the early twentieth century began to examine the complexities of the relationships between human beings and nature. This area of study has gained importance, given the current state of the world where there seems to be more and more evidence every day to confirm that human action is affecting the environment in complex ways that are both unprecedented and unsustainable. On one hand, there seems to be an attempt to interpret nature as a uniform, measurable, and understandable entity on the part of the various sciences. On the other hand, many environmental philosophers agree that the current view of nature has various shortcomings that do not admit perspectives on new ecological challenges facing us today (Larson 1987). The subsequent section is an attempt to unpack and describe some of those issues around nature that are significant to the cause of ecological thinking in particular.

Within the wide range of environmentalist concerns about the impact of human beings on nature and the environment, it is clear that many ideological, philosophical, and social pre-suppositions come into play. We find that most of the discourse on nature has focused on nature as being representational. Any representation then is contained within a set of pre-suppositions and cultural values that are held by the people making representations. Fundamental to the study of these representations is the conceptualisation of "nature". It can be posited that fundamental world views about nature, especially those pre-suppositions that have had a direct effect on the way human beings relate to nature, are given by particular conceptualisations of nature. In the field of conservation and conservative action for instance, phrases such as "protect nature" or "nature conservation" are commonly used. Hidden within these phrases is an idea that one can recognise nature and identify it when we see it and make uncomplicated choices between natural things that are to be protected and unnatural things that are not nature. The question is can we really make such uncomplicated choices? Though the direct connection between conceptual resources and actual practices cannot be proved, yet it is clear that a series of conceptual elements form a background to any world view, including the ecological and these do influence people's attitudes.

Prevalent literature in this area lays claim to the opinion that world views form an important framework for looking at human relationship to nature. The notion of "world views" carries within it a sense of historical, cultural, and geographical framework that goes far beyond the traditional engagements of philosophy. Even though pre-suppositions about the natural world may not affect behaviour, associative values impact a large number of individual and community decisions about nature. Lafreniere (1985) insists that "the majority of individuals living in any culture are motivated by a particular world view". He argues that, to effectively create an environmental ethics education programme, it is important to study and

understand world views. Such an understanding is important in order to deal with the causes of the environmental problems which are cultural, rather than deal with the symptoms that are evident in the natural world, he notes.

1.8 Definition of Nature: Ambiguities and Interpretations

If nature only represented the world of plants, trees, and animals around us, why would there be any ambiguity? We are often so sure of its meaning when we use the word nature in our daily conversations. But if we further ask ourselves what exactly nature is, or ask if the fly on our kitchen wall is a part of nature, we have to pause and really think about what we are referring to when we say "nature". This ambiguity around conceptualisations is because "nature" is much more than a mere descriptive word for the physical reality of our surroundings, or what we would call the natural world. Many philosophers are of the opinion that the idea of nature has been subject to various themes of reduction—such as naturalism or Cartesian dualism—and also to the idea of a static nature that is the object of conservation and management programmes.

Even when used in everyday language, the term nature has many layers of meaning given by its historical and cultural contexts of the past. Soper (1995, p. 9) refers to these various layers as a "symbolic load", that the term carries. Most of this "symbolic load" has been gathered through a long historical process of conceptualisations and usage of the term by various communities and cultures particularly in Western philosophical thought. The interpretation of nature gets further complicated within newer contexts such as conservation efforts or within the frameworks of newer disciplines such as ecology or conservation biology.

As we search for the first use of the word nature, we find the word *natura* in Latin that gave us the term nature. According to Williams (1989), who explains it clearly, "nature" comes from the word *natura* in Latin, the past particle of "*nasci*", the root word which means "to be born" (same as the root of "native", "innate", etc.). Its earliest meanings are also associated with the essential quality of something (sounds vague). However, as we have noted earlier, the term "*physis*" was translated by Romans into the word "*natura*". "*Physis*" in Greek thought particularly was associated with growth.

However, though there were many possibilities of the study of nature among the different schools of Greek thought, Western philosophy seemed to move away from the more organic and active meanings of nature. Callicott and Ames (1989) also point out that the one tradition that lent itself to the development of a particular system of knowledge that we now know as science was that of natural philosophy:

> The first Greek philosophy was natural philosophy, and although many ecologically adaptable or environmentally useful ideas were broached, the natural philosophy that was culturally selected by this dialectic of Western intellectual history, and thus survived to bequeath its characteristics to the modern period is atomism (p. 5).

Many issues surrounding the idea of nature are related to this one dominant understanding of nature that developed from this particular school of thought. However, it is possible that this reductive understanding of nature is no longer sufficient to deal with the complex questions of an ecological crisis. Nature, in its simplest literal meaning, refers to the non-human components of the universe. But, this is a dominant view derived from Western traditions of thought. On the other hand, there are scholars who question the very reality of "nature" itself. In the next section, we explore one of the issues that have arisen out of the interpretation of "nature".

1.9 Place of Humans in Nature: Inclusive and Exclusive Views

The history of conceptualisation of nature is dependent on the sociocultural narratives and discourses of societies, making a strong case for the social construction of nature. Under this category of understanding nature as something culturally interpreted, different ideas about human relationship to nature is also proposed. Some people believe that human beings are included in a "nature" that refers to the natural world at large, while others believe that human actions and the impact on the planet actually exclude the human beings from the rest of nature (as illustrated by the commonly used phrase "man and nature").

The idea that human beings are not like other beings by virtue of their rationality and creative powers can be traced to early Greek thought. The Greeks also believed that there are artificial objects produced by human contrivances which are very different from natural kinds of things.

White (1967), whose essay is regarded as one of the first critiques of a Western view of nature, helped to initiate debates in the area of a largely human-centred thinking of Western religions and suggests a more nuanced, egalitarian view of nature. He writes:

> Especially in its western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen…. Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions [except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism], not only established a duality of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for is proper ends (p. 1205).

Once there is the predominance of a non-inclusive view of nature or a view under which somehow the human beings and their value is given more prominence, we find that the binary of humans and non-human nature becomes a duality that has deeper implications for our ethical stance towards nature. Soper (1995) argues that the demarcation between humans and nature is fundamental to any prescription in ecology or conservation. In other words, in the debate between Humanism and Ecology, the questions of "what is nature?" and "where is the place of human being in nature?" cannot be ignored. Environmental philosophers believe that a conceptualisation of nature which does not distinguish between the human and the

non-human world would create a better framework of environmental ethics. For instance, the first United Nations' World Conservation Strategy, published in 1980, has this to state:

> Ultimately the behaviour of entire societies towards the biosphere must be transformed if the achievement of conservation objectives is to be assured. A new ethic, embracing plants and animals as well as people, is required for human societies to live in harmony with the natural world on which they depend for survival and well-being. The long term task of environmental education is to foster or reinforce attitudes and behaviour compatible with this new ethic (IUCN report, 1980).

As a discipline, environmental ethics is very recent, but human concern for the environment and nature in the form of practices has always existed in the past. The field of ethics, also called moral philosophy, involves systematising, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour. Ethical frameworks, which have traditionally dealt with the behaviour of human beings towards other human beings or at the most towards other living beings, are now applied in the immense task of research in environmental ethics. In the literature on environmental ethics, the distinction between instrumental value and intrinsic value (i.e. non-instrumental value) has been of considerable importance.

The idea that nature has an intrinsic value apart from the utilitarian values it has for the human beings is a significant idea that forms the basis for what is called "bio-centric" view of nature. Some philosophers like Taylor (1986) believe that such a conceptualisation of nature would do away with the exploitative paradigm with which human beings relate to nature. Brunn and Kalland (1995) indicate that moral obligations in Asian cultures are based on continuity of the human and the non-human:

> Nature and morality are closely linked in many Asian cultures, man and environment forming a moral unity. Yet as there is no absolute good or evil, there is no absolute morality, at least not for commoners (p. 11).

One value that has had a great impact on Indian thought even in the current age is that of non-violence/non-injury (*ahiṃsa*). This value comes to us from the traditions of Sāṃkhya-Yoga and Jainism. Many scholars appreciate the overarching moral considerability of *ahiṃsa* and also acknowledge other forms of empathetic beliefs in later movements of Hinduism such as *Bhakti* (devotional) traditions. Others argue that it is not really required to grant intrinsic value to nature to create a framework for environmental ethics. These philosophers believe that as human beings who are separate from nature and use nature for our own survival, we would still care for the environment because ultimately, human welfare depends on the environment. The argument is that it is unnecessary to invoke the idea of an intrinsic value of nature for conservation. This view is referred to as "anthropocentric".

1.10 Nature as Pristine Wilderness

Henry David Thoreau (2001) says in his essay *Walking*, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World”. Wilderness is a problematic concept in environmental philosophy that has at its root the distinction between what can be called natural versus what has been worked with by human beings, the unnatural or modified. Wilderness particularly refers to landscapes that are exclusive of human interference. Lewis (2007) also distinguishes between the quality of wildness and the concept of wilderness in terms of the scale of the landscape areas that require to be designated as wilderness:

> Wilderness is a concept devised by humans to define a particular type of wild environment —with its plants, animals, and ecosystems—and it is entirely appropriate to declare that wilderness, as distinct from wildness, must be large on a human scale. Wild nature can be found everywhere; wilderness cannot (p. 6).

The popularity of the idea of the wilderness being invoked for conservation is based in a particular history of ideas in Western thought, particularly in North America. Nelson (2008) remarks:

> Wilderness, unlike many of the words for the things within a Wilderness area, is not readily translatable into a wide variety of languages. This linguistic lack forms, in part, the first critique of the received view-that it is ethnocentric (emanating from one culture and inappropriately applied to other cultures) (p. 201).

Callicott and Nelson (1998) suggest that wilderness is received idea and not a natural category of understanding nature. Critiques of wilderness and debates around the reality of wilderness are prevalent and much discussed. Cronon (1995) suggests that the problem of wilderness is embedded in two broad conceptual transformations, the romanticism and the frontier imaginations both of which culturally construct wilderness as value-laden. He writes:

> The two converged to remake wilderness in their own image, freighting it with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology, which is why it is no accident that so much environmentalist discourse takes its bearings from the wilderness these intellectual movements helped create (pp. 474–475, in Callicott and Nelson 1998).

He points out that the cultural construction of nature as pristine, imbues it with an almost sacred quality. Landscape experiences were not just pleasurable experiences but began to be articulated as divine experiences. The landscape experience is likened to the experience of divinity, beyond aesthetic value and the joy of being in nature. The second cultural movement that impacted the idea of wilderness was the frontier imagination. According to Cronon (1995), the return to primitivism supported by the nostalgic connections to pioneer history of the Americans lead to celebration of the wild and a call for its preservation. He writes:

> This nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented. If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one

> was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial (p. 480, in Callicott and Nelson 1998).

Current debate in wilderness centres around concerned environmental philosophers who want to make an appeal for conservation of non-humanised nature while others disagree pointing out that such a conceptualisation in the long run may lead to further degradation of areas "humanised nature" creating a value hierarchy of sorts. Nelson (2008) suggests that conceptual analysis of the idea of wilderness may help to further clarity on this.

Just as he has suggested that this is a concept exclusive to Western traditions of thought, there is no exact equivalent of wilderness in Indian traditions of thought. Conceptually, the jungle (*Jangal* in Hindi) has been associated with wilderness in Indian thought. However, this idea of wild has more to do with the sense of wild and fearful than the aesthetic sublime category it represents for debates within Western thought. In a later chapter, I explore the binary of the forest and settlement that seems to underlie some discourses of nature in Indian thought. Another category of landscape associated with beauty and function finds its expression in ancient Tamil poetical works that will be discussed briefly.

1.11 Nature as Feminine

The abstraction of nature as a feminine goddess, or personification of a singular feminine deity such as Mother Nature or earth goddess seems common to many civilisations. The representation of nature as feminine has a long history of imaginations, narratives, and conceptualisations. This representation of nature is not like the usual animism or forms of personification, nor is it limited to the imagination of goddesses who controlled the forces of nature. Many ancient civilisations represented the earth as a mother (Gottlieb 2004, p. 5). Many rituals in agrarian communities, even in current times, represent the earth as a woman, whose fertility nurtures and produces crops. We know that in most cultures, a woman with no children and earth that is uncultivable are both referred to in the same way as "barren". Women and nature were thus connected as reproductive bodies, often compared to each other, and often treated in the same way. Shrirama (1966, p. 164) affirms this about the woman–nature connections in Indian thought: "The earth gives birth to various vegetation [sic]. The value of the earth depends upon its fertility. Similarly the worth of a woman lies in her ability to become the mother of sons." Merchant (1990) also argues that the concept of nature and woman is historical and social constructions where both were seen as passive and subordinate to men: "The new image of nature as a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment legitimated the exploitation of natural resources. Although the image of the nurturing earth popular in the Renaissance did not vanish, it was superseded by new controlling imagery" (p. 189). This imagery according to her is that nature

willingly reveals herself to science: "From an active teacher and parent she has become a mindless submissive body" (p. 190).

Given that the values associated with women and the values associated with nature are similar, it is possible? It is possible that any change in the way nature is treated is likely to have an effect on the way women are treated and vice versa (Plumwood 1993; Warren 1996). Two images of nature were prevalent in Western traditions (to some extent in Indian traditions about women). One was that of a female nurturer and the other was that of a wild and uncontrollable nature (Merchant 1990). For instance, within the Indian tradition, on the one hand, we have the goddess as Durga, who is the protective mother; on the other, we have Kali, who is untrammelled force and energy. Merchant (1990) suggests that the emergence of the earth as living might have restricted certain activities of human exploitation in the west. She writes: "One does not readily slay a mother… As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive; it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it" (1990, p. 3).We find similar sentiments reflected in the Vedic verse:

> What, O earth, I dig out of thee, quickly shall that grow again: may I not, O pure one, pierce thy vital spot, (and) not thy heart! (AV XII. 12, Bhūmi Sūkta, 35, Trans. quoted from Panikkar 1977, p. 128)

These are some of the earliest textual references to nature as feminine in the Vedas where the earth is considered a mighty powerful goddess, the mother of all beings. Just as a mother provides for all her children, the earth provides nourishment and takes care of all beings dependent on her. In a later chapter, I shall point out how this earlier idea was replaced with other narratives and this could have led to the beginnings of the ideas of domination and mastery of nature in Indian traditions.

The feminine connection to nature goes beyond just the portrayal of nature as a woman. Nature and woman are placed as parallels, often on the other side of culture and man. What does this do the way we perceive nature or the woman? Eco-feminists claim that certain value dualisms in the Western tradition of thought associate woman and nature strongly (Warren 1996; Gaard 2003). The contention of these scholars is that "everything associated entire societies towards the biosphere must emotion, body, nature and women is regarded as inferior to that which is (historically) associated with reason, mind, culture human (i.e. male), and men" (Warren 1996, p. xii).

Merchant (1990) in her book *The Death of Nature* points out that the descriptions of nature as feminine and organic are associated with value systems. The changes in conceptualisations of nature are therefore likely to be accompanied by changes in cultural values. Any positioning of such values is likely to also in some ways impact the relationship of human beings to nature. Though eco-feminists hold diverse theoretical positions about woman and nature, one could say that in common, all of them reject the nature/culture dualism of patriarchal thought and locate

animals and humans within nature (Gaard 2003). Due to the close connection between nature and women, eco-feminists assert that the environment is a feminist issue and historically the Western traditions have devalued whatever is associated with women, emotions, non-human, and the body (Gaard 2003).

Warren (1996) suggests that such devaluation occurs because of conceptual and historical causes of a "logic of domination" that is based on a framework of value dualism and value hierarchy. According to her, the devaluation occurs from conceptualising dualisms as "disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than complementary) and exclusive (rather than as inclusive) …" and then placing such dualisms within "value hierarchies" that she explains are "perceptions of diversity organised by a spatial Up–Down metaphor which attribute higher value (status, prestige) to that which is higher…" (p. xi).

Even in Indian traditions of thought, the connections between women and nature have led to similar devaluation and exploitation of women and nature. As pointed out earlier, we find the attribution of "motherhood" to the earth, rivers, and other natural features.

Sherma (2000) suggests that the sacralisation of the mother and the conceptualisation of nature as maternal feminine do not contribute to any significant ecological benefit. Instead, she is of the opinion that this "undermines the potential for ecological benefit". The ideal of motherhood is itself based on characteristics of negation and sacrifice:

> Though Motherhood is highly honored in Hindu kinship systems, it seems this honor is based on her self-negation, the ability to endure privations for the family, the willingness to give sustenance, no matter what the sacrifice, with no thought of her own needs. …whether it is Bhūmi devi or a Bharatmata or a sacred grove, the expectation is that the sacred site will bless, nurture, purify, or perform any other supportive material act without any requirement for sustenance in return (p. 97).

As with the earth and woman in Indian traditions, both are considered only a receptacle for a seed. As a nurturer, woman's role is secondary, and the seed giver's role is primary. Chakravarti (1993) quotes Yalman's study, "… a fundamental principle of Hindu social organization is to a closed structure to preserve land, women and the ritual quality within it". In the context of the development of agriculture and private land holdings, the idea of legitimate motherhood and the notion of a single partner were established as foundations for patrilineal succession, she argues (p. 583).

In this section, we have seen that while the conceptualisation of nature as woman, mother, or goddess seems to suggest that there would be a possibility of respect for nature, it actually may not be so. Instead, the very act of seeing nature as feminine could lead to undervaluing and the exploitation of the earth and women for resources.

1.12 Nature as Object

Duncan (1991) claims that a systematic study of nature as an object was possible because historically, nature lost its personhood without losing the quality of "being in order". The project of science seems to be to discover the "nature as the order", including but not limited to causal laws and processes.

What is the problem with this view of nature? Merchant (1990) claims that the conceptualisation of nature as a mechanical system, after the scientific revolution granted legitimacy to human beings of "manipulating nature". She writes "Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order has been associated with a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism" (pp. 193–194). This framework according to her justifies the extraction, manipulation, and use of nature, but does not allow for an ethical stance towards nature.

What is interesting to note is that there has always been a reference to a nature that is uniform and singular. This uniform "nature" that is studied in the disciplines of sciences ignores the terrestrial, presentational idea in favour of a particularly abstract representational concept. Latour (2004) writes of this relationship between science and nature: "[But] this nature becomes knowable through the Intermediary of the sciences; it has been formed through the networks of instruments…" Further, he adds "For them [ecologists], science remains a mirror of the world, to the extent that one can almost always, in their literature, take the terms 'nature' and 'science' to be synonyms" (p. 4). The understanding of nature through the intermediary of sciences is almost hegemonic, often smothering other understandings as less legitimate.

Keulartz (1995) posits that the philosophy of nature and the science of nature were set in opposition to the history of nature. The views of nature that are worked out in terms of mathematical physics by the theoretical formulations of Descartes or Newton posit that nature is a system of things, events, and laws operating with mechanical necessity. In this view, nature is abstracted to a set of principles. While a philosophy of nature seeks to engage in the conceptualisation of nature from both metaphysical and ontological perspectives, a science of nature seeks to examine the concept of physical reality of the world around us.

This chapter has provided an introduction to some broad themes and issues around the relationship of human beings and nature, particularly from a perspective that is important for environmental philosophy. It is clear that many of the themes and issues discussed above are derived from certain historical developments in Western traditions of thought. An overview of the conceptualisations of nature, highlighting some important thinkers and writers in this area, is needed before we undertake the study of the concept of nature in Indian traditions of thought. Some environmental philosophers believe that any conceptualisation of nature that can actually address problems in the context of the above-mentioned philosophical problems should necessarily match a concept of ecological nature that includes human beings on the same level as other beings. The requirement that a concept of

nature that needs to represent and present nature as a whole, and also needs to include the individual as well as the non-human entities, has been called to attention by Callicott and Ames (1989). They illustrate and explain that in the recent literature of environmental philosophy, there has been "an interest in finding new integrative and moral paradigms by means of which one can establish a mutually fulfilling and beneficial relationship of man to nature" (p. 21). Such a study must therefore take into account earlier work in philosophy and environmental history that traces some of the older paradigms and their development.

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