Chapter 11
Creating New Paradigms
of Understanding: Action and Ecology

Abstract As the final concluding chapter of my book, I have focused on certain significant implications of the conceptualisations of nature in Indian thought on moral action and conservation. The applicability of these interpretations for creating a framework of ecological ethics is analysed. The conclusion of an "eco-moral action" based framework for ecological ethics then places the themes discussed earlier into a modern context for conservation and other ecologically relevant themes.

Keywords Ecological ethics · Conservation · Human–nature relationships · Implications of nature as a concept

11.1 Conservation

An issue around conservation in practice is the gap between people's understanding of nature and the scientific expert understanding of the world. As a part of the lay–expert divide, general people are often seen as ignorant of the "science" that informs "experts" who determine the policy and management of conservation. The gap becomes critical when the cultural values accorded to nature by the people differ from the values accorded by conservation biology or the discourse of "conservation" in science.

According to O'Neill (2003), such environmental evaluations or parameters cannot be included in any environmental ethics framework that includes non-instrumental or intrinsic value. In other words, if a value is relational and evaluated in comparison with other objects, it cannot be of intrinsic value. Can an object be evaluated in such a way that it depends only on its intrinsic value? O'Neill (2003) concludes this discussion by stating that meta-ethical questions may not be required by an environmental ethic as much as normative and applied concepts.

Conservation ethics bases itself on the idea that "nature" should be conserved, and at the heart of this is the idea that it should be untouched by humans. There is

already a contradiction of sorts. On one hand, nature has to be left to its own devices, without human intervention, but yet it has to be "managed" by conservationists as much as possible. In practice, conservation is more about spreading awareness among people who live close to these demarcated areas. In an attempt to conflate science and values, environmental education programmes attempt to teach facts about conservation to local people. However, facts alone do not help to motivate conservation, claims Trudgill (2001, p. 680).

Conservation therefore includes many human activities, such as managing species population by protection, creating exclusive preserves, restoring habitat and degraded ecosystems, promoting sustainable uses of nature, and measuring or evaluating various parameters that indicate the "natural well-being." In this activity of conservation, ecologists, and conservation biologists increasingly see ethics as empirical ethics.

We have seen earlier how the idea of conservation especially as related to nature itself is problematic. Is conservation a property? Is it an action, a process? Is it an ethical stance towards nature? Is it management strategy to keep nature untouched like a historical artefact? The following section of the chapter discusses the idea of conservation and Indian theories of nature to uncover an approach to conservation as a moral duty of human beings who co-constitute nature. One alternative is to understand conservation through the concept of trusteeship as advocated by Gandhi. I reinterpret this idea to see how, from a "conservation of natural resources" perspective, this can form a foundation for a moral eco-ethic. Another alternative is to use the already popular idea of *ahiṃsā*, or non-injury, from an ecological context. To create a context of non-injury, that works beyond the idea of a one-to-one personal violence.

11.2 On the Concept of Nature

Ecological ethics in Indian thought is based on the premise that human beings are intrinsically related to all the other created existents in the universe. At the outset, this seems a rather sweeping view of oneness, but as we have seen in earlier chapters, this relationship is both moral and metaphysical at the same time. As mentioned earlier, a large number of thinkers in environmental philosophy look for a common ground or a framework, within which non-human components of the universe could be morally significant or be morally "considerable". The common ground would place human beings on an equal footing with the rest of nature, establishing interconnectedness or ways of relating to nature that would lead to an ethical recognition of the need for conservation.

The environmental crisis itself has been articulated as a problem of "nature", rather than that of the human being. There have been attempts at solving the "problem" from two angles conceptually. The issues and concepts that are discussed in this chapter and the next are based on attempts to create a framework for of eco-ethical action; firstly, to see how one can highlight phenomena of relationships between human beings and the rest of the environment as envisioned in

Indian thought, and secondly, it is an attempt to re-describe conservation itself from Indian perspectives.

During my lake study (see Chap. 10 for discussions), I found that the lake was subject to natural variations of water content in the past. While the water would dry up in the summer months, during the monsoons, it would overflow into adjoining fields and wetlands. People saw the "*keré*" (lake) as something that varied with the seasons. However, for the urban developer, the conceptualisation of the lake is unvarying over all seasons. The Western concept of nature as non-human fails to address the question about newer "natural" objects created in the human world. For instance, from my field study of the urban lake questions such as "Is the lake natural? Or is it an artefact?" become points of ambiguity.

Extending this argument to the concept of nature itself, we can say that while nature is unpredictable, unstable, and constantly changing, a certain conceptualisation of nature is a constant. Parks and gardens package this as "wilderness" and "nature" for the urban dweller by the process of landscaping.

As earlier discussed earlier in Chap. 3, the natural and the artificial are problematic categories. If seen as *prakṛti*, the lake is still nature, and the rapid rate of conversion of a wetland into dry areas for buildings and recreational complexes is caused by human beings. By creating barriers to the natural inflow and outflow areas of a "*keré*", we can say that we are changing the *dharma* of the water body, thereby its function too. And it is important to remember the causal arguments of the Sāṃkhya philosophy. In this case, the *nimitta kāraṇa* are the human beings (such as the people in authority, policy makers, and the private company), while concomitant conditions (*sahakāri śakti*) such as urbanisation, pollution, and development of real estate are also present. I am not claiming here that the Sāṃkhya viewpoint offers a solution, but I suggest that it helps us to include many more factors into the problem, giving us a richer detail than say a "cost/benefit ecological economics" analysis or a "preserved/degraded" ecological analysis. The other question that can be asked from the Sāṃkhya viewpoint is whether all the permanent buildings set up on the lake shore under the lake development project are a "milk to curds" type of change or a "mud to unbaked pot" kind of change.

The policy to restore the lakes to an urban island of "greenery" seems to ignore the everyday realities of the daily interactions of the various people who are connected to the lake. Instead, there is the dominant influence of a large-scale conceptual model of conservation, based on the idea of "clean and green" that seems to be in direct conflict with the idea of public or functional use. There exists a lack of clarity in such a framework for a philosophy of conservation, where eco-ethical actions are different from our everyday interaction with nature and the world around us. In the action theory of Indian philosophy (which is well articulated in Advaita school of thought), I believe there is a conceptual understanding of moral ethics, that is beyond the understanding of right and wrong in ways we understand them today. Those actions that benefit the environment in the long-term could be considered as moral actions, and those that provide us with short-term economic benefits, pleasures, and luxuries could be considered immoral action. This new paradigm given by this theory could have us understand action as eco-moral action or as eco-immoral action.

The conceptualisation of *prakṛti* as nature, as I have suggested earlier, creates a world view where the rate of modification of nature into refined objects becomes central to the understanding of conservation. There I posit that conservation in this perspective is a slowing down of the change, not necessarily eliminating it. So alternatively, conservation–action can also be interpreted as *dharma* or a property of the human beings towards other beings in the context of caring, through an attitude of trusteeship or the act of giving shelter to other beings.

We have seen earlier theories of moral actions deeply linked to the idea of liberation or sometimes the attainment of good *karma* oriented towards some sort of soteriological goal. Critiques of the moral action theory in India have insisted on an ethical motive that is not so directly linked to the transcendental goals of a human being. However, within the theory of action in the *Bhagavadgītā*, there may be some useful concepts that relate to an ecological stance.

11.3 Disinterested Action: Non-consumption as Ethical Action

Following Larson (1987)'s suggestion that any work on concepts for environmental philosophy has to overcome these earlier mentioned fallacies, I propose to invoke Deutsch (1989)'s idea of disinterested action as an insight for a new understanding of the problems of ecological crisis. The foremost problem in this crisis seems to be the problem of conserving nature, both in the form of natural resources that we are dependent on, and the non-human parts of a natural world. I think that action that is *karma-yoga* or "disinterested action" can be derived from Advaita philosophy using a very different perspective, taking into account the interpretation of "action" as embodied action in the world for ecological ethics. Rather than the interpretation as an abstract principle that is about being 'unattached to the fruit of action', *niṣkāma* can be interpreted as 'restraint' in this view. Overall, the message of reducing "consumption" is clear in the various Indian philosophies such as Advaita, Sāṁkhya-Yoga and Jainism.

Focusing on desire, rather than liberation, overcomes at least one of the fallacies that Larson (1987) raises—the fallacy of symmetry. The human capacity to desire has not changed over time, though what we want and how much of it we want have changed in the modern age. Human desire that is a core meta-problem of sustainability, conservation, and the ecological crisis of environmental destruction is not only about the individual, but also includes collective desires. As social congregations of people, we embody collective goals, ambitions, and desires. Measuring human desire against human need will actually give us a very good idea of our own conception of ourselves as morally responsible for actions on the earth. Perhaps, in understanding what we want and what we need, the fallacy of the sovereignty of the subject can be overcome. This is not a new concept. Many activist organisations have recognised that blatant consumerism has led to exhaustion of resources and created stress on the requirements natural world is left

around us. Increasingly, energy-dependent lifestyles are set to leave a large "eco-logical footprint." The effect of environmental destruction on a community and its surrounding environment in Plachimada illustrates this point.[1] Most people are quick to accuse the multinational soft drink company for the environmental crime of water contamination and overusage of resources. But, at an ethical level, every consumer who takes pleasure in that brand of soft drink has played out his or her desire of the senses. If nobody desires the soft drink and drinks just water, is it not likely that the environmental destruction would not have taken place?

Indiscriminate desire is ethically wrong in the environmental context. In my own understanding, it is eco-ethically immoral. Actions performed in order to satisfy desire are "not right". They are not wrong in the sense of "evil", but wrong in the sense of leading away from both proximate and ultimate purposes of human life.

Going back to the illustration of the lake development project again, one of the "development" activities was the planning of a food court on the lake shore. People would also take a boat out to a "floating restaurant" and have food, entertainment programmes, and parties. Among the issues raised by the environmental activists was that there was no need to set up such an elaborate "fun area" at tremendous environmental and social cost on water or near a lake. They claimed that since a city such as Bangalore already had many places for people to enjoy food and also many entertainment halls, there was no reason why the lake should be considered for this type of a "development". Activists perceived this as exploitation of the lake area by the private company, as it was a well-known hotel chain group. They claimed that the company was using a "public space" as an excuse to set up its hotel activity, without paying for real estate costs.

It is true that soft terms such as "aspiration" or such as "development" are very much in the discourse of this "disease of desire" that currently seems to have acquired an ethically permissible existence. While environmental thinkers focus on reverence to nature, relationship to nature, metaphysical oneness of humans with nature, not many focus on the moral and ethical foundation of many Eastern phi-losophies—the reduction of want and the restraint of sense-pleasure and emphasis on a life that moves towards simplicity and unattached action.

In the case of the lake, the discourse of "developing the lake as a green and natural area, for people to enjoy", was prominent. The "developed" lake thus begins to embody values that are given by different discourses of aesthetic values and the multitude of parameters that represent these values. The physical transformation of the lake, from a wetland marsh into a drinking water reservoir and on its way to being a component of a public park, follows this conceptualisation of what the lake is, and how it should be managed. Though ultimately, the planners tended to look at trade-offs between these various values, it became clear that the functional values of lakes, which involve direct usage of resource such as water conservation or fishing, are of lesser importance than the lake forming a visual and aesthetic backdrop for

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[1]For details of this environmental incident in the state of Kerala, see Bijoy (2006)

recreation, in the form of a fun world with eateries, stalls, and shopping centres. As one of the participants in the research project said, "It is about how to consume the lake by paying money."

Though very complex and subtle, it is also very easy to see that human action towards nature is linked to the everyday human action, caused by the desire to consume. If collective human action is guided by a satisfaction of pleasure—an indulgence of senses—then such a desire-based action is to be avoided. Again, it is easy to argue that the line between good and pleasure is very difficult to recognise, as is the line between need and greed, or between necessity and luxury. However, in case of the ecological crisis, it is clear that need and greed are socially, geopolitically, and culturally dictated. Despite this, one can insist that across cultures, it is possible to recognise the profanity of excess, and the overexploitation of nature is not so hidden from common-sense morality.

In today's world, there is so much emphasis on nature as pristine that most environmental philosophers forget that everything that we have around us, so-called artificial, or all manmade objects draw their primary resource from nature. So the modern person tends to see no "nature" in a laptop for instance. It comes to be of no surprise than that we continue to lead lifestyles that exhaust our resources and still wonder why there has to be a crisis. The connection between a waterhole drying up in a jungle and the use of a car everyday seems to be missing in the mind of the common people. The connection between my actions everyday where I consume resources is not considered from an eco-ethical viewpoint as much as my direct involvement in some action labelled as "eco-friendly", such as signing a pledge to "Save the Tiger".

When we interviewed two software engineers walking in the park on the shores of the lake, they were very happy with the idea of taking a boat down to a restaurant and having a cup of coffee. They conceptualised the floating restaurant as a calm retreat with a pleasure-giving coffee break. However, they were unable to gauge the complexities of the resources that were required for such a project or the effect on the water or the wild birds around them. On the other hand, the view of an office bearer of the eco-wing of a local resident welfare association (incidentally named Thoreau foundation) that was involved with the upkeep of the lake was that the silt islands in the lake should be populated with deer, to make the lake "more natural". From a naïve viewpoint, the second suggestion seems perhaps better suited to a conservation effort. But on being unpacked, both are desires of the human to enjoy something, excesses that we may well do without on a lake shore.

Going by the philosophy of Advaita and the theory of moral action, every action performed is a moral action directed towards restraint or directed towards sense pleasure. It is this concept that underlies the slogan of conservation "to reduce, recycle, reuse." To reduce consumption of resources, we need to reduce desire that is the root cause of consumption. The focus of a philosophy of conservation is human nature and not nature itself. Gandhi emphasises on this very idea of restraint of desire when he suggests that the "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed."

Guha (1989) explains that the roots of global ecological problems lie in the disparate sharing of resources. The industrialised countries and the elite of the third world consume more resources than they need. He suggests that the solution for the ecological crisis lies in the West adopting alternate political and economic structures and also changing some of their cultural values. Guha (1989) also argues that the attempt of deep ecologists to insist that intervention in nature should be guided by principles of "conserving biotic integrity" would have harmful effects in third world countries. He suggests this is because the dichotomy of a bio-centric versus an anthropocentric viewpoint is of little use in the third world. Particularly contrasting India with countries such as the United States, he insists that in developing countries such as India, creating pockets of wilderness would actually displace the agrarian communities who have lived in interaction with nature. Rather, his suggestion is that the ethics of restraint be adopted by the West: "The expansionist character of modern Western man will have to give way to an ethic of renunciation and self-limitation, in which spiritual and communal values play an increasing role in sustaining social life" (p. 249).

11.4 The Relational View of Ecological Ethics

There is a need to understand the category of an ecological ethics that is different from the domains of environmental ethics. While environmental ethics deals with appropriate management of the environment as perceived as natural resources and as sustainable for human use, ecological ethics is about the moral relationships between human beings and nature. This view of an ethical response to the ecological problem is broader and does not reduce our experience of nature to one particular view of nature. The challenge therefore is to bridge traditional accounts of nature with current prevalent concepts of nature, and this can be achieved through synthesis rather than through positivist shifts. The richness encountered by human beings as nature is diversely captured in many cultures of thinking and speaking about nature. To engage with these streams of thought would certainly yield rich dividends for the ecological cause.

For instance, Berkes et al. (1998) suggest that "ecosystem"-like notions are found in traditional cultures including concepts of bio-regionalism and "sense of place". They suggest that many indigenous peoples have words in local languages that get translated as "land", which often refers to a broader and richer category that is inclusive of the human. Such traditional understandings of the "ecosystem" move away from a positivist mechanical perception of nature towards a more organic interpretation of biological networks, inclusive of human beings, and their experiences. Every human being experiences nature as a place. The phenomenon of place is the experience of a space that has somewhat absorbed into it narratives and meaning that people ascribe to it. These narratives do not exist in the mere imagination of the people, but we find them represented in tangible elements and real fragments of the physical and material. Casey (2001) claims that place not only

provides a location of a "where" things happen, but also provides the "how" and the "when" of one thing relating to another. These meanings are vested in physical matter. For example, in the case of Hebbal Lake that we looked at in the previous chapter, these meanings are vested in the discarded torn nets of the fisher folk or in the flat stones used by the dhobi or the favourite footpath with worn-out grass used by the bird watchers, or perhaps represented more powerfully in elements of architecture or landscape on the banks of the lake, such as the temple of lake goddess—Ganggavva, or the tree planted on the occasion of the visit of the Norwegian Prime Minister. These repositories of meanings become very important in establishing an identity for a space that manifests as a particular place and creates the idea of relatedness between the human being and her surroundings. The same is true of those elements of nature as *prakṛti*. While nature is whole, we cannot relate to the whole, we can only relate to its various elements—trees, rivers, landscapes, animals, and so on. Relationships are not to be seen as natural dependency and biological interdependencies between these various elements of nature. Instead, understanding relationships as the relatedness of the human being to nature through the process of "making sense of" would give an alternative perspective. The "making sense of" the world within the view of Indian thought is interesting and becomes a rich source of meanings that help us understand nature.

Merchant (2004, p. 223) proposes a new environmental ethic—a partnership ethic. She suggests that it is based on the ideas of a "viable relationship between a human community and a non-human community in a particular place, a place in which connections to the larger world are recognised through economic and ecological exchanges." In Indian thought, we already have a similar form of this mutual relationship and obligation within the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. How might we articulate these principles to support an ecologically-relevant ethics? As she suggests, a mutually beneficial situation requires that both people and nature are acknowledged as actors (p. 223). We have seen that nature cannot be a moral agent in the Western traditions. Merchant proposes that the concerns of nature be brought to the table on discussions related to any project or intervention in nature. Nature should be accorded a voice in all our meetings. As an equal partner with human beings, consensus and dialogue should be attempted at all times keeping the interests of both humans and nature. She writes:

> A new ethic entails a new consciousness and a new discourse about nature. Living with and communicating with nature opens up the possibility of non-dominating, non-hierarchical modes of interaction between humans and nature (p. 229).

She adds that mechanistic conceptualisation of nature is replaced by the position that nature becomes a subject. The voices of human being and nature would both find expression in such an ethic (Merchant 2004, p. 229). To accord voice to nature requires is to humanise nature, to give it equal moral standing. The current paradigms of ethics cannot account for moral standing except through invoking concepts such as intrinsic value. Categories we have seen in Indian thought such as *prakṛti* and *dharma* point us to ways in which nature can be brought to the table.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, nature in Indian philosophy can have *dharma* as its voice. The humanising of nature is a common theme through many narratives. Even when the earth is a divinity, she speaks with the voice of nature in a dialogue with King Pṛthā. In another episode from the *Mahābhārata*, the deer appear in a dream to Yudhiṣṭira asking him not to deplete their numbers in the forest. Trees, parrots, elephants, mountains, and rivers all have voices in Indian thought. They speak for their own *dharma*. While on one hand, it is easy to dismiss these voices as imaginations of pre-modern peoples; on the other hand, understanding this as the "voice of *dharma*" provides us with an idea of what we think nature wants. In a verse regarding the stubbornness of his heroine, Kālidāsa, the great poet remarks that the Gaṅgā water would not flow upwards. The river wants to flow downwards that is its *dharma.* For example, on the discussion during the meeting for a large hydroelectric project, if we ask what the river wants, it would articulate its *dharma*, which it that it wants to continue to flow downwards. If we listen to the voice of the river—the riparian rights of people and animals downstream, seasonal variations, floods, and the erosive action of a river whose work is also to replenish the silt in the plains—all of this would have to be taken into account, not just the socio-economic cost-benefits of the dam.

The principle of ecological ethics in Indian thought is fundamentally based on the unique, internally relational, substantive, yet functionally differentiated constituents of the universe. These elements find themselves expressed in alternative discourses of meaning making of the people, whose interaction with the everyday world is often given by narratives rather than by any understanding of "facts" or "concepts". This world view is combined with a strong normative principle of action, where being and function are interrelated. To be human is to be within the realm of both *ṛta* and *karman*, and this means to be related to every other created existent in the world.

It is within this cosmic process of relatedness between created beings and the environment that the main eco-ethical themes discussed in this book can be contextualised. The relationship between the substances and their manifestation constituted by *guṇa*s provides for a framework of evaluation that does away with a categorical view of conservation, and replaces it with a relational view. We as human beings conserve not because we are different and separate from "nature" but because we are also *prakṛti* and relatedness inheres in everything as *dharma*. The same *dharma* inherent in human beings as members of a created cosmos (*nisarga*) is embodied in different bodies and en-worlded by *loka*s expresses itself as care, trusteeship or being non-violent and in being a shelter towards the earth, the other beings, and the environment. In this case, it does away with the focus on debates on sentient–insentient distinctions of environmental ethics and shifts our attention to the agency (*kartṛtva*) from the arguments about considerability of moral action. Again, as human beings, we are embodied in the functions of being related to the processes of natural resource degradation, by being an efficient cause. Conservation as slowing this change requires us to fulfil the *dharma* of being cause in the matter of slowing down the processing and consumption of raw materials. Finally, as embodied beings connected to the objects of experience through the relationship of

disinterested action, we must act morally towards ourselves and with restraint towards the sense objects that envelop us as nature.

The recent debates surrounding conservation in India have raised issues regarding the kind of knowledge that should form the basis of management of our natural heritage. Many conservationists are clear that biodiversity cannot be conserved in isolated pockets of "wildernesses". The depletion of natural resources and the new challenges of population and globalisation have only added to the ecological crisis. Leading environmentalists have suggested recourse to mitigation and adaptation as two practical methods of handling the global crisis.

Before there is a real pragmatic change in action or policy, there needs to be a conceptual transformation of the way human beings perceive nature. It has therefore become imperative for philosophers to examine the different aspects of the relationship between human beings and nature. As a discipline, environmental philosophy is still in its early stages of development compared to other branches of philosophy. Colyvan (2007) states that there are many interesting philosophical issues associated with the science and policy of conserving our natural environment that go beyond the scope of just environmental ethics. I have therefore focused on the broader questions and ideas around the conceptualisation of nature in Indian thought.

Such shifts have to occur through the engagement with various forms of narratives and texts found with or culture. For instance, as pointed out in Chap. 9, ecocriticism, a discipline that has its origins particularly in American literature, is yet to develop concepts that can address non-Western, non-English literature. When we try and understand nature within pre-modern Sanskrit literature in India, where the influence of Romantic Movement is completely absent, we find that to refer to these compositions as nature-centric or human-centric is also difficult. A more nuanced way of understanding nature in pre-modern poetry could be through the two categories of action and natural behaviour of the non-human world. As we have seen earlier in poetry of Kālidasa, the cloud's activities in the rainy season are described rather accurately.

The discourse of *dharma* and *karma* of nature in literature is one of the ways in which we could analyse nature that is inclusive of the human being. In literature, the non-human is included in the human world. Nature is seldom passive in these narratives; nature participates in the human world by being itself, active as nature. Winds blow, clouds rain, the forest fires burn, and mountains stand tall. All these are *dharma*, the appointed duties of natural things or the order of nature. *Karma*, as actions of nature objects, is completely instinctive and in sync with their *dharma.* Yet again, it is through these categories that the feminisation of nature or the silencing of nature takes place.

The descriptions of human engagement with nature are also based on karma and dharma. The adaptation to seasons and landscapes and the ethical and moral attitude to the non-human part of the world are all based on activities and the order of nature. The literature discussed in Chap. 9 in many ways reflects these important conceptualisations from Indian philosophy.

To summarise, I posit that there are three main frameworks in Indian conceptualisations of nature for proposing an ethical relationship with other "created" beings around us: firstly, the internal relatedness created by the concepts of *prakṛti* (as constituted by the *guṇa*s) as well as *nisarga* (as levels of created beings and functions) that places human beings "within" nature, yet allows for eco-moral responsibility in the context of *dharma* and moral action. The second framework is that of an embodied, en-worlded relatedness to the planet we live on, understanding nature as being entrusted to us, in which trusteeship and ethics of non-consumption through disinterested action play an important role. Finally, a phenomenal relatedness framework is created by the concept of human beings as caregivers to nature, from another perspective of human non-injury to the various beings (including the environment beings) as "beings that sheltered" by us, their shelterers. This relatedness is to be interpreted as more of an existential, an "allowing to be" relationship. This has important implications for environmental and conservation ethics. Conservation therefore has to be relational and not oriented towards a particular being or object or species or a particular space. Within this relatedness of dependency and welfare, which are not steady states of affairs, it is clear that at various point of time, various beings can support or be supported by other beings.

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