Chapter 7
Sacred Geographies and an Ethics of Relating with Reverence

Abstract After secular ideas of landscape ecology, this chapter deconstructs the understanding of sacred nature and natural landscapes in the subcontinent. Religious and philosophical thought has always influenced people's social and ecological behaviour in India. The unique world views of nature in Indian thought through relationships between place, the idea of sacred, and narratives about sacred landscapes called *sthala purāna* are elucidated. The chapter also explains how secondary narratives called *sthala māhātmya* recount the human experience of the sacred and create a moral relationship between landscapes and people. As practices around sacred geography and pilgrimages are prevalent even today, I conclude this chapter with suggestions of the possible place centric, relationship-based ethics of sacred landscapes.

Keywords Sacred landscapes · Narratives · *Sthala purāna* · Place · *Sthala* · *Sthāna* · Sacred geography · Reverence to nature

7.1 Introduction

Nature in India has been conceptualised as sacred, both within the mainstream Hindu religious tradition as well as within other belief systems of communities, including indigenous communities such as the *Adivāsi*s. The presupposition that nature and natural objects have sacred meanings for such communities can be inferred from the practices of reverence of nature such as worship or other rituals and popular narratives involving nature as sacred. The reverence for nature within such practices is embedded in the everyday lives of people, overtly expressed as some form of worship, ceremony, or daily practice such as drawing patterns of *rangoli/kolam* on the ground, tree, or water worship, and demarcation of sacred groves. It would not be wrong to say that conceptualisation of nature within the Indian world view is constructed to a great extent by narratives, myths, and ritual. This according to Nagarajan (2000a) can be theorised as "embedded ecology",

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where direct ecological themes seem to be absent in the culture, but are found embedded in cultural forms. In a similar essay (Nagarajan 2000b), she adds that such a theory emerges through an exploration of subtle and complex relationships between the "cultural and natural worlds" (p. 454).

Many natural features that are geographically located—rivers, forests, mountains, beaches, stony outcrops, and tree groves—are sacred places in the Indian subcontinent. The relation of people to landscape is articulated in terms of functions, resources, experiences, narratives, and seasonal practices. According to Tuan (1974, p. 146), "sacred places are locations of hierophany". He also points out that places acquire sacred character whenever a divine manifestation or a significant event is associated with it. Many such sacred places in India are described by myths called *purāṇas*. Most of these mythologies are based on the Vedic cosmology. A complex process of place making—by Vedic and Purāṇic primary narratives and localised oral secondary narratives—is usually connected to such landscapes. An examination the cosmology and cosmogony prevalent in many cultures shows how nature in India is perceived from a deeply humanised world view given by creation myths of some sort or the other. For instance, explanations to account for the sacredness of a landscape are often found in the primary narrative called *sthala purāṇa*. Secondary narratives called *sthala māhāṭmya* to recount the human experience of the sacred are also prevalent at most sacred sites.

Inside the world view of such a culture, one can see there is the advantage of not having to work through a relationship with a passive inanimate other-than-human nature, in order to extend an ethical stance towards it. Already present in this culture, is what Abram (2004, p. 83) refers to as "… a common ground, common medium through which a mutual exchange can unfold". This common ground in Indian thought is a pre-existing relationship between human beings and nature as sacred. However, is this idea such an easy "words to world" fit?

In this chapter, I also foreground some of the implications of what it means for nature to be sacred within the Hindu cosmology and culture. Would our cultural reverence of sacred nature result in any ethical framework for actions that protect the planet Earth we live on? The reverence accorded to natural objects or landscapes seems attractive enough to use at least as a metaphor to encourage pro-environmental behaviour in the Indian subcontinent.[1]

7.2 World Views Behind the Sacred

In India, almost all of nature is still perceived from a deeply humanised perspective, given by meaning making that encompasses not just earthly, but larger cosmic realities. Cosmologies, as a meaningful description and understanding of the world,

[1]Parts of this chapter were published as a paper in a journal: Baindur (2009).

are very influential and even necessary for a community to understand and interpret their relationship with the universe. A cosmology can be said to be "a theory or conception of the nature of the universe and its workings, and of the place of human beings and other creatures within that order" (Bowie 2006, p. 108). Cosmology, which is often seen as irrelevant or outmoded for modern times, has to be recognised for its fundamental importance within human societies, claims Mathews (1994, pp. 11–12). She writes about the adaptive function of a cosmology:

> Primarily, perhaps, one of orientation—a cosmology serves to orient a community to its world, in the sense that it defines, for the community in question, the place of humankind in the cosmic scheme of things. Such cosmic orientation tells the members of the community, in the broadest possible terms, who they are and where they stand in relation to the rest of creation. Some conception of a cosmic scheme of things is active too in the prescription of a system of norms, or at least in contributing to the normative tone of the community (p. 4).

Cosmologies include within them stories and narratives that explain the world, its origin and the origin of human beings. These myths and stories are collectively referred to as cosmogony. These traditional forms of knowledge help communities understand their complex relationship with the environment and the world they live in (see Bowie 2006, p. 108).[2] Bowie (2006) remarks that Matthews's insights on the importance of cosmology on cultural and social practices cannot be dismissed lightly. She points out that, according to philosophers such as Freya Mathews and others anthropologists such as Roy Rappaport, a cosmology can have both functional and dysfunctional affects. People speak of, act on, and interpret realities that they encounter not as they are, but as they should occur to them or as they are meant to occur within these discourses and narratives. Rappaport (1979, p. 97) too describes the close relationship between nature and cosmology:

> Nature is seen by humans through a screen of beliefs, knowledge purposes, and it is in terms of their images of nature, rather than of the actual structure of nature, that they act. Yet it is upon nature itself that they do act, and it is nature itself that acts on them, nurturing or destroying them (p. 97).

It is important to mention here that the world views of the people may not be rational or scientific enough to support the perspectives of modern conservation, but such beliefs or presuppositions may as well serve to encourage actions that further environmental causes. In fact, we find that the religious and cultural associations created by such narratives often have more popular impact than the tangible values of resource or the discourses of environmental conservation. Alley (2000) writes "Symbolic representations of space in Hindu sacred texts and ancient concepts associated with them call for an approach to ecological understanding that moves beyond the secular notions of the 'environment'" (p. 298).

Two of the popular themes that invoke the idea of sacred nature in Indian thought are that of sacred geography and the equally significant discourse of the Goddess,

[2]While cosmologies are theories that relate to the origins of a universe according to a world view, cosmogonies include stories and myths too.

Mother Earth, or *bhū devī* that has been discussed in Chap. 6. Both these themes underlie popular imaginations, rituals, discourses, and textual literature around nature in India. Kinsley (1995, pp. 58–60) foregrounds the idea of land as a holy place as being one of the predominant ecological themes of the subcontinent. He suggests that the sacred geography of land manifests itself in narratives of the Earth goddess, sacred geographical features, as well as the theme of sacred Bharat-*ma*, mother India. The first of these two beliefs is certainly ecologically relevant and is analysed in this chapter. The prevalence of conceptualisation of land as sacred and the Earth as both mother and sacred goddess suggests that the Indian geographical or terrestrial experiences of nature are interpreted through cosmogonies that are metaphorical and deeply linked to sacred myths. One reason why it is important to look at these two themes in particular is because these ancient narratives and cosmogonies form a living tradition practiced in the everyday lives of people.

What is the source of the evolution of cosmogonies behind these kinds of themes and are such cosmogonies are relevant to creating a background for some kind of ecological ethics? The increased interest in understanding ecological beliefs in non-Western cultures is spurred on by a renewed interest in the concepts that are available in traditional Indian thought. Reverence to nature is often cited as a possible virtue we could re-learn from our pre-modern past. Many writers make the claim that a large part of nature is considered sacred and worshipped in India; therefore, it could have positive implications for an ecological ethics of nature. The re-reading of these textual sources in the current literature has the purpose of finding possible concepts (often referred to as conceptual resources) that could be used to generate some form of an indigenous environmental ethics. Moreover, it is clear that attribution of value and sacredness to these objects is dependent on many factors, including folk narratives, and is not limited only to the larger Hindu traditions.[3] Nagarajan (2000b, p. 281) explains how this arrangement of the cosmos occurs: "Depending on caste, class, religion, community and bioregions, different people arrange natural substances according to a diverse range of values".

One of the reasons we value something is because of the way we are related to it. If we can find such a way of relating to the nature as Earth or relating to sacred landscape as a vulnerable form, it would then justify the view that conceptual resources from Hindu thought can be used to raise ecological consciousness (within our own country) in the current scenario, and also yield alternate frame works of values and ethics that are not mere imitations of Western traditions of moral and ethical thought.

[3]It is, however, an onerous historical task to find out whether these folk traditions influenced the major texts or vice versa. It is clear that there have been exchanges at various periods of Indian history.

7.3 Sacred Places and Natural Features

7.3.1 The Idea of the Sacred

A brief note on some perspectives of the idea of sacred in Indian thought is discussed here in detail to provide a background to the idea of "sacred nature" in India. Among objects that are related to the practice of sacred nature worship or reverence, we must distinguish between natural objects, general geographical features, and particular *named* landscapes. Certain objects, plants, animals, and features are regarded as sacred categories—such as the *tulsi* plant (*Ocymum sanctum*) or the holy fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*) or eastward flowing river channels. The sacredness of these objects is given by the fact that they are sacred types and tokens; they are considered as some sort of sacred universals. They are not bound to a particularised location. All occurrences of such objects are sacred. On the other hand, there are objects in which the divine is invoked for some time and the object is sacred for that period of time. Clay idols of Ganeśa used in the annual worship in homes are sacred after they have been installed.

To distinguish the idea of sacred objects, one can examine the way the divine is invoked in such an object. Keith (1925) points out that there is difficultly in distinguishing between the divinity accorded to the sacred by being imbued with the holy or sacred essence and the object itself being divine, a reverence paid to the sacred object as a sign (see Keith 1925, pp. 1–66). This difference is not confined to the natural but also to human-made objects. For example, the various ceremonial objects in Vedic rituals such as the wheel refer to the sun and gold or sometimes represent the god Agni or other deities (pp. 66–67). Yet again, the stones with spiral markings—the *sāligrāmā*—are considered divine forms of Viśṇu. Sometimes, the objects used for a sacred ritual may not be used or treated like ordinary objects. Flowers used for ritual worship are ritually divine and may not be disposed with normal garbage even after they are dry. Strings of used garlands hanging from trees in streets in urban areas in India are an illustration of this point.

An interesting idea has been proposed by Apffel-Marglin and Paranjuli (2000) about the notion of sacred (see pp. 291–316). They argue that the sacredness cannot be equated with a non-utilitarian attitude. In other words, the attitude of reverence within Indian thought does not presuppose an attitude of "non-use" by human beings. This is a very relevant insight for the purpose of understanding the practice of reverence. They posit a paradigm of rest/fallow and active/productive phase of the use of the Earth and land (p. 305). Revered objects within Hindu cosmology cannot be totally kept apart from the people. Depending on social practices, ritual beliefs, or other kinds of rules, there are restricted areas of the sacred that one may access, but in general, access in terms of its sacred function is not denied.

7.3.2 Sacred Geography

A traditional belief system of reverence for landscape features, referred to as sacred geography in popular literature, is common to most cultures in the Indian subcontinent. Some writers also suggest that forms of mythic–ritual sacralisation or reverence of geographical features could translate into ecologically supportive behaviour by the people. Ruether (2005) points out the prevalence and the intensity of these beliefs and their connection to ecological ethics in the Indian subcontinent. She writes "Perhaps nowhere is there such an extensive sense of sacrality of place. Its [India's] forests and rivers are seen as holy, even as embodied gods and goddesses. India as a whole is venerated as a sacred land" (p. 48).

With reference to the beliefs about sacred features, we find that each of these sacred places has a rich narrative tradition, either oral or written that describes in detail the story of sacred origin of these places. Serving as both markers of events and as metaphorical teachings for everyday behaviours, the stories called "Purāṇas" or history form an important component of the philosophic presuppositions about the concept of nature. Tuan (1974, p. 146) suggests that the landscapes become sacred after a signal event demonstrated by the occurrence of some signs: "In every instance the spot was sanctified by some outside power, whether it be a semi-divine person, a dazzling hierophany, or cosmic forces that undergrid astrology and geomancy" (p. 146). In the Indian traditions, *purāṇa*s relate these events and also describe the context for the appearance of these sacred signifiers. Such stories are not limited to the larger textual tradition of Hinduism as we know it today, but they are also told from a very local context and through oral or ritual folk traditions. These local narratives such as the stories of the land are deeply embedded in the geography of a place.[4] Chapple (2000), for instance, writes of such narratives: "It must be noted, however, that many pilgrimage places within India, from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari at the very southern tip of the subcontinent, form a patchwork of sacralised spaces that could be newly interpreted through the prism of environmentalism" (p. 33).

To make the idea of sacred narratives clear, I retell one of the stories from the south of India, about a sacred landscape, a hill called "*maruda malai*" or medicine hill here. Rare medicinal herbs are found on this mountain near Coimbatore in South India, which is worshipped as a sacred geographical feature.[5] The story of how the scared hill came to be located in that region is connected to an incident that is narrated in the epic poem *Rāmāyaṇa*, the story of the divine hero Rāma.

During the final battle described in this epic that is said to have happened in Lanka (Sri Lanka), *Lakṣmaṇa*, the ideal brother of the divine hero, Rāma, was lying on the ground senseless bound by the magical bonds of the *sarpāstra* (a mythical snake weapon). The only cure was a divine herb *sanjīvinī,* found beyond the Himalayas.

[4]In time, however, such local stories get absorbed into the larger mythologies of Hinduism or adapt to their own versions depending on the socio-political views of the people belonging to a place.

[5]The name is in Tamil, the local language. For details of this story, see Das (1964, p. 6).

Hanumāna, the mighty *vānarā* (monkey warrior), flew north to the Himalayas to find the herb. Arriving at the mythical mountain (also called *sanjīvinī*), he found that all herbs on the hillside were alike and he could not identify the right herb. So, he picked up the whole mountain in his mighty hands and flew down south towards Lanka. On the way, a piece of this hill fell down in the south of India; the sacred hill called "*maruda malai*" is said to be that very piece. According to the story, the expert physician in Lanka identified the herb and revived the ailing warrior.

This story may or may not be available in the Sanskrit version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. But "natural sacred places" consisting of geographical features are revered and are almost always associated with oral narratives about the location called *sthala purāṇas,* and this story recounts one such narrative.[6] The shared meanings and communicated oral histories of natural-scapes draw back to the deep connection of nature with the concept of earth, or land (*bhūmi* in Sanskrit). The idea of these oral histories therefore is not only embodied in architectures of the human being, but also includes natural elements and natural objects, specially water, rocks, and trees which form features such as rivers, lakes, mountains, and forests. These locations are not *universal* places or generic features such as sacred groves or river confluences, but are *particulars* (specific to their cartographic positions). The particular and unique nature of each feature is given by mythical imaginations of journeys, of events, and of creation. Many ritual practices that may be religious or cultural are performed in these areas to reinforce the narratives again and again.[7] The myths answer the question as to why the place is sacred and often give a name of the place that is based on one of the themes of the myth. In such narratives, often divine and superhuman events are described and are claimed to have happened in a particular place. These are recollected by a set of oral stories narrated by the local inhabitants, or mythical histories sometimes visually represented during festivals through folk performances. Eliade (1959, p. 95) refers to the power of such myths to create what he calls "an apodictic truth". He asserts that the myths create a reality by revealing a sacred history: "It is the sacred that is pre-eminently the real". People who encounter the tangible elements of such natural landscapes do not see them as sterile nature or mundane phenomenon, but perceive them as sacred locations and experience the sanctity of contact with the place. What I derive from this reading of Eliade (1959) is the converse idea that perhaps a natural spot that is not construed with a myth or sacred history is mundane. This has some implications for environmental ethics that will be discussed later.

[6]In Sanskrit, *sthalā* means place, *purāṇa* means history or ancient stories, so the word would mean ancient story of a place. These have been documented and published into written books only in recent times. Sacred groves also belong to this landscape category with their own stories.

[7]Annual festivals, rural fairs with folk narrative, and drama traditions often portray the narrative at the sacred place.

7.4 About the Idea of Place

To examine the idea of the sacred natural landscapes in India, the concept of "place" as described by Edward Casey (1993) is useful. While the notion of "space" represents a three-dimensional, measurable extension of elements grouped together, at a more experiential level, place itself would include the "character" of the space, which one can loosely term as the social and culturally defined space. According to Casey (1993), the power of a place is not merely determined by its location on a map, but includes the relationships of the elements within it.[8] He writes:

> The power of a place such as a mere room possesses not only where I am in the limited sense of cartographic location but how I am together with others (i.e., how I comingle and communicate with them) and even who we shall become together (p. 23).

This idea of place certainly allows for the rich connection between a habitat and its occupant more descriptively and completely. Due to the importance given to notion the human interpretation of and interaction with the natural areas within the Indian subcontinent, one has to examine the nature of "implacement". Casey (1993, p. 23) reiterates that "implacement is as social as it is personal". We find that on the one hand, the notion of sacred is personal and cultural in Indian thought: people often visit the sacred places for their own spiritual or personal benefit. On the other hand, the social and cultural beliefs about the sacredness which guide these visits are oral narratives that are socially shared. As a phenomenon of experience, the feature itself is natural, an area on the geographical landscape—the contact with the sacred is very personal, but the story about it is cultural and intersubjective.

It is to be noted that, in Sanskrit, the idea of place has two equivalents. The conceptualisation "place" in Sanskrit is thus deeper and more specific in its interpretation and meanings. The first term "*sthala*" is often used to indicate place as an area on the ground. The word "*sthāna*" which is more like the word "spot/place" refers to a designated location and is a term that also performs an indexical function.

The narratives and stories that surround the natural can only be understood with a concept that connects the idea of the sacred and the natural, a concept that intimately connects a human being with her environment. Unlike the word "place" that can be used to designate place order and other locative references, the use of the Sanskrit term "*sthala"* is free of a mere indexical function. *Sthala* in Sanskrit refers to a section of the Earth that is distinctly marked out from the rest of the landscape as different. *Sthala* is derived from "*sthā*", meaning "section, chapter, or marked part" "and" "*talā"* which means "surface". The correct translation would be "land-place". The surface of the Earth is intrinsic to this word. That eliminates for us the possibility of having to include places otherwise not found on Earth such as location in the sky or clouds. The places in heavens (*swarga*) are never called *sthala* in the mythology. They are sometimes called *sthāna*, such as "Indra-*sthāna*". Distinguished from the other word *sthāna*, referring to the ordained **location**,

[8]Parts of this section are from Baindur (2010a).

or where things stand, or can be spotted, *sthala* is a terrestrial-linked term and a shared cultural kind. For example, in the *Tīrtha Yātra Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, a sage describes the holy places to be visited and the merits gained by the pilgrims:

> "*tato gaccheta dharmajña viṣṇor sthānam anuttamam*"[9]
> Then, (one should) go to the most exalted place of *Viśṇu* (where he is established), O knower of righteousness… [10]

We find that in common usage, the sacred landscapes that are sacred places are referred to as *tīrtha sthala*. The designated location of a city/temple or the location in some area is designated by a different word, *sthāna*. I argue that the word "place" therefore is closer to the word *sthala*, especially when it refers to a landscape or more accurately a land-place.[11] Besides, we find that *sthala* is invariably linked to the material boundaries of a landscape feature such as a rock, a river, or a forest. The sacred boundaries of a place are as amorphous as the landscape they designate. Even in the case of *place*, Casey (1993) points out the difficulty in the distinction between *place* and *landscape*: "A landscape seems to exceed the usual parameters of place by continuing without apparent end; nothing contains it, while it contains everything, including discreet places, in its environing embrace" (p. 25). The same holds true somewhat for the category *sthala.* But discreetness of *sthala* for human recognition, however, is given by the material content of the feature, such as the water of the Gaṅgā river, the red soil of a particular region, or the extent of a rock surface. Though most sacred places involve some form of a water body, the category *sthala* includes the area in general, along with the banks and the land surface. Where discreteness of a boundary is lacking, the sacred place is marked by human architecture, such as steps on the river bank or a shrine marker which indicates the horizon or boundary of the sacred place or simply serves as a pointer. Tanaka specifies that sacred sites such as these "comprise natural and human-made assemblages of sacred symbols and landscape markers invested with special meaning" (Tanaka 1988, pp. 21–40). It is clear that it is the natural feature itself that is sacred and not just the shrine. As mentioned earlier, the word *sthala* seems to be closer to the idea of a natural feature because it includes the idea of "land surface" within its interpretation and so it is the carrier of the created sacred reality. As we have seen in the earlier story, the "hill" or "*malai"* is the natural meaning and so is the word "*maruda"* which refers to the profusion of medicinal herbs on the hill. The origin of the hill and its divinity are explained by a narrative. When some of these narratives are analysed, we find that there is a certain world view of mythical history associated with these geographical places—a narrative of ***being*** sacred by creation, rather than being ***made*** sacred.

In a conceptual analysis of sacred geography, while examining the ideas and practices that surround the concept of the sacredness of land-place, two components

[9]Emphasis in bold is mine.

[10]*Verse 10, Chap. 83, Vanaparva, Mahābhārata.* Trans by author.

[11]The word "landscape" devoid of its historical antecedents in the west would be ideal as the translation as it includes within it the word "land".

of experiences of the people can be identified: firstly, the mythic imagination which relates to the sacred origin of the land-place and, secondly, the ritual practices that are prescribed in such places. The oral narratives that record the sacred origins of the place or *tīrtha* are often called *sthala purāṇa* (story of the land-place). What is unique to these stories is that along with the meaning ascribed to natural objects or elements of the environment, each place is connected with a story that is rich in metaphor and includes the location and its natural elements within its narrative, along with people and divine beings. Eck (1990) mentions the prevalence of these stories: "The stories of India's *tīrthas* are told in the popular praise literature, the *māhātmya*s, sometimes called *sthala purāṇas*, 'the ancient stories of the place' (p. 35)".

Sacred *sthala* narratives have two components: one is a description of the descent of the divine upon the terrestrial or "earthed divine" and the second part describes human experience of this divine on Earth or "deified land". The secondary narratives, the *sthala māhātmya*s, describe the positive interactions of people who have benefited from the presence of the sacred or have been punished for disrespecting the location. These secondary narratives are often referred to as *sthānamāhātmya*s too, especially if there is a temple or a shrine. For example, in the famous shrine of Somanatha, the oral *sthala purāṇa* recollects the manifestation of a self-formed *liṇga* or a representation of Śiva at a river confluence.[12] The *purāṇa* tells the story of the moon god, *Soma,* who by being partial to one of his wives of the other twenty seven sisters he married annoyed his father-in-law. Cursed to be consumptive, the moon was unable to perform his duties. To restore his brightness, he was asked to bathe at the confluence of Sarasvatī. The *Skandapurāṇa* states that Sarasvatī originates from the water pot of Brahmā in the heavens and flows from *plakṣa* on the Himalayas. The myth speaks of how by bathing at the confluence of the rivers; he regained his splendour and had a vision of *Śiva as* a self-formed effulgent *jyothir-liṇga* (a *liṇga made of light).* The term "*prabhāsa tīrtha*" is named after the regained effulgence of the moon. Both non-earthly entities, the *jyothir-liṇga* and the descent of the celestial moon itself into the waters, further sanctified the holy place. The *sthalamāhātmya* recollects the association of Kṛṣṇa with this place. Also popular is the story of King Mūlaraja of the Chaulukya dynasty who built great shrine at this place after a dream about the moon god. Thus, the two forms of narrative coexist, informing the pilgrim that her experience of the holy place is sacred and otherworldly. To quote the words of Flood (1993): "Mythical worlds are mapped to specific geographies of a holy place; the physical world is imbued with mythological or religious meaning" (pp. 1–5).

Some spaces or areas on the ground are "originally sacred", while others are sanctified by rituals of human beings or actions of the divine beings. For example, before building any structure, the land is consecrated and worshiped with the ritual of *bhūmi puja*, or land worship. There are rituals where land areas are temporarily

[12]For a detailed mythical history and the story of this shrine which is condensed here, see "The Setting", Chap. 2, in Thapar (2004, pp. 18–37).

sanctified for a *yajña* (Vedic ritual) or a *pūja* (worship). On the other hand, the idea of naturally sacred locations is interpreted through narratives that claim sacredness for the land-place by some sort of ***non-terrestrial*** "origin". Land-place features, however, are connected to very specific, particular examples of sacred events that have occurred in an ancient time and space. With respect to natural elements, it seems that both kinds of sacred narratives exist—divine origin and divine contact. There are areas and sacred places that are originally sacred and some ordinary places which are made sacred by connection with the divine. It is to be noted that the narratives of places sanctified by contact with the divine are not unique to Indian thought alone and also that the idea of divine contact is not restricted to natural landscapes, but includes human-made objects or even relics.

While the rituals of purity or actions of the divine gods create sacred spaces, geographically sacred regions are ***implanted*** onto the Earth. These regions seem to have sacredness as an essential component. The sacredness imbued in the landscape features—rocks, mountains, or rivers—does not disappear after the human or divine interaction is complete. The sacred spaces that are created by ritual acts may later turn mundane, while sacred places remain sacred, regardless of time and changes. Within the belief system of *purāṇas*, the defilement of a sacred geographical feature is not possible, making the environmental efforts around these natural features a difficult task. We therefore need to understand what makes these sacred regions incapable of being polluted within certain belief systems of Indian people. Here, I propose a radical idea that perhaps it is the narratives about the origin of these places that makes them non-degradable. I suggest that sacred geography is not geography of "terrestrial", but of implaced other-worldly materials—rivers, mountains, or forests.

7.5 Sacred Imaginations: Myths About Sacred Places

Most myths about the sacred places are a narrative about the transplantation or a sudden appearance of that sacred feature on the Earth. This narratives or stories are like mini, creation myths and discuss the divine origins of the sacred land-place. These narratives form a part of the tradition of stories called *purāṇa*s. The descriptions of nature-scapes and the relationship between the human and nature in the Vedas and the *purāṇa*s, some of India's earliest philosophical and religious literature, are to be understood within a broader framework of some fundamental conceptions of people who created these narratives and their larger cosmic views.

The first of these preconceptions that I discuss here is that of the idea of nature itself. The popular meaning of nature in the current times is that which is "non-human". It is also clear that the idea of a "non-human nature" is largely absent in these stories and narratives. However, the perception of nature is anthropocentric; much of the manifested world is explained and understood through the experiences of the human being. Human beings are not placed above all other natural elements in the world, but they are situated in the cosmic system, interrelated to both beings

and geographies. Bilimoria (1997) stresses on the cosmic application of moral values across all beings:

> The normative values were not restricted for human well-being alone, rather they were universalized for all sentient beings and inanimate sectors as well as spirit-spheres, i.e. gods and the faithfully departed; the biosphere, i.e. animals and plants; and the broader biotic universe, i.e. inanimate realms comprising the elements, stones, rocks, earth-soil, mountains, waters, sky, the sun, planets, stars, and the galaxies to the edges of the universe (this and other possible ones) (p. 2).

The classificatory scheme in case of Hindu cosmology is based on a cosmic system of the place-worlds that are called *loka*s, *and* each *loka* is an inhabited world each with its own description, having within it unique features, denizens, places, myths, and also creation myths within a cosmology. The Earth itself, as the **terrestrial** surface which humans and other Earth beings occupy, is not seen as a single isolated place, but it exists as part of a hierarchical cosmic system of different *loka*s or worlds.

Thus, we find the worlds, though placed in relationship with each other, are still bound by an order of divinity and importance. The heavenly world, being relatively immortal and replete with pleasures and privileges unavailable upon the Earth and other "lower" worlds, was accorded a higher status value. To be a denizen of these sacred worlds required actions and austerities that naturally made a being of a world morally higher in status. It is significant to note that at the cosmic level, beings were not ordered according to families or species; ordering was first based on origin and the world they inhabited. Thus, a divine serpent is higher in the hierarchy than the human being on Earth. The achievements of pious acts or austerities also mattered in this moral order, sometimes being considered more important than age or the place-world of origin. Many stories recount how sages from Earth, for instance, were revered by even the gods. The understanding of this world view is significant to the understanding of the creation myths of sacred landscape features on the Earth.

7.6 Crossing Over: Places and Human Beings

As in the case of the *maruda malai* or the sacred medicine hill, it is clear that the sacredness of the landscape is connected to the origin of the event that caused the hill to *be* or *occur*. Accordingly, in story of the medicine hill, it actually dropped from the sky onto the Earth. The unique creation of land-places in these mythological narratives strongly support a hypothesis that divine origination alone imparts eternal sacredness to a land-place. I suggest here that the purpose of the narrative is to locate the place culturally as non-terrestrial (non-earthly) and give it a higher value than that of the surrounding areas.

The reason such places are sacred and divine is because the feature is not earthy, but has been introduced by an event from another *loka* onto the *bhūloka*. The creation of the land-place feature more often than not signifies a geographical

descent of some "other-worldly feature". The descent (not fall) from the higher worlds is easier than the ascent. The descent of anything from the divine plane forms an important part in the creation of the sacred in nature. The descent of the divine or *avatār* concept that is very much a part of the Vedic and Purānic tradition finds its counterpart in geographical descents of rivers and other natural features onto the terrestrial. By being descended, these transfers of rivers, mountains, lakes, and rocks from the heavens help the terrestrial beings, such as the human, ascend.

The primary goal is the gaining of positive *karma* that allows one to access higher births or planes such as heavens, as well as the opportunity to attain *mokṣa*, the cessation of suffering. The transit between worlds is possible for the beings that have eligibility or have gained enough merits (good *karma*). Eck (1981) sums up the idea that *tīrtha*s are like ladders to higher worlds: "In sum, it is clear that the *tīrtha* is not only a riverside bathing and watering place, but a place where one launches out on the journey between heaven and Earth. It is a threshold of time, or space, or ritual" (p. 328).

The original sacred thus comes from the heavens—the *devaloka*. The rivers of India form one of the most striking examples of this origination as sacred narrative. The *Ṛg*-Vedic myth, in which *Indra* slays the serpent *Vṛtra*, who had coiled around the heavens and locked the waters inside, and thus frees the heavenly waters to fall to the Earth, is recounted in this verse: "As your ally in this friendship, *Soma*, *Indra* made the waters flow. He slew the serpent and sent forth the Seven Rivers. He opened, as it were, the holes that were blocked" (trans. Griffiths 1973).

Though these narratives of direct descent are far and few, it seems that there are many more features that somehow are accounted for by oral histories that may not occur in the literal rendering of the Purānic or Vedic texts. Historically, it seems likely that these located sacred land-places were adapted from an earlier primitive tradition of spirits abiding in nature. Eck (1981) writes:

> … the many specific *tīrtha*s of India's vast sacred geography are also well grounded in yet another tradition: the non-Vedic tradition of indigenous India which, despite its many areas of obscurity, was most clearly a tradition of life-force deities associated with particular places. It was a locative tradition in which *genii loci* under a variety of names—*yakśas, nāgas, ganas, mātrikas*—were associated with groves and pools, hillocks and villages, wielding power for good or ill within their areas of jurisdiction (p. 324).

She suggests that the traditions of pilgrimage by foot or sacred journeys are traditions based on sacred place. She adds that these myths are not static and keep changing, yet the places draw pilgrims who come to presence the divinity and seek blessings from the resident deity (p. 324).

Eck (1981) refers to this as borrowing and assimilation of the pre-Vedic tradition into the *purānic* lore. It also seems likely that many places create the narratives that give them legitimacy through the association with popular Hindu texts and gods. Often, in its *māhatmya*, a local *tīrtha* will subscribe to the larger all-India tradition by linking its sanctity to the great events of the major epics and *purāṇa*s. She suggests that this might be seen as the geographical equivalent of Sanskritisation (p. 336).

7.7 Sacred Interactions: Human Aspirations

The story of the descent of the Gaṅgā is much eulogised, having many versions and subplots within the main story. In all the versions however, the narrative implies that the actual river, materially, is not of the Earth but of the heavens and is of godly content and essence. The presupposition that makes this transfer of material possible from one *loka* is that the substances—gross or subtle—are all the same and are made of the five elements. So, a river from heaven is as real as one on Earth. But, its reality is a sacred reality, not the reality of the Earth. The way this river differs from an ordinary earthly stream is by having the quality of sanctifying human beings and the earthly plane, and her origins from *devaloka*.

In the secondary narratives of the heavenly river flowing upon the Earth are recounted the various miracles wrought on the human beings who take a dip in her waters. The claim is that the experience of the ritual dip (ritual bath called *snān*) is a terrestrial experience of a dip in a heavenly river that has been transplanted to the earthly plane. The interaction between the land-place and the human pilgrim in his embodied form can be conceptually understood by using the concept of place as theorised by Casey (1993).

The human subject gives identity to the undifferentiated geographies of a landscape or natural regions by her interaction with the phenomenon and ordering them into fragments of private and collective memory. The experience of the human in the sacred natural land-place is different from the experience of a human being in a sacred place like a temple. This seems to be an example of what Casey (1993, p. 31) calls a "placescape". He refers to a placescape as something that is generated by a collusion of the body and the landscape. This identification of specific locations into placescapes occurs each time the subject comes across unfamiliar territory—natural or settled (p. 31). By this definition, sacred land-places are placescapes because they are created by a collusion of the Earth beings and land-places that have originated from the divine worlds. Though located on Earth and near enough to the familiar human habitats, the land-places by the nature of their origin are alien, unfamiliar. The narratives emphasise contact of the divine material with the body in the sacred place, rather than give priority to the experience of the presence or "*darśan"* through a symbol or vision. The importance of bodily contact with the divine reality is both phenomenological and ontological. The acculturation of these landscape features, according to Casey (1993), is "a social or communal act". Place as the sacred landscape thus is no longer just a "natural" category, it includes within itself a historical component. On how these places both cultural and social become shared realities, he writes "The culture that characterizes and shapes a given place is a shared culture, not merely superimposed on the place but part of its very facticity" (p. 31).

The experience of the human being who has bodily contact with a part of the divine world is very much linked to the idea of *karma*:

The dust (*dhūli*) from a sacred place has a special significance for a vaiṣṇava… While visiting the *tīrthas*, the pilgrims rub the dust of the holy place on their forehead and body as a mark of humble devotion (Chowdhury 2000, p. 74).

The *sthala māhāṭmya* story of the Pāpanasaṃ Waterfalls (in Tamil, the word *pāpanasaṃ* means destroyer of sins), further illustrates this point. A brother and sister separated at birth by calamity fell in love with each other by mistake. Soon, they both realised that they had sinned and wished to make amends by visiting all holy rivers and waters. Learned people advised them to wear black garments and bathe in all the holy waters, until the clothes turned white. No holy place gave them any relief, until finally they bathed at the waterfall called Pāpanasaṃ. On bathing in the falls, their clothes turned white and they achieved salvation. The fish that live in the lake are golden-hued and are never killed or eaten (Das 1964, pp. 44–45).

Whether it is the contact of the mud, water, land, or herbs, with the body of the devotee, the natural *tīrtha* is much favoured over the built structures. Perhaps this is the reason why many temples claim that the image of god was "found" rather than made. For example, the famous statue of Lord Bālaji in Tirupati is said to have been dug out from the earth by a devout king. This suggests the image was not of human origin but "other worldly"—a direct descent of the lord from his divine world in a corporeal image form. Naturally occurring Śiva stones or the Śiva *linga*s are also said to spring from Śiva *loka*. Referred to as *svayambhū* (self-born), they attract worship in the most unobvious places even today such as an urban horticultural garden or in an ice-sculpted form, or in the holy mountain shrine of Amaranth (where a Śiva *linga* of ice is formed annually), reached after an arduous trek. This tale also demonstrates Eck's (1981) explanation of the concept of *tīrtha*, or crossing over. Every sacred location forms a ladder, where the human can crossover to the state of salvation or to a state of heavenly experience of purity.

Eck (1981) remarks on the living tradition of these narratives: "The whole of India's sacred geography, with its many *tīrtha*s—those inherent in its natural landscape and those sanctified by the deeds of gods and the footsteps of heroes—is a living geography" (p. 336).

Place as a natural landscape includes time as an integral component of happening, not marked by physical parameters but by the experience of a subject. These form the basis of both shared and unshared narratives. Most rituals and stories associated with the place can be dismissed as mythical, but they are deeply metaphorical and give insights into the place-experiences of these traditions. In Casey's words: "We might even say that culture is the third dimension of places, affording them a deep historicity, a *longue durée,* which they would lack if they were entirely natural in constitution" (1993, p. 32).

7.8 Issues Around the Sacred Places: Being Immutable

Land-place features are sacred, yet the reverence seems to be merely ritualistic without regard for the physical degradation of the natural. A dichotomy between the sacred and the mundane that Kinsley (2000, pp. 225–246) refers to exists as two

different spheres of belief. While the sacred landscape affects and impacts the human beings, the lower valued human being has no impact on the sacred in return (in comparison with the more sacred and exalted status of the divine-worldly land-place). On the other hand, the mundane activities of the human are both impacted and in turn affect by the natural—as in case of the pollution of the Gaṅgā or the destruction of a sacred grove. What are the understandings of the sacred and the mundane with respect to natural landscapes? There exist some conflicting notions of sacred that I intend to discuss here.

From the conclusion about the origin myths of the sacred *tīrtha*s, one can reason that the sacred is immutable and the attitude towards the sacred is one of ritualistic reverence, not environmental restraint. Alley (2000, p. 322) writes about the two conflicting notions of pollution that exist in the Gaṅgā. It is seen that the ecological idea of pollution relates to chemical and other scientific parameters, while the priests equate the impurity to break down of morals and social values. The idea of the sacred land-place is located in the sphere of the sacred reality, not the mundane world of water and dirt. The original sacred, therefore, is considered immutable and cannot be subject to degeneration. As I mentioned earlier, it is also true that whichever land-place is not construed with a myth or sacred history, conversely, is mundane. This is an important issue related to sacred natural places that are local in nature. People from different areas who are unconnected to a sense of the sacred place lacking the experience of the shared narrative would not believe in the local sacred geography. In an essay comparing the pilgrimage of the Hindu with the aboriginal walkabout, Kingsley (2000, p. 228) points out how the sacred myths are like the dreamtime tales of the aboriginals and the landscape can be imagined as a text containing a detailed narrative of the land, in which these people are embedded. He suggests that these implicit structures are not comprehensible to a person who is outside the cultural context, and such a structure plays more than a mere geographical role (p. 229). This idea suggests that it should be the local carriers of the sacred myth, who should be the enforcers of any plausible ethics of place. Since the sacred is already embedded in their practices, including the ecologically relevant ethics would be easier.

The argument by environmental philosophers is that we do not have a theory of ecological ethics in Indian thought, but only have a kind of a normative framework that can be called at the most descriptive. Merchant (1980), for instance, emphasises that the normative import of the descriptive statements of nature is also important. She argues that understanding changes in the description of nature could lead us to understand certain ways in which cultural values have changed. She also implies that such descriptions lead to exposure of hidden norms within a culture: "Descriptive statements about the world can presuppose the normative; they are then ethic-laden … the norms may be tacit assumptions hidden within the descriptions in such a way as to act as invisible restraint or moral ought-nots" (p. 4).

Gottileb (2004, p. 8) also emphasises the significance of texts that teach systems of beliefs and create identities for the human being that seem to go beyond merely social or physical identities. Though most of these narratives seem to be about

other-worldly concerns, they play a very crucial role in people's orientation to their everyday world especially in the form of familiar habits and rituals: "At the same time religions provide norms for the conduct for the familiar interpersonal settings of family, community and world. Religious moral teachings presuppose a spiritual foundation and are meant to root our everyday behaviour in a spiritual truth about who we really are" (p. 8).

7.9 Conclusions: The Problems and Possibilities of a Sacred Nature Discourse

The idea of a scared geography can contribute positively to environmental ethics. Along with the discourse of the sacred imagination, the secondary narratives include normative rules that are to be followed in sacred places. Like the restraint on fishing in the holy falls mentioned earlier, many types of rules also surround the conduct of pilgrims to a sacred place. Jacobsen (1993) calls these two discourses as the magic and the ethical discourse and emphasises the importance of the ethical discourse: "The second group of textual statements aims at having an ethical impact from the point of view of environmental ethics of the place" (Jacobsen 1993, pp. 141–149). Illustrating the importance of the practice of normative ethical restraints in a sacred place, Jacobsen recounts how pilgrims practice forms of *ahimsā* or non-violence in sacred places by not using footwear or consuming meat. The sacred is to be experienced by morally dealing with the mundane even within the mind. Within the sacred, we do have two schools of thought: one which emphasises that the mere ritual can be sufficient for the benefit of the sacred experience and the second which hold that rituals without the support of moral conduct would not benefit a pilgrim. The popular story is told of how all the sins get off and wait for the bather to take a dip in the Gaṅgā and re-join him as he steps out of the divine river. Such narratives included in the secondary narratives seem to actually critique the sacredness of the land-place and emphasise moral conduct as a prerequisite for the experience of the sacred place. Verses in the *Mahābhārata,* (*Vanaparva*), for instance, describe the various moral practices for an individual that would give him the full benefits of encountering the sacred. They include observances such as self-control, being truthful, following austerities, and treating all beings as he would himself (Kane 1973, p. 562).

There are also ritualistic practices that have a moral basis that seem to prevent pollution of sacred places. For instance, the *Śiva Purāṇa* has a list of practices to be followed near holy water bodies and rivers which includes not spitting into the water, not washing clothes in a river directly, but using the water to wash elsewhere.

While I do agree with the comparison, I would like to point out that mere sacred imaginations of the land-place will not directly contribute to the conservation of such places. Instead, what would have an impact would be an emphasis and a

re-awakening of the ethical discourse of restraint that runs parallel to the sacred stories of the land. In the words of Jacobsen (1993, p. 138): "Places of pilgrimage are places where people, according to the normative statements, are expected to show restraint towards all living beings. There is therefore traditionally a relationship between environmental ethics and sacred places".

Despite significant environmental campaigns in the media and the incorporation of environmental sciences into education, there has been no significant change in people's behaviour towards the environment. Recent studies have shown that mere awareness or education on issues does not transform human behaviour. The need to raise these supernatural, socio-ethical beliefs and values to the secular understanding is possible through linking these values to sustainable, pro-environmental behaviour of people. If the value–behaviour link is clearly established, it is possible to incorporate value education into environmental awareness programmes and advocacy. It is, for example, possible that somebody is quite aware of the fact that his behaviour is detrimental to natural environment, but as long as he is not convinced that it is important to preserve the environment he might not be willing or motivated to change his behaviour.

I end this chapter with a very brief note on the possible ways in which the idea of sacred geography can be relevant to ecological ethics. It is in the body of human being that both the mundane and the sacred meet. The human being is the agent of moral action both for the ascent into higher worlds and the preservation of the nature in this world. Though the purpose of the sacred is to create a way for the ascent of the human being, and not ecological conservation, it is clear that the emphasis on the restraining or other similar normative practices can serve to create ecologically sensitive pilgrims. The idea is to include the normative values within a place without the ecological value displacing the sacred value or imagination. Wherever possible, ritual practices must be supported by ecologically planned structures. [13]Asking people not to bathe in the holy waters or visit a sacred rock would not be possible. However, asking them to not use plastic papers or eat or spit within the sacred perimeter would be well within the discourse of a sacred place. It is important to therefore take into account the narratives and concepts of sacred land-places and perceive them beyond the mere natural features to create a viable eco-ethics of place. The relationship to place both socially and culturally given by normative narratives would thus be environmentally relevant in today's world. There are parts of our pre-modern tradition that we have to reject and parts of it that we have to incorporate in this reformed world view.

[13]For instance, in Talakaveri, the spring considered the birth place of the Kaveri, the bathing area is kept separate from the actual spring where worship is offered. *Kalyani*s, or special tanks, were constructed on the lake banks in Bengaluru to provide for the immersion of *Gaṇeśa* clay idols during the annual festival which would have otherwise polluted the lakes and tanks.

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