

Chapter 8

Nature in Vedic Thought: Gods, the Earth, and *Ṛta*

Abstract Continuing with the theme of sacred nature, this chapter traces sources of some of the ideas about nature and the human being from the Vedic tradition. The representation of “nature and human” in the Vedic period can be viewed from two perspectives. The representation, thought, and behaviour of the people during the Vedic period from an eco-sociological viewpoint differ from the eco-philosophical interpretation. The purpose of this chapter was to look beyond the two rather opposite viewpoints taken by previous research in this area to see whether it is possible to construct an ecological philosophy of Vedic period fairly, without bias. The term *ṛta*, an alternative conceptualisation of nature as “natural law”, and the interpretations of these concepts are also detailed in this chapter. I have also briefly suggested the ecological implications of such understandings.

Keywords Vedic nature · Gods · Goddesses · Panentheism · Earth · Natural law · *Ṛta*

8.1 Sacred Nature: Gods and Goddesses of Vedic Cosmology

One of the dominating influences on Indian thought has been the body of the literature known as the Vedas, and subsidiary texts called the *purāṇas*. These texts are based on a complex understanding of the cosmos and its structure. They construct a story of a universe in which human beings occupy a place within the web of creation and are not separate from it. From the religious and philosophical constructs found in the texts of the Vedic period, one can posit with reasonable certitude that the people who composed the Vedas subscribed to a cosmogony that was not confined to the visible physical environment that they lived in. Space and time were a part of this created cosmos, as were the sun, moon, and the stars. One could say that that it is possible to look at nature as a vision of an interconnected “cosmos” in the Vedas.

The cosmogonies or the stories of the universe in these texts describe not only our world that is presented to our senses but also mythical worlds of other beings. Within this world view, the cosmos consists of many worlds called *lokas* (which are sometimes mythical and not *on* the earth) and also beings (*bhūtas*) that inhabit such worlds. Vedic verses often refer to the cosmic being—*Vaiśvānara* or *Hiraṇyagarbha*.¹ The various components of this universal being-body are the waters, sun, moon, and the earth. Like the limbs of the body, the various components of the whole cosmic being make up this cosmic realm.² The *Puruṣa Sūkta* (*Rg Veda* 10.90) for instance, describes this cosmic being as having a thousand limbs and heads and suggests that he permeated the universe and all his creation in an act of sacrifice (Monier Williams 1876, p. 240).

It is interesting to note that these metaphysical and experiential components, like the nature gods in the Vedas are amorphous, lending themselves to multi-level interpretation. The *lokas* in traditional myths are named after the beings that inhabit them. Just as the beings are “enworlded” by the *lokas*, the *lokas* are populated or “en-being-ed” by the inhabitants. The inhabitants often define the place-world (*loka*) by giving them a particular name: *Nāgaloka*: the world of *Nāgas*, snake people, *Devaloka*: the world of *Devas*, divine beings, etc. Sometimes the stories call these worlds by the name of the primary deity whose presence is primary (some other word?) in that world. The trinity gods in Hindu thought are assigned special *lokas* such as *Śiva-loka*, *Viṣṇu-loka*, and *Brahma-loka*. The seven earlier hierarchical worlds described in Vedic texts give way in later Puraṇic stories, to the more personal *lokas* in the narratives which are “inhabitant-centric or deity-centric worlds”. While these worlds have spatio-temporal dimensions, their material or geographical locations are uncertain. Some worlds are “attainable” worlds, which one reaches by designated rites or austerities, and yet others can be reached by travel and sometimes within one’s own mind through meditation. The world view about the *lokas* remains constant; however, retaining the cosmography of the hierarchical planes, with the upper worlds, having more sanctity than the so-called lower worlds. As discussed in Chap. 7, the important point is that the cosmic order within these is maintained and balanced harmoniously by the natural order called *ṛta* (=rita) or *dharma* in various texts (Keith 1925).

The moral hierarchy also determined the sacred precedence of the various beings; a sacred being was defined by the actions and rituals of who salutes whom or reveres whom, who is given offerings first or who is morally in perfect integrity. The origins, the actions of dharma, and adherence to universal laws, all formed a complex indication of the place order of all objects and beings in the cosmos. This cosmology forms an important presupposition for the analysis of the ecologically relevant themes in Indian thought.

¹*Vaiśvānara* is the form of the universal experiencer, consumer. *Hiraṇyagarbha* refers to the cosmic womb.

²Also sometimes called *Brahmāṇḍa* or the cosmic egg.

On examining the Vedic literature and related texts, it is clear that Vedic people worshipped parts of nature as sacred and powerful cosmological entities. MacCulloch (1994) suggests that people living close to nature are stirred by a sense of wonder and awe, which manifest as fear, love, or respect. Perhaps this was the case with the Vedic people who deified the sun, moon, and stars and all that they saw around them (pp. 201–202). This seems to be a rather simplistic reading of the Vedas, which are not merely poems of praise of the powerful elements and natural climatic events.

About the divinities themselves, Jamison and Witzel remark that there was no particular way in which deities could be clearly categorised.

Indeed, what is striking about the Vedic pantheon is its lack of overarching organisation. Some gods are transparently “natural”—their names merely common nouns, with little or no characterisation or action beyond their “natural” appearance and behaviour (e.g., *Vāta*, [*Vāta*], deified ‘Wind’). Others are deified abstractions, again with little character beyond the nouns that name them (e.g., *Bhaga*—‘Portion’). Others belong especially to the ethical and conceptual sphere (e.g., *Varuna*, *Mitra*), others to ritual practice (*Soma*, the deified libation) (Jamison and Witzel 1992).

However, as we have seen earlier, the idea of sacrality, even among the Vedic deities, was strictly determined by a cosmic hierarchy of different *lokas*, beings, and moral precedence.³ Prevalent literature does take on a romantic view of the idea of Vedic natural gods, suggesting that we can somehow learn or derive an ecological sense from these beliefs about sacred nature divinities. The tendency to be anecdotal and situate the verses out of the larger framework of the Vedas to prove a point that the Vedic people were more mindful of the earth than we are seems to be a dubitable discourse.

As I mentioned earlier, hymns of praise in the Vedas are not limited to the earth alone. The sun, the waters, and Indra are praised in turn and asked to protect mankind and issue favours. While I agree that we are no longer in the age where we continue to practice all the Vedic beliefs, it is also impossible to ignore the larger context in which these gods were given offerings. If we examine the philosophy and the belief system behind the praise of these various gods including the earth, we find that the Vedic people had a give-and-take relationship with the universe or cosmos. A review of the philosophy behind rituals and myths shows that the people lived by a rule of reciprocity (Mylius 1973):

Perhaps the most obvious of the motivating ideas of Vedic religion is the Roman principle of “*do ut d.s*”[sic], “I give so that you will give” (Van der Leeuw 1920–21), or in Vedic terms: “give me, I give you”, *dehi me dadāmi te*, TS 1.8.4.1, VS 3.50 (p. 476) (Mylius Quoted by Jamison and Witzel 1992).

This reciprocity extended beyond the community to the phenomenal world, in a system that Jamison refers to in his paper as “natural economy”. According to this

³Some dysfunctional aspects of this moral order could be the social domination of Brahmins or Kṣatriyas who are given precedence over the others in the community and access to sacred objects, and study of scriptures. Though interesting, this discussion is out of the purview of this book.

view, all nature participates in a cycle where nothing is wasted or lost. For instance, heavenly water falls as rain to earth, it produces plants (which are eaten by animals); both plant and animal products are offered at the ritual and thus ascend to heaven in the smoke of the offering fire, to become rain again. Some philosophers, however, do not believe that these rituals had any deeper meanings than performance.

The contention of most scholars who studied the religious background of the Vedic people suggests that Nature was considered powerful, the human was indebted to these nature gods, whether they were abstract or primitive. It is a philosophy of exchange rather a deep sense of love, respect, or care for nature per se. Writers such as Dwivedi (2000) tend to articulate this as a simple ethics of care when using words such as “*Dharmic ecology*” to refer to the relevance of sacred texts in raising ecological consciousness. We also find that certain readings of these texts assert that the sentiments in the *Ṛthvī Sūkta* denote the bond between the earth and human beings and exemplify the relationship between the earth and all living beings, humans, as well as other forms of life. The interest in classic texts such as the Vedas and *purāṇas* is important in the search for conceptual resources that may provide answers to issues in environmental ethics (Callicot and Ames 1989).

Patton (2000), however, warns us about reading ecological ethics into every text of the Vedic period. She accepts in her article that affirmation of harmony between humans and nature could add to our constructive behaviour, yet cautions that deliberate readings that leave something out of the ancient assessment of nature would damage the ecological cause. Transparency and critical assessments of such texts, she suggests, may have a better persuasive power. One must be aware that it is not necessary that every sacred or traditional reference to nature would automatically entail ecologically relevant behaviour. Narayanan (1997) also wonders at the disparity between the world views on nature and environmental behaviour and acknowledges the competing forces within the traditions. Given the fact that the Vedic sacrifices and the direct worship of these nature deities is no longer predominant in the popular imagination of the people, it is not possible to re-invoke nature gods within the larger traditions in society. However, it is possible to explore the spirit and the virtues extolled as a context for the Vedic fire-ritual activity—the concepts of reciprocity, offering and also greater good.⁴ Patton (2007, p. 127) interpreting the Vedic rituals from a Levinasian framework of ethics suggests that the Vedic “mutuality occurs on a two-folded level”. The first of these is between the divinity and the humanity and the second between each of the priests who are active performers of the fire ritual. She suggests “... such a sacrifice involves face-to-face interaction, both at the level of performance as well as the symbolic language of interaction between humans and gods” (pp. 127–128). She refers to the various ways in which a face-to-face accountability can be envisioned in the acts of the fire

⁴In Sanskrit texts, these would be *dharma*, *dāna*, and *loka-kalyāna*, often discussed together in the *Bhagavadgīta*. See Bilimoria (2007) for an overview analysis of various ethical streams in Indian thought.

ritual (p. 131). As Patton admits, the ethical imagery in the Vedas is far more complex because of its intermeshing with the social, “yet it also carries the possibility carrying the other within oneself” (pp. 141–142).

8.2 Dematerialisation of the Vedic Gods: Loss of an Ecological Narrative

Narayanan (2001) refers to the sanctity of the earth, the rivers, and the mountains in Hindu sacred texts starting with the Vedas. An important historical turn in the conceptualisation of Vedic gods is the dematerialisation of the so-called “natural gods”. As discussed earlier, there is no documentation as to why some deities were abstract, some very physical or why some had multiple names and personalities. Most gods associated with real physical aspects of the environment seemed to lose their embodiment in nature and become abstract or a “controlling power”.

Social ecologists such as Gadgil and Guha (1992) also interpret the loss of sacred geography to the creation of abstract nature gods such as *Varuṇa* or *Agni* (Brahmin gods). They argue that divinity individualised in trees, groves, and ponds was replaced by abstract forces of nature such as wind, water, fire, air, earth, etc., and these powers were again used to subjugate hunter–gatherers. Geden (1926), however, prefers to consider the transformation of the spirits of nature—trees, ponds, and rivers into a later tradition of deeming certain places and trees, plants, or animals as sacred.

The word for nature used in common parlance in languages derived from Sanskrit, *prakṛti*, also comes to us from the literature of the Vedas and *purāṇas*.⁵ Jacobsen (2002) also mentions that the word *prakṛti* is used as a technical term in the Vedas. With reference to rituals, *prakṛti*—means model or archetypal sacrifices. Though there was no particular concept for nature in the Vedic age, the word *prakṛti* has come to represent nature for us in the current times and its conceptual meanings are various, as we have seen in the previous chapters.

8.3 Nature in the Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads are some of the oldest texts in Indian intellectual traditions. A part of the Vedic literature, the Upaniṣads are distinguished from the rest of the Veda sections because they emphasise the path of knowledge called *jñānakānda*, as opposed to the rest of the Vedic sections that focus on ritual or *karmakānda* (Dasgupta 2004).

⁵*Prākṛt*, the common language, is so named due its natural formation, as opposed to a well-formed created language, *Samskṛt*.

The term *upaniṣad* is formed from the root word *śad* that means “to sit” and the two prefixes, *ni* that means “down” and *upa* which means “near”. The term therefore refers to the act of “sitting down near” or in another sense it also means “to draw close to”. The word represents both the context and the content of the Upaniṣads. The context is that of a close conversation between the teacher and the taught and the content of teaching of these texts is the revelation of a secret knowledge that leads the student closer to a supreme spiritual state. The Upaniṣads are also called *Vedānta*, a culmination of Vedic enquiry into the nature of the truth (Dasgupta 2004).

Though the central theme of the Upaniṣads is seen as “the hidden self or inner being” referred to as *ātman* (Ganeri 2007), we find a number of references to the lived world and its descriptions that are woven into deeply philosophical narratives. As Sharma (2003) rightly remarks, the usual reading of some of these texts is largely limited to viewing them through the perspective of Advaita philosophy. Such a perspective limits the possibilities of the phenomenological descriptions of nature conveyed in many passages (p. 53). He writes “Such a metaphysics at this stage [during the *Upaniṣads* era] did not entail a denial of the world and nature, at least in the same way, as later came to be associated with the school of *Advaita Vedānta*”. (p. 52). Sinha (2006) suggests, “Monotheism in the *Veda-s* [Vedas] led to monism” [non-dualism] (p. 4). Therefore, it is equally possible that the Upaniṣads propound diverse streams of thought that represent both dual and non-dual understandings.

Culp (2009) citing Whittemore (1988, 33, pp. 41–44) writes

Although there are texts referring to Brahman as contracted and identical to Brahman, other texts speak of Brahman as expanded. In these texts, the perfect includes and surpasses the total of imperfect things as an appropriation of the imperfect. Although not the dominant interpretation of the *Upaniṣads* [*Upaniṣads*], multiple intimations of pantheism are present in the *Upaniṣads* [*Upaniṣads*].

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (henceforth, *BU*) and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (henceforth, *CU*) contain some accounts of nature that are relevant to us as many passages. These Upaniṣads describe the interdependencies of the created beings in the cosmos. Clear examples and indications of sacred immanence are also to be found in many passages such as this verse in the *CU*:

That deity willed, “Well! Let me entering into these three deities, [fire, water, and earth] through this living-self, differentiate and manifest names and forms.” (6.3.2, trans. Gambirananda 1983)

In the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, the second chapter concludes that the luminous cosmic self is in fire, water, plants, etc., pervading the whole world. Nature and the entire universe are also conceived as representing the entire universe and its functions as the parts of a single being. This being is not always in the form of a human being, but the cosmos is sometimes likened to a tree, or a horse as in this verse in the *BU*:

Verily the dawn is the head of the horse which is fit for sacrifice, the sun its eye, the wind its breath, the mouth the *Vaiśvānara* fire [digestive fire], the year [is] the body of the sacrificial

horse. Heaven is the back, the sky the belly, the earth the chest, the quarters the two sides, the intermediate quarters the ribs, the members the seasons, the joints the months and half-months, the feet days and nights, the bones the stars, the flesh the clouds. The half-digested food is the sand, the rivers the bowels, the liver and the lungs the mountains, the hairs the herbs and trees. As the sun rises, it is the forepart, as it sets, the hind part of the horse. When the horse shakes itself, then it lightens; when it kicks, it thunders; when it makes water, it rains; voice [neighing] is its voice (*BU* 1.1.1, trans. Müller 1879).

As we see from the passage above, one of the ways nature is conceived is as one unified whole “being” constituted by its different parts and functions. The unified being in these texts led to other traditions of philosophies where the texts suggest that a search for the innermost core or this substantive support of all beings becomes central to their doctrine. Another way of seeking unity of all nature is to describe layers of essences/substances, each giving rise to another, supporting each other. The *CU* for instance describes this idea: “The essence of all these beings is the earth. The essence of earth is water. The essence of water is vegetation. The essence of vegetation is the man. The essence of man is speech...” (1.1.2, trans. Swahananda 1956). Also in the *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, we find a verse (2.1.9, trans. Gambhirananda 1989) that describes the world of creation as arising from one who chooses to remain as the inner being of all. In the list of beings that have arisen out of this self-being are “all the oceans, all the mountains, rivers, plants, and their juices”.

Many verses of these texts also celebrate this inner essence as life or *prāna*. The conceptualisation of a unitary form of life force in all beings of is an interesting view of an organic nature. Some passages for instance mention the presence of life in trees as similar to that of human beings.

Of this large tree, dear boy, if anyone were to strike at the root, it would extrude sap, though still living, if anyone were to strike in the middle, it would extrude sap, though still living, if anyone were to strike at the top, it would extrude sap, though still living. As that tree is pervaded by the living self, it stands firm drinking constantly and rejoicing (*CU* 6.11.1, trans. Swahananda 1956).

8.4 On the Sacred Earth

One of the oldest conceptualisations of the idea of the natural world is that of the earth. The earth was often considered to be the womb of all living beings. Among the very many Vedic deities associated with nature and natural phenomenon, the closest to our concept of nature is Earth or *Pṛithvī*. As the great mother of all beings and a goddess, the reverence for the earth is unmistakable. In Vedic literature, the earth is regarded as a divine mother. Many writers have pointed out that such a conceptualisation of Earth as a divine mother demonstrates the reverence that the composers of the Vedas had for the land they lived on (see Kinsley 1998; Gottlieb 2004).

Patil (1974) traces the conceptualisation of the earth to a pre-Vedic period. He suggests that the goddess *Nirṛti* mentioned in the Vedas is a pre-Aryan fertility mother goddess who continues to be worshipped in different forms even in later periods and is mentioned in various texts such as the *Mārķendeya Purāṇa* (p. 36) and the *Vajaseneyi Saṃhitā* (p. 37). The goddess is represented in two aspects in the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (*TS*): as a cruel deity and a death goddess she is terrible and she is also the Earth:

Thee in whose cruel mouth here I make the offering,
For the loosening of the bonds,
As “earth” people⁶ know thee,
As *Nirṛti*, I know thee on every side. (*TS* IV.2.5 trans. adapted from Patil 1974, p. 31)

He traces the origins of this goddess to the ancient deity who might have been a river goddess: “*Rti* or *Rta* means, according to *Nigṇṭu* (I.12.68), water. This etymology denotes *Nirṛti* was originally an *apsara*, a water or river goddess” (p. 33).

Patil (1974) also makes an observation that the goddess, *Nirṛti*, is connected to the realm of water, serpents, tribes, and the land. Using textual quotations and also observations of practices related to this fertility goddess, he establishes the connections between waters in the context of both rivers and *Varuṇa*, the deity of serpents, and water. *Prakṛti*, the universal mother goddess (the later creatrix of the *Sāṃkhya* philosophy) may have been derived from the concept of *nirṛti*, he suggests. If the meaning of *rta* is taken to mean cosmic law, this deity becomes the power of those laws, a precursor to *prakṛti*. Patil (1974) concludes his study with the suggestion that “The three characteristics of *Nirṛti*, over lordship over water, land and tribe, in course of time were transformed into the three *guṇas*” (p. 55). Each of the colours associated with the three characteristics, white with water, black with the earth, and red with the over-lordship of the tribe, give rise to the colours associated with the three *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. In some passages in the *TS*, the goddess *Aditi* is also identified with the Earth, and in others, she is mentioned separately along with the earth. The *Naighantaka* names *Aditi* as a synonym of Earth—*prthivī*, cow—*go*, and in the dual as similar to the heaven—earth pair—*dyāvāprthivī* (Macdonell 1998, p. 121). *Aditi* is referred to as a personification of a universal or cosmic nature. It is interesting to note that the two qualities of *Aditi* described as prominent are that of motherhood and that of a power to release the bonds of human suffering. While motherhood is closely linked to the idea of the earth, the second power is represented in the cow (Macdonell 1998, p. 121). He suggests that etymologically, as *Aditi*, it is possible that she is a cow, representing boundless plenty: “Mystical speculation on the name would lead to her being styled a cow, as representing boundless plenty, or to her being identified with the boundless earth heaven or universe” (p. 121).

We find that in the Vedas, there are two forms of reference to the earth. Sometimes, the earth is called earthly plane (*bhūloka*), the *metaphysical* realm of which is a part of either a seven world system (*saptaloka*), or sometimes a three-world system

⁶Patil’s (1974) translation reads ‘men’ for *janā*; I prefer to use the term ‘people’ here.

consisting of the earthly plane (*bhū*), the intermediate plane (*bhūvah*), and the heavenly plane (*suvah*) (Baindur 2010).⁷ Another form of common reference to the Earth is the land that on which we live on, the earth that provides all the natural resources for all beings, often called the “Goddess Earth”. This idea of the Earth revered as a mother is evident in many verses of the Vedas such as the *Pr̥thvī Sūkta*. It is assumed that an attitude of reverence would lead to ecologically responsible behaviour towards the planet.

An eco-feminist’s critique of this view would dismiss the metaphor as something that is based on ecological romanticism, which chooses to ignore social realities about nature and women. This metaphor is problematic as it still is within the framework of a patriarchal imagination of a vulnerable nature that is to be “protected” (Roach 1996).

In early references in the *R̥g Veda* for instance, the earth is portrayed as a powerful goddess who is mighty and sustains all beings and landscape features such as mountains (Dwivedi 2000). Transformation of the social life and position of woman in stratified communities led to devaluation of the earth. In an earlier paper, I trace the conversion of the Goddess Earth into a divine abstract, *Bhūdevī*, and the material resource earth (Baindur 2010). Mani (1989) suggests that the separation between the earth and its body is evident when the texts suggest that “The earth is made of mud and *Bhūdevī* is its Goddess”. This reduces the corporeal earth into a resource while the divine qualities of the Vedic Earth are enshrined in the divine consort of *Viṣṇu*. The Earth goddess loses her power and autonomy and as mere land becomes subservient to the owner—the king or the landlord. The dematerialisation of the earth also occurs with time. The earlier verses clearly indicate that the Earth was venerated as the earth that was material, composed of mud, dirt, and supporting mountains and trees. For instance, the verse in AV XII.1 says:

Earth is composed of rock, of stone, of dust;

Earth is compactly held, consolidated.

I venerate this mighty earth the golden breasted (trans. quoted from Panikkar 1983 p. 125).

Like the West, a scientific narrative of a mechanical universe (Merchant 1990) did not replace the concept of a living earth in Indian traditions. Instead, the objectification was due to cultural and religious norms as well as myths around the roles and characteristics of a woman that seem to augment the patriarchal discourse. A feminist critique of this position would reject the metaphor of the earth as drawing on the romantic idealisation of “woman as mother” and an idea of chivalrous protection of woman, both of which have patriarchal underpinnings.

Drawing from her conclusions on Vedic and Purānic literature, I discuss the problems and possibilities with the two models of belief (Baindur 2010). Firstly, in Indian thought, the earth has been accorded a divine status and is revered as a goddess. Given the reverence shown to the Earth in Indian culture, the unsustainable extraction of resources from the land is a contradiction. The problem with

⁷This study related to this topic has already been published independently as a paper and is to be a separate chapter that is to be published in an edited volume. I briefly summarise my work here.

deification is that any discourse about the Earth as a goddess who is divine and therefore indestructible often masks exploitation and neglects towards the corporeal earth. Secondly, the earth is often regarded as a mother of all beings. As a mother, as land, and as a divine goddess—all these representations seem to form beliefs that could influence people to pro-environmental behaviour. Despite all these beliefs, forms of extracting resources from the Earth are justified by narratives that can be traced to the historical conceptualisation of the Earth and woman in Vedic and Purāṇic thought. In my study, a critique of this idea is developed through analysis of narratives about the earth in both classical and popular literature linked to the problems with the image of the feminine mother and also of a goddess in a patriarchal society.

The concept of the earth within the Vedic narratives gradually underwent a transformation that was influenced by the sociocultural transformations. It is clear from various textual sources that the earth which is conceptualised as a mighty mother is transformed into a suppliant goddess, and at the same time, she is also distanced from the actual land which becomes de-sacralised and non-organic. I posit that this occurs through narratives and myths such as that of King Pṛṥṥa that legitimise the exploitation of resources.⁸ Following my analysis, one can see how the earth, though not called Aditi in the myth of King Pṛṥṥa, comes to embody these two forms of the mother and the cow (Baindur 2010).

I have suggested in this context that it is possible to rework this image of the Earth–mother in a constructive way. The Earth is vulnerable to human action, but this vulnerability need not be connected to the idea of the woman. Instead, if we seek to humanise the earth, giving the idea a temporal context, we can say that the vulnerability of the earth is linked to ageing. In terms of how much longer the Earth can care for us, we have an option of re-imagining the earth as an aged parent who deserves our care and love.

I also point out that perhaps, the humanisation of the earth as an aged parent can restore its fragility and evoke an ethics of care towards it:

Inside this view, we would need to re-embody the earth having a temporal existence. The solution thus lies not in revering the earth as divine but humanizing it. This explicit invocation of temporality into both humans as children and earth as mother is the first ethical move in a narrative of the earth. Basically this implies that the earth, which was earlier deified, has to be humanized for any ethics to be possible. The metaphor of an unchanging divine and ever young earth that is divine and untouched by our activities has to be replaced with a narrative that foregrounds the earth as an aging mother (Baindur 2010, p. 581).

⁸According to one version of the story (Mani 1989; Baindur 2010), the Goddess Earth had withdrawn all her vegetation into herself and people were suffering for want of food crops. King Pṛṥṥa who was angered by this behaviour of the earth went after her to punish her. The goddess took the form of a cow and ran to all the worlds (*lokas*), but found no place to hide. The goddess was forced to surrender to King Pṛṥṥa and the threat of his powerful bow and sharp arrows. She was then milked for all her resources.

8.5 *Rta* and *Dharma*: The Natural Moral Law and Duties

The idea of *dharma* is still based on the concept of *rta*, founded on the hedonistic principle that finds mention in the Vedas. This is the principle that guides and ensures performance of one's *karma* (action) according to one's *dharma* and leads to the reduction of suffering; the non-performance of one's *dharma* leads to suffering. As *rta* as described in the Vedas, it is not merely an automatic "natural" law that governed planetary movements and the duties of the various gods. In the Indian conceptualisation, *rta* evolved into a principle of moral action and righteousness, its meaning taking on similarity with "truth". The word for truth as "integrity" or righteousness is *rtam*. *Rtam* is a principle that goes beyond the descriptive truth we call "honesty". Instead, it represents a state of moral affairs, a statement that is a creative act of keeping one's word or what in an Indian perspective would be called as "obeying one's socio-cosmic and place-order duties or *dharma*". Bilimoria (1997) explains that the concept of *rta* is important as it connects the created cosmos to a moral order within it:

The highest good (summum bonnum), however, expresses itself in total harmony of the cosmic or natural order characterised by *rta*: this is the *telos*, the creative purpose that underpins human behaviour. The prescribed pattern of social and moral order is thus conceived as a correlate of a natural order (p. 33).

The idea of *rta* is important in the conceptualisation of nature as the idea of the moral or ethical in Indian thought called *dharma* arises from the same conceptualisation and the word. A discussion on the meanings and various references to *rta* would be a merely descriptive project unconnected to the central idea of the philosophy of nature. Therefore, the idea of *rta* in relation to its derivative *dharma* becomes a study of natural law in Indian philosophy.

We have earlier discussed the concept of *puruṣartha*s with a view to understand the difference between human and non-human beings of creation. Here, we shall see a moral framework for environmental ethics is possible within the framework of *dharma*. Without attempting to translate the word, which lacks an equivalent term in the English language, we can explore the cluster of ideas around this particular concept which has many moral connotations in Indian thought.

The idea of *dharma* comes from the root *dhr* (which means sustaining) and the word *rta* that was used in the Vedas to represent moral order or natural law. On one hand, the word *dharma* represents some sort of natural, summing each character of function in any existent. It is commonly used in sentences such as "it is the *dharma* of fire to burn" and again "it is the *dharma* of water to flow downwards". The same word is used in many moral and social contexts too. It represents the norms and the duties enjoined by one's place in the universe. This place order may be cosmic or social or both. According to this, it is the *dharma* of the sun to travel across the sky (cosmic duty) and the *dharma* of the son to obey his father (relationship duty). It is also the *dharma* of a *kṣatriya* to fight (caste/community duty) and the *dharma* of the king to protect his subjects (social/political duty). It is the *dharma* of every human being to tell the truth and keep his promises (a common human moral duty).

As the prescribed and proper function or action, *dharma* can be a moral concept. It is true that the combination of both the natural (in some cases, the identity criteria) and the social context for *dharma* creates a framework in which actions are natural, moral, and social at the same time. Bilimoria (2007) describes *dharma* as moving from a natural order that is organic towards a more human-based ethics rights and duties (p. 37). Mohanty (2007) points out that classically *dharma* is defined by various philosophies in different ways, such as this functional definition of serving a purpose of good: “‘*Dharma*’ is that from which well-being (*abhyudaya*) and the highest good (*niḥśreyasa*) come about”. He also adds

An answer to the question ‘What is *dharma*?’ which abandons the project of defining it is this: ‘*dharma* is that which the cultivated persons (*āryāḥ*) praise when it is done, and *adharmā* is that which they condemn when it is done’ (pp. 59–60).

One of the aspects of *dharma*, referred to as the *varna-āśrama-dharma* relates to the idea of “caste duties” and is unfortunately, the source of much debate in the modern Indian society. This is one of the particular types of *dharma* that may have to be ignored in this discussion and we may instead consider a broader understanding of *dharma* as place-order-based duties or obligation for a philosophy of nature. This would also help to interpret *dharma* within a framework of environmental ethics. The idea of *dharma* takes away from the question of moral considerability (as discussed in Chap. 4) and instead focuses on the moral agent and his actions. Rolston (1999) remarks that one of the difficulties of an anthropocentric and personalistic ethics of the Western world is that

According to holders of the humanistic perspective, humans can have no duties to rocks, rivers, or ecosystems, and almost none to birds or bears; humans have serious duties only to each other, with nature often instrumental in such duties; the environment is the wrong kind of primary target for an ethic; nature is a means, not an end in itself; nothing there counts morally; and nature has no intrinsic value (p. 410).

Rolston (1988) also derives the concept of duty to nature from different values which are instrumental such as life support value, economic value, recreational value, scientific value, aesthetic value, as well historical and cultural values. On the other hand, in Indian thought, duty to nature is given by the internal benefit that the human being derives from following *dharma*. It is an instrumental value but it is not derived by the use of nature directly. The benefit of all actions is twofold. On one level, there is an immediate effect on our everyday existence. On the other hand, we have another level of effect that is a moral judgement. Rather, all the actions give the result moral *karman*. The naturalisation of moral obligations results in nature being instrumental in actually “fulfilling” a human being’s need to follow his/her *dharma* rather than “deserving” of his interventions or moral obligations. Nature becomes a means for human beings to attain liberation and gain merits. Nature is instrumental, not in the sense of being exploited, but in the sense of becoming a field for human *karma* and the fulfilment of *dharma*.

Extending this to the modern context of environmental ethics, the idea of *dharma* can be easily applied to our duty to care for the environment, the non-performance of which will ultimately lead to suffering of the human kind. The idea

of one's *dharma* is fundamentally based on a being's relationship to the world around her. To act in a "dharmic" way is to act according to one's place and context in the universe. So the idea of *dharma* forms a foundation for an ethics that is already based on human relationship to the rest of the beings, cosmos, or even one's own self. This can actually provide a framework where one's ethical or moral actions are based on norms given by the place order state of being. This framework of ethics is certainly anthropocentric, but the foundation of it is based on non-anthropocentric, cosmic view of the human beings' place as part of a larger cosmos. 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 *rta* and *karman* and that means to be related to every other created existent in the world.

8.6 The "Relational", *Dharma*, and an Interpretation of Ecological Ethics

The philosophy of Sāṃkhya in particular upholds that there is an eternal relationship between the whole and its parts, in this case between *prakṛti* and its evolutes. The relationship is a category of *sāmānya* or generality that inheres in all existents.⁹ Aniruddha, a Sāṃkhya commentator, is summarised by Larson thus "It is true that materiality [*prakṛti*] and consciousness [*puruṣa*] are eternal, but nevertheless, the category of universal property [*sāmānya*] has a certain constancy".

Vaiśeṣika philosophy gives the definition of the universal *sāmānya* as "eternal one and residing in many". The universal is also explained as the one by the presence of which many individuals belong to a single class.¹⁰ For both the Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika, this is an ontologically real category and is not like a concept in the mind. This makes all universals metaphysical realities that are not mere abstract principles. The universals reside in substances, qualities, and actions and claim the realists. One such relationship universal that inheres in all of *prakṛti* is the universal "*dharma*". The concept *dharma* is a unique universal (*sāmānya*) as it inheres in substance (*guṇas* or collocations), in qualities as the function of an existent, and also in action as ordained moral action. Further, from the discussion

⁹The idea of pursuing the concept of relatedness evolved after a discussion with Dr. Sundar Sarukkai who saw connections within the broad themes I had put forward in an early draft of this chapter.

¹⁰See the details of *Vaiśeṣika* categories in Sharma (2003).

on *dharma* in chapter three, *dharma* is a unique category in Indian moral thought, because by virtue of being ontologically given, it establishes the relationship of human beings to the cosmos at large. Koller (1972) reiterates that the unique ontological status of *dharma* and *ṛta* is a profound thought of the Vedas:

But it would be a mistake to infer that since *dharma* and *ṛta* are normative they are not ontological, for they are both. There is no difference between the being (*sat*) of reality and its function (*ṛta*). Just as in the *Upaniṣads*, truth is identified with *dharma*, so in the Vedas, truth (*satya*) is identified with *ṛta* (p. 136).

Connected to the principle of *dharma*, especially in the human realm, is the idea of *karman* or moral action. Koller (1972) emphasises that while *dharma* provides the normative dimension of relatedness, *karman* refers to the “connectedness of events”. He adds “The law of *karman* guarantees the relatedness of all events in the world but does not provide for the regulation of events. The ordering or regulation of relations between events is accomplished by *dharma*” (p. 141).

According to Panikkar (1977), *ṛta* and *karman* are not merely mechanical forces; they are functional and relational. He writes “... both *ṛta* and *karman* are always functional and they function according to a set of relational factors, one of which is human will along with its sentiments and feelings”. This internal relationship between action, moral, and the universe at large is very significant for a theory of Indian ethics, specifically a foundation for an ethics that is not human-centric. Ethics therefore becomes a process, a “being in a state of relating” to the en-worlded state of human beings. It is clear that the normative aspect of leading a “good life” is analogous to being in state of *dharma*, a state where one performs actions within the context of one’s prescribed position in the universe.

The relationship between the substances and their manifestation that is constituted by *guṇas* 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*) embodied in different bodies and en-worlded by *lokas* expresses itself as care towards the environment.

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