

Nature as Non-terrestrial: Sacred Natural Landscapes and Place in Indian Vedic and Purāṇic Thought

Meera Baidur

National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISC campus, Bangalore, 560012,
India; mansilight@gmail.com

A complex process of place-making by Vedic and Purāṇic primary narratives and localized oral secondary narratives shows how nature in India is perceived from a deeply humanized worldview. Some form of cosmic descent from other place-worlds or lokas are used to account for the sacredness of a landscape in the primary narrative called stala purāṇa, while secondary narratives, called stala māhātmya, recount the human experience of the sacred. I suggest that sacred geography is not geography of “terrestrial” but of implaced otherworldly materials—rivers, mountains or forests. An ecological ethics based on sacred geography must therefore take into account the sacred aspects of such narratives and encourage normative values that could apply to both the sacred and the ecological for such places.

1. The Stories of the Land

To the south of the Indian subcontinent is a hill called “*maruda mala*” or medicine hill. Rare medicinal herbs are found on this mountain near Coimbatore in South India which is worshipped as a sacred geographical feature.¹ 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 *Rāmāyana*, the story of the divine hero *Rām*.

During the final battle described in this epic that is said to have happened in Lanka (Sri Lanka), *Lakṣman*, the ideal brother of the divine hero, *Rām*, 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. Hanuman, the mighty *vānarā* (monkey warrior), flew

1. The name is in Tamil, the local language. For details of this story see R. K. Das (1964, 6).

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.²

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. Recent writing in environmental ethics suggests that the notion of sacred geography or reverence for nature could possibly create a context for conservation. Some writers also suggest that forms of mythic-ritual sacralization or reverence of geographical features could translate into ecologically supportive behavior by the people. 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 metaphors for everyday life, the stories called “*purāṇa*” or history form an important component of the philosophical presuppositions about the concept of nature.

The conceptualization of nature within the Indian worldview is constructed to a great extent by mythical and cultural narratives as well as rituals. The idea of a non-human nature does not make sense to the Indian people at large because almost all of nature is still perceived from a deeply humanized perspective given by worldview that encompasses not just earthly but a larger cosmic reality. People speak of and interpret realities not as they are, but as they occur or as they are meant to occur within these world views.

It cannot be denied that these ideas continue to influence the present-day narratives of social and environmental concerns in India. 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’” (298).

“Natural sacred places” consisting of geographical features are revered and are almost always associated with oral narratives about the location called *stalā purāṇas*.³ The shared meanings and communicated oral histories of

2. In the spirit of ecological awareness, Hanuman takes the mountain back to where it was!

3. In Sanskrit, *stalā* means “place,” *purāṇā* means “history” or “ancient stories,” so the word would mean “ancient story of a place.” These, however, have been documented and published into books in recent times.

natural-scapes draw back to the deep connection of nature with the concept of earth or land (*bhūmi*). These oral histories therefore are not only embodied in architectures of the human being, but also include natural elements and natural objects, especially 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, events, and creation and often requires performances of many ritual practices that may be religious or social in nature and reinforce the narratives again and again. The myths answer the question why the place is sacred and often include a name that is based on the theme of the myth. In such narratives, divine and superhuman events are claimed to have happened in a particular place and are recollected by a set of oral stories or mythical histories. Eliade (1959) refers to the power of such myths to create what he calls “an apodictic truth.” The myths create a reality by revealing a sacred history: “It is the sacred that is preeminently the real” (95). People who encounter the tangibles 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. Chapple (2000), for instance, writes: “It must be noted, however, that many pilgrimage places within India, from the Himalayas in the north to Kanya kumari at the very southern tip of the subcontinent, form a patchwork of sacralized spaces that could be newly interpreted through the prism of environmentalism” (33). What I derive from this reading of Eliade 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 I will discuss at the end of the essay.

2. The Idea of Place

To examine the idea of the sacred natural landscapes in India, the concept of “place” as described by Edward Casey and others 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. 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 come together and communicate with them) and even who we shall become together.” 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 the human interpretation of interaction with the natural areas within the Indian subcontinent, one has to examine the particular nature of “implacement.” Casey

reiterates that “implication is as social as it is personal” (23). We find that on one hand, the notion of the sacred is personal and cultural in Indian thought, people often visiting the sacred places for their own spiritual or personal benefit. Each pilgrim to a sacred place will benefit individually according to his or her actions. On the other hand, the social and cultural beliefs about the sacredness that guide these visits are oral narratives that are socially shared, enumerating in a general manner the kind of spiritual benefits that one could obtain.⁴ As a phenomenon of experience, the feature itself is natural, an area on the geographical landscape.

In Sanskrit, the idea of place has two equivalents. The first term “*stalā*” is often used to indicate place as an area on the ground. The word “*stāna*,” 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, the use of the Sanskrit term *stalā* is free of a mere indexical function. *Stalā* in Sanskrit refers to a section of the earth that is distinctly marked out from the rest of the landscape as being special.⁵ The term for land, *talā*, is essential to formation and meaning of this word. This eliminates for us the possibility of having to include places otherwise not found on earth, such as the sky or clouds. The places in the heavens (*swarga*) are never called *stalā* in the mythology. They are sometimes called *stāna*, such as “*Indra-stāna*.” Distinguished from the other word *stāna*, referring to the ordained *location* or where things stand or can be spotted, *stalā* is terrestrial and culturally shared. For example, in the *ūrtha yatra parva* of the *Mahabharata*, a sage describes the holy places to be visited and the merits gained by the pilgrims: “[T]ato *gaccheta dharmajña Viśnor sthānam anuttamam*”⁶ (83:10; emphasis mine). For instance, the sacred landscapes are often sacred places referred to as *ūrtha stalā*. The designated location of a city/temple or the location in some area is designated by a different word, *stāna*. I argue that the word “place” therefore is closer to the word *stalā*, especially when it refers to a landscape or, more accurately, a land-place.⁷ Besides, we find that *stalā* is invariably linked to the material boundaries of a landscape

4. For example the general benefit of a ritual bath in the Ganga river is to wash away one’s sins; the personal benefit could be that a person experiences a divine vision of a deity as he desires.

5. *Stalā* is derived from “*stha*,” meaning “section, chapter or marked part,” and “*talā*,” which means “surface.” The correct translation which I will use henceforth is “land-place.”

6. “Then, [one should] go to the most exalted place of *Viśnu* [where he is established], O knower of righteousness. . . .” (trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli, 1883–1896).

7. The word “landscape,” devoid of its historical antecedents in the West, would be the ideal translation as it too includes within it the word “land.”

feature such as a rock, a river, or a forest. The boundaries of a place are as amorphous as the landscape they designate. 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 enviroing embrace” (25). The same holds true somewhat for the category *stalā*. But the discreteness of *stalā* for human recognition, however, is given by the material content of the feature—such as the water of the *Ganga* 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 *stalā* 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, which indicate the horizon or boundary of the sacred place or simply serve as a marker. Tanaka (1988) specifies that sacred sites such as these comprise natural and human-made assemblages of sacred symbols and landscape markers invested with special meaning (Gesler and Pierce 2000, 222). It is clear that it is the natural feature itself that is sacred and not just the shrine. As mentioned earlier, the word *stalā* seems to be closer to the idea of a natural feature because of its inclusive category of land surface and so 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 is explained by a narrative. There is a certain worldview 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 of the experiences of people can be identified; firstly, the mythic imagination that 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 *stalā purāṇā* (story of the 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. Sacred *stalā* narratives have two themes, the first being a description of the descent of the divine upon the terrestrial, or “earthed divine,” and the second theme that describes what human experience of this divine on earth, or “deified earth,” would be. The secondary narratives, the *stalā mähātmya*, 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 *stāna mähātmya* too, especially if there is a temple or a shrine. For example, in the famous shrine of *Somnatha*, the oral *stalā purāṇā* recollects the manifestation of a self-formed *Liṅga*, or a

representation of Śiva at a river confluence.⁸ The *purāṇā* tells the story of the moon-god, *Soma*, who by being partial to one wife among twenty-seven sisters 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 *Sarasvati*. The *Skanda purāṇā* states that the *Sarasvati* originates from the water pot of Brahma 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 splendor and had a vision of Śiva as a self-formed effulgent *Jyothir-Liṅga* (a *Liṅga* made of light). The “*Prabhāsa tīrtha*” is named after the regained effulgence of the moon. Both the non-earthly entities, appearance of the *Jyothir-Liṅga* and the descent of the celestial moon into the waters further sanctified the holy place. The *stalā māhātmy* recollects the association of *Kriṣṇa* with this place. Also popular is the story of King *Mularaja* of the *Chaulukya* dynasty who built a great shrine at this place after a dream about the Moon-god. Thus the two forms of narrative co-exist, informing the pilgrim that her experience of the place is sacred and otherworldly at the holy place. To quote Flood (1993): “Mythical worlds are mapped to specific geographies of a holy place; the physical world is imbued with mythological or religious meaning” (2–3).

3. The Sacred

A brief note on some perspectives of the idea of the sacred in Indian thought would provide a background to the idea of sacred land-places in India. In objects of the practice of sacred nature worship or reverence, we must distinguish between natural objects and natural landscapes. Certain objects, plants, animals and features are regarded as sacred categories—such as the *tulsi* plant (*Ocimum sanctum*), the holy fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*), or eastward flowing river channels—but these are classes, some sort of sacred universals. They are not bound by location, but are sacred wherever they occur.

Another way to distinguish the idea of the sacred is by considering the modes in which the divine is invoked in an object. Keith (1925) points out that there is difficulty 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 as a sign (66). This difference is not confined to the natural but also to human-made objects. For example, the various ritual objects such as the wheel refer to the sun and gold or sometimes represent the god *Agni* (66–67). Yet again, the stones with spiral markings—the *saligrāmā*—are considered divine forms of *Viṣṇu*.

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

8. For a detailed mythical history and the story of this shrine which is condensed here, see Romila Thapar, “The Setting,” chapter 2 in *Somanatha: The Many Voices of History* (2004, 18-37).

example, before building any structure, the land is consecrated and worshipped with the ritual of *Bhūmi-pūja* or land worship. There are rituals where land areas are temporarily sanctified for a *yajña* (vedic ritual) or a *pūja* (worship). On the other hand, the idea of sacred natural locations occurs by narratives that claim sacredness for the land-place by some sort of non-terrestrial “origin.” Land-place features are, however, 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. There are areas and sacred places that are originally sacred and some that are made sacred by connection with the divine after they have been created. On the other hand, we find that the narratives of places sanctified by contact with the divine are not unique to Indian thought alone, and also that this 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 are created by ritual acts and 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 people believe that these sacred regions are incapable of being polluted. The idea of physical pollution seems to be less significant to pilgrims than the experience of the divine on earth. The narratives about the origin of these places play a very important role in establishing the non-degradability of the physical feature. These narratives often defeat the efforts of the environmentalists to create ecological awareness.⁹

4. Sacred Imaginations—Myths

Most myths about sacred places are narratives about the transplantation or sudden appearance of that sacred feature on the earth. These narratives or stories are like mini-creation myths and discuss the divine origins of the sacred land-place. As in the case of the *maruda malai* or the sacred medicine hill, it is clear that the sacredness is connected to the origin of the event that caused the hill to *be or occur*. Accordingly, in the 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

9. See Alley (2000, 322). The difference between the idea of dirt and pollution is discussed a bit later in this paper.

alone imparts eternal sacredness to a land-place. 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. These narratives form a part of the tradition of stories called *purānas*. The descriptions of nature-scapes and the relationship between the human and nature in the *Vedas* and the *Purānas*, some of India's earliest philosophical and religious literature, are to be understood within a broader framework of some fundamental conceptions of the 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 contemporary, popular meaning of nature refers to that which is non-human. Yet, it is clear that the idea of a “non-human nature” is largely absent in these stories and narratives. 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 are situated in the cosmic system, interrelated to both beings and geographies. Bilimoria (1997) stresses 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). (2)

The classificatory scheme in Hindu cosmology is based on a cosmic system of place-worlds that are called *lokas*. Each *loka* is an inhabited world with its own description having within it unique features, denizens, places, myths and also creation myths. The earth itself, as the *terrestrial* surface that humans and other earth beings occupy, is not seen as a single isolated place but exists as part of a hierarchical cosmic system of different *lokas* or worlds. In the *vedas* there are two clear forms of reference to the earth. One is the earthly plane, the *metaphysical* realm of *bhūloka* which is a part of either a seven-world system, (*saptaloka*¹⁰), or sometimes a three-world system—*Bhū* (earthly plane), *Bhūvah* (intermediate plane), and *Suvah* (heavenly plane). We find the word “*tala*” used to describe the different surfaces of these worlds: *rasātala*, for instance, means “water surface.” The earth surface, being stable, is called *stalā* as mentioned earlier,¹¹ the word is prefixed with “*sta*.” The earth's surface is therefore a kind of *tala*, a surface that refers to its potential for having sections.

10. *Bhū, Bhūva, Suva, Jana, maha, tapa, and satya* are the seven worlds mentioned in the longer versions of the popular Gayathrimantra chants.

11. Please see footnote #5 on page 46 of this article.

The worship of objects that are natural, including landscape features, can be celestial, ethereal or terrestrial. As the realm, the earth had no sacred personification. It was for all purposes a meta-physical territory. It is interesting to note that these metaphysical and experiential components, like the nature gods in the Vedas, are amorphous, lending themselves to multilevel interpretation. The *lokas* in traditional myths are named after the beings that inhabit them. The inhabitants 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 can be had in that world. The trinity gods in Hindu cosmogony occupy special *lokas* such as *śiva-loka*, *visnu-loka*, and *brahma-loka*. The earlier seven worlds described in Vedic texts give way in later stories to the more personal *lokas* in the narratives that are “inhabitant centric worlds.” The worldview about the *lokas*, remains constant, however, retaining the cosmography of the hierarchical planes, the upper worlds having more sanctity than the so-called lower worlds.

The cosmic order is maintained by balance, and this harmony was a natural order called *ṛta* (= *rita*) or *dharma* in various texts (Keith 1925, 83–84). Bilimoria (1997) explains that concept of *ṛta* is important as it connects the created cosmos to a moral order within it: “*Ṛta* determines the place, entitlement, function and end of everything” (2).

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 “lower” worlds was accorded a higher-status value. It is significant to note that at the cosmic level, beings were not ordered according to families or species—like properties, but 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 understanding of this worldview is significant to the understanding of the creation myths of sacred landscape features on the earth. 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 fall¹²) 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 concept of the descent of the divine or *avatār* that is very much a part of the *vedic* and *purānic* tradition finds its counterpart in geographical descents of rivers and other natural features on to 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.

12. While the word “fall” has an ethical connotation, this notion of descent does not.

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 *tīrthas* 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” (328). The original sacred comes from the heavens—the *devaloka*. The rivers of India form one of the most striking examples of this origination as sacred narrative. The *Rg*-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 earth, is recounted in this verse: “As your ally in this friendship, Soma, Indra for man made the waters flow. He slew the serpent and sent forth the Seven Rivers. He opened, as it were, the holes that were blocked” ([1889] 1973, 44–45). 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 *purāṇic* 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 writes:

[T]he many specific *tīrthas* 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—*yaksas*, *nāgas*, *ganas*, *matrikas*—were associated with groves and pools, hillocks and villages, wielding power for good or ill within their areas of jurisdiction. Many of the deepest roots of India’s traditions of *pāda* and *tīrthayātra* are here in this place-oriented cult. Although the myths associated with these places have changed, layering one upon the other through the centuries, pilgrims have continued to come with their vows and petitions, seeking the sight (*darsana*) and the token material blessings (*prasada*) of the deity of the place. (324)

Eck refers to this as borrowing and assimilation of the pre-Vedic tradition into the *purāṇic* 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 *purāṇas*. This might be seen as the geographical equivalent of Sanskritization (336).

5. Sacred Imagination: Human Interactions and Rituals

The story of the descent of the *Gaṅgā* is much eulogized, 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 possible transfer of material 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 the one on earth. But its reality is a sacred reality, not the reality of the earth. The way this river differs from an 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 theorized by Casey.

The human subject gives identity to the undifferentiated geographies of a city 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) 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 (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 emphasize 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 this landscape features, according to Casey, 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” (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, 74). The *stalā māhāṁya* story of the *Papanasam* (in Tamil, the word means destroyer of

sins) waterfalls, further illustrates this point. A brother and sister separated at birth by calamity fell in love with each other by mistake. They both soon realized that they had sinned and wished to make amends by visiting all holy rivers and waters. Learned people advised them that they must wear black garments and bathe in all the holy waters until the clothes turn white. No holy place gave them any relief until at last they bathed at the waterfalls called *Papanasam*. Upon 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, 44–45).

Whether the contact of the mud, water, land, or herbs, the natural *tīrtha* is much favored over the built structures. So perhaps this is the reason why many temples claim that the image of god was “found” rather than made.¹³ Naturally occurring *śiva* stones or the *śiva linga* are also said to spring from *Śiva loka*. Referred to as *svayambhū* (self-born), they attract worship in the least obvious places even today such as an urban horticultural garden or in an ice-sculpted form, or in the holy mountain shrine of Amaranth, reached after an arduous trek. This tale also demonstrates Eck’s point about the concept of *tīrtha*, or crossing over. Every sacred location forms a ladder where the human can cross over 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 tirthas—those inherent in its natural landscape and those sanctified by the deeds of gods and the footsteps of heroes—is a living geography” (336). Place even as a natural landscape includes time as an integral component of happening, not marked by physical parameters but by the experience of a subject. This forms the basis of both shared and unshared narratives. Most rituals and stories associated with a 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, 32).

6. The Sacred and Mundane Places: Suggestions Towards an Ecological Ethic

Land-place features are sacred, yet the reverence seems to be ritualistic without regard for the physical degradation of the natural. A dichotomy that Kinsley (2000) refers to, between the sacred and the mundane, exists as two different spheres of belief (242). While the sacred landscape affects and impacts human beings, the lower-valued human being (in comparison to the more scared and exalted status of the divine worldly land-place) has no impact on the sacred

13. The famous statue of lord Balaji 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.

in return. On the other hand the mundane activities of the human both are impacted by and in turn affect the natural—as in the case of the pollution of the *Gaṅgā* or the destruction of a sacred grove. What are the nuances of the sacred and the mundane with respect to natural landscapes? There exist some conflicting notions of the sacred that I intend to discuss here.

The first among the contradictions is the idea of the earth as sacred. The idea that the entire earth is a sacred goddess is evidenced by verses such as *Bhūmi sukṭa* in the Vedas.¹⁴ The apparent contradiction in the concept of the sacred earth and mundane regions of the land seems difficult to reconcile. If all land is sacred, then what is sacred or mundane about some landscapes?

This contradiction is resolved by a study of the concept of the earth in Indian thought as it has been transformed over time.¹⁵ One possible hypothesis that I suggest is that there was a transformation of the idea of earth goddess into a mere resource with the advent of agriculture. Another hypothesis links the narratives that changed the *vedic* ideas of the earth that considered the earth as sacred, a form of the great mother, into a divine goddess. The abstraction in the mythology of the goddess earth into the *Bhūdevi*, or consort of the mighty god Viṣṇu, separated the terrestrial from the concept of a divine “mother earth.” With the development of agriculture, the experience of the terrestrial became progressively mundane. This required the earth to be purified or sanctified by ritual or contact with the divine. The loss of the divine earth mother is as historical as it is political.

Secondly, from the conclusion about the origin myths of the sacred *ṭīrthas* one can reason that the sacred is immutable and the attitude towards the sacred is one of ritualistic reverence, not environmental restraint. Alley (2000) writes about the two conflicting notions of pollution that exist in the *Gaṅgā* (322). It is seen that the ecological idea of pollution relates to chemical and other scientific parameters, while the priests equate the impurity with the breakdown of morals and social values. The idea of the sacred land-place is located in the sphere of sacred reality, not the mundane world of water and dirt. The original sacred is therefore considered immutable and cannot be subject to the degeneration. As I mentioned earlier, 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 are unconnected with a sense of the place as they lack the experience of the shared narrative would not revere the sacred geography. In an essay comparing the pilgrimage of the Hindu with the aboriginal walkabout, Kinsley (2000) 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 (228). He suggests that these implicit structures are not comprehensible to a person who

14. See Atharva Veda XII, 1, “Hymn to Goddess Earth.”

15. See Baidur (2009).

is outside the cultural context, and such a structure plays more than a mere geographical role (229). This 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 local practices, including the ecologically relevant ethics through rituals that find resonance in both the sacred and the ecological would be easier.

The idea of a geography that is sacred can also 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 emphasizes the importance of the ethical discourse: “The second group of textual statements aims at having an ethical impact and is of interest from the point of view of environmental ethics of the place” (148) Illustrating the importance of the practice of normative ethical restraints in a sacred place, Jacobsen also recounts how pilgrims practice forms of *ahimsa* or nonviolence in sacred places by not using footwear or consuming meat (146). The sacred is to be experienced by dealing morally with the mundane even within the mind. Within the sacred, we do have two schools of thought, one that emphasizes that the mere ritual can be sufficient for the benefit of the sacred experience and a second that holds that rituals without the support of moral conduct would not benefit a pilgrim. The popular story is told of how all the sins clinging to a pilgrim detach themselves and wait on the banks for the bather to take a dip in the *Gaṅga*. They rejoin him as he steps out of the divine river. Such sub-narratives included in the secondary narratives seem to actually critique the ritual sacredness of the land-place and emphasize moral conduct as a prerequisite for true experience of the sacred place. Verses in the *Mahābhārata* (Vanaparva), for instance, describe the various moral practices that would give the individual the full benefits of encountering the sacred. They include observances like self-control, being truthful, following austerities, and treating all beings as he would himself (Kane 1973, 562).

There are also ritualistic practices with 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 that includes not spitting into the water, not washing clothes in a river directly but using the water to wash elsewhere.

While I agree with the ethical discourses having relevance to a pilgrim in a sacred place, I would like to point out that mere sacred imagination of the land-place will not directly contribute to the ecological conservation of such places. Instead, the impact would be an emphasis and a reawakening of the ethical discourse of restraint that has to run parallel to the sacred stories of the land. In the words of Jacobsen (1993): “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” (148).

I end this essay with a 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 restraint 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.¹⁶ Asking people not to bathe in the holy waters or visit a sacred rock would not be possible. However asking them not to use plastic or eat or spit within the sacred perimeter would be well within the discourse of a sacred place. The people’s relationship to a natural place is pre-given by narratives that are socio-cultural. It is important therefore to take into account the concept of sacred land-places and perceive them beyond the mere natural features to create a viable eco-ethics of place.¹⁷

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16. 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. *Kalyanis*, or special tanks were constructed on the lake banks in Bengaluru to provide for the immersion of Ganesha idols which would have otherwise polluted the lakes and tanks.

17. I would like to acknowledge my advisor Sundar Sarukkai for his valuable guidance. Thanks are also due to Ted Toadvine for the opportunity to present this paper at the IAEP “Thinking Through Nature Conference” and to the reviewers of this paper for their inputs.

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