

MAN IN NATURE

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Nature as Feminine

Ancient Vision of Geopietry and Goddess Ecology

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The Feminine conceptualization of nature occupies very significant place in Indian religious history. The image of the earth as a goddess, known variously as *Prthivi*, *Dharatimata*, *Jagaddhatri* is ancient and all-pervasive. Almost all the geographical features of the natural environment are personified as goddesses. Mountains, caves, rocks, forests, trees, plants, healing herbs, rivers, streams, lakes were conceived of as potent symbols of feminine power, inherent in nature. From the *Vedas* down to the *Puranas* nature personifications are mediated through the symbol of the divine feminine. In the *Rg Veda*, for example, the crimson streak of day-break is portrayed as *Usas*, the Mistress of Dawn whose brilliant effulgence spreads out piercing the formless black abyss (*RV*, 10.127). Night and day are the two celestial sisters that bring rest and awakening to the world. In their lap, gods recline and enact their roles. The much celebrated mother of the gods, *Aditi* who claims as many as sixty hymns in the *Vedas* is the infinite and the womb of the cosmos. Goddesses such as, *Kuhu*, *Sinivali*, *Anumati* and *Raka* are lunar divinities symbolizing the waxing and waning of the lunar-cycle. The rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Sarasvati* mentioned in the *Vedas* are goddesses who preside over the fecundating waters of life. The hymn dedicated to *Aranyani* (*RV*, 10.146) or the forest goddesses (*Vanadevis*) celebrated the spirit of the forest and groves. They are joined by an innumerable number of goddesses who preside over village territories and specific sacred centres (*Ksetradevis*). The life sustaining foods also have their goddesses in the personifications such as, *Annapurna*, *Sataksi* and *Sakhambhari*. Thus from the sky wandering celestial bodies to the sprouting plant were conceived of as a manifestation of the feminine principle. In later literature these personifications culminate into the composite vision of an all-inclusive cosmic form (*virat svarupa*) of the goddess, where mountains, rivers, celestial bodies, vegetation and stratum of space from various parts of her body:

They (the gods) saw the goddess's superanal cosmic Form. The *Satyaloka* is situated on the topmost of Her head; the Sun and Moon are her eyes; the quarters, Her ears; the *Vedas* are Her words; the Universe is Her heart; the earth is Her loins; the space between earth and sky is Her navel; the asterisms are Her Thighs; the *Maharaloka* is Her neck; the *Janaraloka* is Her face; *Indra* and the *Devas* and then *Svarloka* is her arms; the sound is the organ of Her ears;. . . . The fire is within her Face; day and night are like her two wings; the mountains are Her bones; the rivers are Her veins, and the trees are the hairs of Her body. O King ! youth virginity, and old age are Her best gaits, the two twilight are Her clothings; the Moon is the mind of the Mother of the Universe.

[*Devibhagavata Purana*, VII. Chap. 33.1-21ff]

Energy, Synergy and Consciousness

All the forms of nature personifications of the goddess invariably converge into the abstract notion of *Sakti* or Energy and its inherent power of synergy. All the visible forms of nature, despite their outer appearances, mountains streams, rivers, fields, vegetations, etc. is said to be endowed with an invisible energy of *sakti* that constitutes its subtle nature.

Rivers and mountains have a dual nature. A river is but a form of water, yet it has a distinct (subtle) body. Mountains appear as motionless mass, yet their true form is not so. We cannot know, when looking at a lifeless shell, that it contains a living being. Similarly, within the apparently inanimate rivers and mountains there dwells a hidden (feminine) energy (*sakti*).

The hidden feminine *sakti* inherent in nature stirs the seeds to fructify as the universe. Nature's *sakti* is visible everywhere in the cyclic movement of germination, growth and decay of life. *Sakti* is the energetic feminine potency of the Earth Mother, the life line of the living earth. The earth is an animated and live organism with an efficient network linked to the biological vision of the ecosystem. The world-body of the great goddess is a whole organism — a 'holon' — in which each part is related to the whole.

From very early times, India employed the image of the loom to explain this interrelated web of life. The universe is imaged as a woven fabric the warp and woof of which form intricate interrelated patterns. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* (2.1.19) employs the metaphor of a spider sitting at the centre of its Web, issuing and reabsorbing, its threads in concentric circle. The spider's web symmetrically expand into a visible circumference, and though there are divergent lines, all the threads interrelate and can be traced back to the central point of the web. The sacred geography of the land is the reflection of this interrelated web. Earth, water, plants, animals and human life are inter-dependent and interrelated in the grand design of creation. These interrelationships operate within the expanding and contracting cycle of the seasons. As the wheel of time turns, the products of nature transmute, change, decay, and are born anew. Her ongoing rhythms web together the waters, vegetation, and the earth. It is for this reason that nature gets humanized and is treated with extreme reverence in India. No part of nature is desecrated as they all participate in the animated play of *Prakrti*. The fundamental motive behind the ancient perception is the belief that nature is conscious (*cit*), alive and animated. Text such as the *Yogavasistha* have dealt with the inherent consciousness that underlies creation. Consciousness or *cit* resides in everything just as 'vibration resides in air, or void in space, as water in whirlpool' (*YV*, VI *Uttara* 211.23).

Nature goddesses thus, do not stand in opposition to the natural powers of the earth, of life, of death, or regeneration, but are ever in harmony with the natural law of cyclic order in creation. They operate as unifying participants in essence of life : as a self-contained fusion of energy and synergy. Just as water, soil, light/heat and vegetation are in a constant symbiotic relationship, similarly, the feminine personifications, as the symbolic projections of nature, are interlinked to one another. Earth and water goddesses interact to create vegetation, the moon orbits sustains the sap of the plants, roots and trees. The goddesses manifest as primal *relational* powers of nature, connecting all elements of life in a single biotic web.

Our seminal concern in this essay is to revision the nature heirophanies from an ecological perspective. The interpretive model that I adopt will attempt at comprehensive analysis on the conceptual understanding of the feminine principle. There are countless number of goddesses and innumerable local variants. This essay will focus on two of the most important nature personifications : the earth and the waters of life. It will illumintate the concept of the earth mother as expounded in the *Atharva Veda*; and trace the timeless myth of the Descent of the Ganges in the light of ecological concerns. By viewing the Feminine Principle as an integral symbol of nature one may gain insight on the ecological implications of the symbolic feminine. These ideas must be viewed in the larger context of the traditional attitude of reverence toward nature. The traditional perceptions toward nature has roused a variety of critical responses. The scriptural sources that extol such attitudes, are generally seen as a collections or primitive songs of nature worship and a reflection of archaic animinism. They are considered no more than 'half-formed myths, crude allegories, obscure gropings' and immature poetical ramblings of a very primitive stage of human civilization. Some consider the Indian passion of sacralization of nature to be an adulation in the extreme rooted in unreasoning faith. The nature hymns of the *Vedas* are conceived to be an imaginative, but subjective model of the mind that helped to develop a world-view based on emotional participation of nature.

Our hypothesis is that the descriptive, prescriptive and ecologicistic passages on nature deities found in scriptural sources were a means of inculcating ecological awareness. Their significance lies in the fact that the metaphors provide that methodologies and strategies adopted in the past to sustain the imbalances and threats posed to the natural environment.

As no activity whether biological, natural, human or metaphysical can exist outside the sphere of the earth, the concept of the Mother Earth¹ assimilates a wide range of meanings. The celebrated *Prthivi-sukta* (also referred to as *Bhumi-sukta*) in the *Atharva Veda* (12, 1.1-63)², sums up the Vedic attitude towards earth. Our

seminal concern here is to revision the Vedic concept of Mother Earth as woven into the sixty- three verses of this hymn, in the light of ecological concerns. The whole of *Rgveda* reflects a religion of nature, where man is conceived as a part and parcel of its natural dynamics. Vedic man was nature centred for whom the natural phenomena arose from a divine source. Behind the wide spectrum of gods and an immensely intricate ritual technology of the fire-sacrifice, there was an insight into the natural laws of nature. The *Rgveda* (c. 2000-2500 bc), resonates with praise hymns to the deities of the sky, earth and atmosphere, thunder, rain, sun and wind. In contrast, the *Atharva Veda* rings a new note. It affirms the life of man-in-the-world. The text contains incantations, magic spells, and formulas either to bless or appease, to curse or to protect the general well-being of the community.

The *Atharva* hymns, named after the fire-churning priest Atharvan, were devised to establish harmony in family and village life. Here the attention of the forest-dwelling seers has shifted, as it were, from the sky pervading nature gods to the life sustaining earth. Vedic culture, as we know, was rooted in a very high degree of material comfort. Man's life was conceived as a harmonious unit. There was neither any pessimism nor any conflict between the pursuit of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksa*. Life on earth was considered a short sojourn or a stepping stone to higher life in other regions. From the fertile soil of this life affirming milieu sprang the most exalted vision of the real visible earth, conceived as a nurturing mother of human-kind:

The earth on whom water flow day and night, never ceasing motion — the earth that is brown black and red in colour, a vast abode. [*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.9a-11b]

***Prthivi* : The Earth Mother**

The Vedic praise hymns to the Earth Mother cover a wide range of aspects: physical, organic, metaphysical, ethical and cosmic. No aspect of existence is kept out of its fold.

The Vedic seers were moved by the beauty and splendour of the far spreading earth. The earth holds the verdent continents, lands with forests, nurtured by abundant rains and simmering warmth. Her body laced by rivers, rimmed by ocean is adorned with "gentle slopes and plains" (AV, 12-1.2). The earth is composed of hills, 'rock, stone and dust' and is compactly held. An essential feature of the Earth is her fragrance which pervades all the products of the earth. The herbs, water, nymphs and celestial creatures bear it. Her fragrance enters the lotus and the flowers everywhere. May this fragrance enter him, says the seer:

Instil in me abundantly that fragrance,
O Mother Earth, which emanates from you
your fragrance which has entered the lotus
where with the immortal Gods at the Sun-daughters wedding
were redolent, O Earth, in times primaeval —
instil in me that fragrance.
Your fragrance that adheres to human beings
O Earth, steep us, too deeply in that fragrance

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.23-26]

The Broad One

Once Priyavrata, son of Svayambhu Manu, the first human to be born on earth, ruled the country for eleven hundred million years. One day he saw the sun travelling on one side of the earth and wondered that one side of the earth must be dark. Curious to know what lay on the other side of the earth, he rode his chariot and travelled around the earth seven times. The wheels of the chariot made seven furrows. These furrows became seven seas, the beds between the furrows became seven islands, inhabited by people (*Linga Purana*,

52.35-39). Thus, the setting of the earth mother is a limitless domain, far spreading and wide. Her immensity is beyond the grasp. Hence, she is called *Prthivi*, the Broad One:

Your regions, earth, to Eastward and to Westward.

Southward and Westward, may they receive me kindly.

[*Atharva Veda*, 12-1.31]

Earth as Supporter

The earth is the eternal matrix 'on whom moves all that breathes and stirs' (*AV*, 12-1.2). She carries on her body the four directions of space, on whose body the ploughman toils. She is the dwelling place of creatures, animate and inanimate:

On whom the men of olden days roamed.

On whom the conquering Gods smote the demons,

the home of cattle, horses and of birds,

Her upon whom the trees, lord of forest,

stand firm — unshakable, in every place,

this long-enduring Earth . . .

[*Atharva Veda*, 12-1.3, 27]

It is upon her that men enact the drama of life; the animal kingdom find their homes. It is upon her paths that human's tread and its her highways that men use for their chariots. She is the unshakable One in whose bosom trees and forests stand firm. None can escape the touch of the earth, whether walking, sitting or standing, whatever postures one may take, she provides the 'couch' for all. In this way, she is the foundation and supporter of all. The word used to describe earth is *dharani* or *dharati* (derived from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, meaning to hold or bear). By reason of this, the seers realized the generosity and patience of the long-enduring earth and approached her with praise:

O Purifying Earth, I you invoke,

O Patient Earth, by sacred word enhanced,

bearer of nourishment and strength, of food and ghee

O Earth, we would approach you with due praise !

[*Atharva Veda*, 12-1.29]

Our Relationship to Earth

The Vedic attitude toward earth springs from man's primal experience of being an offspring or a child of earth:

The Earth is Mother, I am son of Earth.

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.12b]

The earth is the supreme, loving, life sustaining mother. She is beautiful, fertile, nurturing and generous. She is close to humans as their own skin. As a person's entire existence depends upon her, man is of earth, part of earth. The earth is his home. She is a merciful compassionate mother whose benign heart pours unconditional love to all, irrespective of their talents and station in life:

She carries in her lap the foolish and also the wise

She bears the death of the wicked and the wise.

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.48]

She is the gracious leader and protectress of the world (*AV*, 12.1.57). Helpmate of human kind, she lives in friendly collaboration with all.

Man adores the earth, yet is smitten by her awe. Capricious and unpredictable is her rule over man. She is benevolent, but also wild, destructive, chaotic, disorderly, death-dealing. Earth is more than a material segment. Her formidable size, hidden elemental powers released from time to time besott man and make him a stranger to his environment. Although, man's relationship to the earth remains ambiguous and ambivalent the inseparability of man and earth is affirmed in no uncertain terms.

Earth as Sacred Womb

"You (Earth) germinate the seed with quickening power" (*Rg Veda*, 5.84.1). The Earth Mother is the vitality that generates growth and germination. In Her maternal womb, She nourishes the potent seed which completes its life-cycle in the tree, the flower, the fruit, and once again the seed. One association of the earth is with the food saplings that grow on Her vast body. The earth reveals Her powers in the form of Mother of Grains. Grains such as corn, wheat and barley is her bounty, simultaneously the basic source of nourishment. She is the continuous source of food and herbs valuable for healing (*AV*, 12.1.19). Just as a human mother gestates the child in her womb, similarly, the Mother Earth nourishes the seed till they ripen. There is no danger between the earth and the forms that emerge from Her. All Her birthlings remain bound to their source and their relationship is one of intimacy and solidarity. The creative and fecund nature of the earth are given so much prominence that she requires none but herself to procreate. It is for this reason that several epithets of earth are virgin mothers who were endowed with the power of parthenogenesis-goddesses who could give birth unaided by men. Durga is one such epithet who is an eternal virgin, 'the energy of all but consort of none'. In the mythological context, She has the superhuman ability to give birth to a number of goddesses who emanate from Her body, like sparks of fire. The image of the earth as a universal womb explains why vessels, hollows, grottos and caves were found to be the vulvic body of the Earth Mother.

If on one hand the Earth Mother awakens the fertility of the soil from its potential state, it also encompasses the reality of death. For, she contains the eternal condition of life and death; death in life and life in death. The mythical destiny of earth is to stand at the beginning and end of every biological form and share in the history of human destiny. Thus she mediates between the mystery of life and death. Life consists in abundant growth involving a brief detachment from the womb of the Mother Earth, death consists in a return to the eternal condition in the bosom of the earth. As said:

You are the earth, I place you in the earth.

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.11; 12.1.14]

The earth is the dwelling from which all life is born and into which it returns. That is her supreme nature. Since Mother Earth resists destruction, she is one of the most powerful images of recurring life. She is endowed with an inexhaustible capacity to organise its own energy and growth patterns. Left to its own natural devices, she creates order where there is disorder, harmony in place of disharmony, life in place of death. The earth mother in this respect is endowed with self-regenerative energy. She therefore symbolises the sacred totality of life's processes: birth, death and rebirth.

An overwhelming concept of the Earth Goddess is found in the characterization of Goddess Viraj,³ the epitome of Earth's essence and cosmic form. She is the universe as *Prana*, *Vak*, and the creator. Viraj is the Resplendent One, who is intimately associated with the process of creation. Her most important feature is that she is imperishable and never dies. All the gods and powers of nature fear Her origin for they consider, 'She will become This All'. She spews forth as the vital energy that quickens the sap of the seed and enters the sacrificial household fires, the plants, trees, villages, and pastoral sites. She rises. She is above, below, around, everywhere. Then rebirthing Herself as the creator, for Her very own propitiation by man, to make

abundant the earth, She arises, She stands, She strides fourfold and comes to the trees, to the manes, to the gods and to humans. They all slay Her one after another. She vanishes into the atmosphere, then returns into existence. Even when slain, She remains invincible and indestructible like the patient earth, who endures but never dies (AV, 8.10.1-33).

Earth in the Cradle of *Rta*

The entire earth by virtue of its animation is sustained by a harmonious cosmic principle. In Vedic code, this principle is known as *Rta* or cosmic order. It is the self-regulative law of harmony. It is the impersonal power, the underlying regulator of all life on earth at the natural and human level. The two functions of the earth, birth and death, are embodied in the fundamental ecological principle of interdependence. In every environment, the hilly, desert or forest, the plant and animal species that constitute the biotic community, together with the soil, air, water are innately organized so as to form a unified life support system. There exist an intricate and extensive networks of links. If a single unit of this links is damaged, it would destroy and weaken the whole structure. 'There is no room for waste in nature's finely balanced economy'. Whatever is used is recycled once again through seasonal flux. The fundamental intuition of the cyclic order of the seasons is celebrated by the seers:

Your circling seasons, nights succeeding days
Your summer, O Earth, your splashing rains,
Yours winter and frosty season yielding too spring-
may each and all produce for us milk !

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.36]

The processes of the earth seasonal cycles are grounded in *Rta*, the principle of universal order that holds the seasonal movements like a hub of a wheel. Earth is held by a regularity of cosmic order: the rising and setting of the sun, cycle of seasons, spring time and harvest. *Rta* is the intrinsic justice and order that sustains the eco-balance of nature.

The sense of interrelatedness, enjoined so fervently in the *Vedas* provides a norm for the ethics of the environment. The Vedic vision of geopiety considers man to be a guardian of natural resources who, replenishes the bounties of the earth rather than plunders it. Conservation, thus, means a state of harmony (*rtam*) with land, forest, waters and natural environment. Harmony is restored only when the bond between humans and nature is consistently strengthened, when man and nature are viewed as one biotic community. The earth, therefore, is worthy of adoration. The modern reductionist world-view, value-system and code of ethics are inadequate for a long term survival of our planet. Our last refuge is to revive a caring for the Mother Earth. It is said in the *Atharva Veda* (12.1.60) that the Earth was revealed to mankind for joy. In the light of this sensitive attitude, the seers had evolved a strategy to preserve the integrity and stability of the biotic community. Earth is, invoked with a feeling of great humility:

Whatever, I dig of you, O Earth,
May that grow quickly upon you,
O Pure One, may my thrust never pierce thy
Vital points, thy heart.

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.35]

Earth and Us

History records that man's attitude towards the environment has been twofold: either of exploitative dominance or pious reverence. Vedic ethos considers man/nature as twin agents who, reshape their environs for mutual

benefits. The concern for the environmental conservation and protection is based on natural law of mutual dependence and reciprocity. The way we treat nature determines the way nature will treat us.

The Vedic code states that we live in a participatory universe which threads together man and his active actions in nature in a causal chain. When there is genuine caring and sharing it brings about beauty and bounty in the environs and maintains the eco-balance.

When man looks upon nature as an object of exploitation, as a commodity for trading, man is said to go against the current of life. He instigates disorder, chaos, falsehood (*anrta*), is swayed by the natural forces of darkness leading to disintegration. He acts against the natural current of life. The sympathetic bond between man and nature became a basis for the celebrations associated with the returning cycles of the seasons. These celebrations stimulated with prayer, incantations, consecration and offerings to the Earth Mother reinforce innate links with the natural world.

What is it that holds the earth together? The unequivocal claim of the *Vedas* is that the eternal bond between man and nature is nourished by the law of universal harmony (*Rta*), truth (*Satya*) and prayers:

Truth, unyielding cosmic order, consecration,
Ardour and Prayer and Holy Ritual
Uphold the Earth, May she the ruling Mistress
of what has been and what will come to be,
for us spread wide a limitless domain.

[*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.1]

The message of the praise hymn to Mother Earth in the *Vedas* is that the earth mediates between man and the unyielding cosmic order inherent in nature. This natural bond is one of partnership and continuous renewal.

The Goddess as the Waters of Life

The goddesses association with the waters of life is perennial. There is an enormous amount of material to show the antiquity and popularity of the intimate connection of the goddess with the waters. The *Mahabharata* (VI.10-35) invokes all the rivers as 'Mothers of the World'. In the Rg Vedic hymn, the waters, referred to as *Apah* appear as goddesses, young maidens and wives, and life-sustaining mothers, of Agni. The rivers also appear as independent goddesses (*Saptasindhavah*).

All the rivers of India that meander through the land, plains and hills embody as the fecundating element that renews life. An early invocation celebrated the river goddesses:

The waters of the sky or those that flow (on earth), those that are dug out, or those that arise from themselves, those pure and clear waters that seek the ocean as their goal — Let the waters, who are goddesses, help me here and now. [*Rg Veda*, 7-49.2]

The texts categorically assert that there are innumerable rivers and that all are uniformly divine. They are said to have sprung from the celestial rivers that dwell in the form of clouds and rain in the atmosphere:

The celestial river of sacred waters spring from it (the Moon), the reservoir of nectar. The river of clear transparent water flows through the sky through the path of the wind (on earth).

[*Vayu Purana*, 43. 2-3]

The waters wash away the impurities. They are pregnant with healing, life-giving and purifying properties:

May the waters, purify us; clarifiers of *ghee*, may they clean us with *ghee*, for the goddesses carry off impurity. [*Rg Veda*, 10.17.10]

The vast landmass of India, covering an area of 3,287,782 km is irrigated by hundred of streams. Ganga is the foremost among all the rivers. She is said to have absorbed the divinity of all the rivers. Of all the rivers, it was Ganga who achieved the highest acclaim and personification. In Hindu myth she appears as a younger sister of Uma, co-wife of Sive and mother of Karttikeya. In her icons, she is frequently given human shape riding her crocodile mount. To the pious Indian, Ganga is not simply a river among many that flow across the country, she is conceived of as one who descended on this earth by some special grace. The river Ganga is one holy stream which represents all the rest. She is the mother of all rivers, is considered to be the purest and holiest water stream in India. Emerging from the Himalayan glacier, Gangotri, in Tehri Garwal, Uttar Pradesh, it makes a unique scenic fall at *Gaurikunda*, whereupon it courses its way through the length of 2,525 km to the Bay of Bengal. Our concern here is to decode a distinctive narrative pertaining to the river Ganges as an expression of primal ecology. The myth, expounds in veiled language one of the most profound ecological statement of our times.

Ganga Avatarana in the Light of Ecology

The myth relates to the fecundating waters of life personified as the Goddess Ganga. It expounds in veiled language one of the most profound ecological statements of our times.⁴

There are several versions of this myth. In one popular version from Vaisnava sources,⁵ the descent of the heavenly waters to earth takes place from the 'foot of Visnu' (*Visnupada*). The holy river had its origin in the heavens when Visnu, in his Vamana, Dwarf-cum-Giant incarnation measured the three worlds with his three steps. His third step pierced the heavenly vault and caused the waters to flow. Through the opening in the shell of the universe, the Ganga flowed into Indra's heaven, and settled around the immovable Pole-star, Dhruva. In this form Ganga is known as *Visnupadi*. She meandered through the sky to the moon as the milky way. The milky way is often referred to as *Akasa-Ganga* and suggests the idea of a heavenly river.

The next episode of the myth describes the descent of the Ganges on earth. The story consists of long episodes which I shall not recount here. For our purpose, what is necessary is that the heavenly Ganges descended to the earth for salvic purpose, namely to animate and purify the sixty thousand son's of Sagara, who were reduced ashes by the glance of sage Kapila.

The Ganga was brought down to the earth by Bhagiratha who performed fierce austerities on the Himalayan slopes and won the favour of the Goddess. She agreed to descend but warned Bhagiratha that the earth would split under the torrential currents of Her fall. Ganga asked him to placate Siva. Siva agreed to catch its gushing waters in his matted locks before releasing the waters. The mighty river wound Her way through Siva's ascetic locks and found Her course on the mountains and plains of India.

Bhagiratha, then led the Ganges to the nether world where Her purifying 'funeral' waters liberated the sixty thousand sons of Sagara. In the nether worlds, Ganga is called Bhogavati, from which the waters were raised for Bhisma, by Arjuna who pierced the nether regions with his arrow. Bhagiratha, then conducts her to the sea. With its waters the sea was replenished. After completing Her course of the three worlds, the mother of the holy rivers returned to the heavens.

The ecological implications of the myth can be decoded and its meaning laid bare. Water's natural flow is rooted in a cyclic pattern. It continuously renews itself. Water circulates from land, seas, to the clouds by coming in link with solar heat. It returns to the land and rivers, lakes and underground streams below the soil and intermingles in the deep oceans. Being a volatile element, its flow is invisible. It is below the soil, on it and above as air and clouds. The myth preserves in metaphorical language, the vital links of the ecoprocesses of the water cycle. The Goddess Ganga is referred to as *Trilokagamini*, one who meanders through the three worlds starting from the heavens above, coursing her way to the earth down to the subterranean levels of the nether world. The course of the Ganges as depicted in the myth is in consonance with the 'logic' of the water cycle in nature.

The water is released in the heavens by the foot of Visnu, who is traditionally identified with the Sun.⁶ Since the milky way follows the track of the sun, the *Puranas* often refer to the Ganges as liquid essence of matter issued from the resplendent glory of the Sun as Visnu. Is this an allusion to the melting of ice in the Himalayas by the Sun or the liquification of that element which is absorbed by the Sun?

Is it not that the origin of the Ganges highlights the complementary relationship of solar energy and water, which forms a part of the water cycle in the physical universe?

Next comes the imagery of the Ganges roaring down in torrents on the Himalayan slopes. Brahma and the gods were obviously concerned with the hydrological problem caused by her descent. For, 'the earth alone could never bear the mighty torrents travelled from the air'. In our terms it mirrors the enormous havoc caused by powerful monsoonic rains on the Himalayan slopes. If the waters were to fall directly on the naked earth the river would cease to be a life giving source. Hence, the *Itihaskaras* struck a symbolic solution and cause the waters to be tamed in Sivas locks, which in the sacred geography of India are identified with the thick forests on the Himalayas. As the eminent ecologist, Reiger has rightly pointed out. 'In Siva's hair we have a very well-known physical device which breaks the force of water coming down . . . If the forests on the Himalayan slopes were not maintained, we would foresee destruction.'⁷ This episode relates to the intimate biotic connection between the waters and vegetation.

Lastly, the myth reiterates the value of *tapas* and reverence to the waters of life. This message is brought to us through the resolute character of Bhagiratha, whose only mission in life was to bring the pure waters to the earth by means of *tapas* and prayer.

It is no gainsaying that the narrative cycle of Ganga *avatarana* seems to be inspired by the observation of natural phenomena. The *Itihaskaras* of this myth had considerable insight into indissoluble connection of the pairing of the elements such as water/fire, water/vegetation, and earth/sky. Further the narrative reflects great concern for the unconditional moral order that "Truth is the base that bears the earth" (AV, 14.1.1). In all these respects, the story validates the seminal aphorisms of the *Bhumi-sukta* of the *Atharva Veda*.

Our brief analysis has shown that the early views on the earth mother from the *Atharva Veda* and the Pauranic myth on the Descent of the Ganges reflect a remarkable awareness of primal ecology. The nature hierophanies make a good case for a reconstruction of a 'Goddess Ecology'. The emerging vision of the earth as one organism, is only a recent image of an ancient heritage, traced to the *Vedas*. The ancient view of Geopiety and 'Goddess Ecology' contains a remarkable insight for the modern man. Its true significance will manifest when the catastrophic implications of technology become more and more visible.

Notes

1. The paper is mainly concerned with the concept of the *Prthivi* as a separate divinity. The notion of Heaven and Earth together has been expounded adequately by several scholars. See for instance, Gonda J., *The Duel Deities in the Religion of the Vedas*, Amsterdam, (1974), pp. 93-117.
2. All translations from the AV are taken from Pannikker, Raimundo, *Vedic Experience, Mantramanjari*, New Delhi, (1977).
3. RV, 10.90.5; AV, 10.10.24; AV. 8.10.1-33.
4. I am indebted to Kapila Vatsyayan for this insight. For an excellent exposition on a similar theme, see: Kapila Vatsyayan, Ecology and Indian Myth, In *Indigenous Vision, India International Centre. Quarterly*, Vol. 19, Numbers 1-2 Spring-Summer, (1992), pp. 157-90.
5. *Bhagavata Purana*, 5.17 ff. *Devibhagavata Purana*, 8.7 etc.
6. RV, 1.154.1 and 1.154.3 etc.
7. H.C. Reiger, "Whose Himalaya? A study in Geopiety"; In T. Singh (ed.), *Studies in Himalayan Ecology and Development Strategies*, New Delhi, (1980), p. 2.



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