



Ecospiritualism: Metaphysical and Ethical Dimensions
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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt towards understanding of one stream of Ecophilosophy namely, Ecospiritualism. The general practice of considering knowledge systems as divergent disciplines is gradually losing ground and today we see some developments that bring the areas of science and philosophy closer and independent. At this crucial point of change, ecology is resuming its potential interconnections with other disciplines and conventions of thought including religion, philosophy and indigenous belief systems

KEYWORDS

Ecospiritualism, Ecosocialism, Ecotheology, Ecofeminism

RESEARCH PROBLEM

i) What is the precise meaning and range of ecospiritualism? ii) How is it different from conventional religions? iii) Which are the diverse forms and expressions of ecospiritualism? iv) Is it a living tradition in the incipient circumstances of environmental crises?

METHODOLOGY

There are many different products of disciplinary amalgamation like ecofeminism, ecosocialism and ecotheology. Within the limits of this paper, our concern is a broad understanding of one stream of ecophilosophy¹ namely ecospiritualism. The analysis is proposed to be carried out through the queries like, 'What is the precise meaning and range of ecospiritualism?', 'How is it different from conventional religions?', 'Which are the diverse forms and expressions of ecospiritualism?' , and 'Is it a living tradition in the incipient circumstances of environmental crises?'

Introduction

The practice of treating knowledge systems as divergent disciplines is gradually losing ground, and today we see some developments that bring the areas of science and philosophy closer and interdependent. A potential beneficiary of these developments is the scientific discipline of ecology that is acquiring a philosophical/ethical dimension especially in the techno-scientific context of modernity. Ecology is technically the academic study of the natural environment as a system of interconnected and interdependent living and nonliving beings, but it cannot remain so for long because humanity is facing the unprecedented consequences of its own greedy onslaught on the natural environment. So, today the science of ecology is becoming the source of the positive ecological wisdom that is motivating different manifestations of environmental ethics and corresponding movements. At this crucial point of change, ecology is resuming its potential interconnections with other disciplines and conventions of thought including religion, philosophy and indigenous belief systems.

The nature and scope of ecospiritualism

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- i) What is the precise meaning and range of ecospiritualism?
- ii) How is it different from conventional religions?
- iii) Which are the diverse forms and expressions of ecospiritualism?
- iv) Is it a living tradition in the incipient circumstances of environmental crises?

In understanding the nature and scope of ecospiritualism, it is relevant to see what it does not represent. It is evident that ecospiritualism is not a unitary theoretical position pertaining to environmental studies nor it is an obviously theological position. For many indigenous communities it was just a 'postulate of faith' to be lived through for the sake of secure subsistence and harmonious coexistence. Most of the contemporary environmentalist thinkers and activist groups are motivated and guided by ecospiritualist inclination beyond any religious distinction. The crux of this preference may be a range of ethical, religious, spiritual, or agnostic beliefs and attitudes leading to environmental awareness, concerns and sensitivity. As observed by Aurélie Choné,

It is possible to pursue spirituality inside organized religion or out of any religious context, and even without having any faith in God. As it is founded on a personal inner experience, it is difficult to define it univocally, but it is generally associated with a quest for interiority, for self-knowledge, transcendence, wisdom, the sacred.

Ecospiritualist sensitivity instills in the individual and/or a group of likeminded people the quest for life that is in harmony with nature with its myriad living and nonliving beings. If organized religions preach divine life as the boon from a transcendental God, ecospiritualism asserts that the whole reality is immanently divine and hence everything in nature is endowed with innate spirituality. So, this unity in terms of the inherent divinity/spirituality forms the crux of the inextricable interconnection within the web of life in nature. And this is a fact reiterated by modern ecologists also. Ecospiritualism denotes the vision of the whole nature as endowed with a uniform *élan vital*² that is the life energy or vital power.

Ecospiritualism: Origin and development

The earliest expressions of ecospiritualist vision can be found in the simplistic belief systems that shaped the indigenous cultures. There is total absence of any sense of separation in the indigenous vision of nature whereas institutionalized religions prescribe transcendence towards the creator who stands a vantage point apart and separate as the *Causa Sui*. The early tribal communities conceived all beings as innately endowed with some mystic vital force or life energy and revered them all as the spontaneous manifestation of that power. This divine element as shared by one and all - humans, plants, animals, rocks, rivers and so on - instilled the sense of inherent interconnectedness between all components of the ecosystem.

We can find environment in the Indian, Red Indian, Hawaiian and African tribes one or another expression of this spontaneous awareness of the vital force of nature as immanent in all beings in an (For details, see Gottlieb, 1996 and Versluis, 1992). This conception of humans (and all beings) as living in nature and nature as living in all of them founded their belief systems, worship patterns and ethical conventions. It is to be noted that this ecospiritualist vision is the common element that underlies the amazing diversity and multiplicity that characterize the wide variety of pre-modern ecological visions. Marglin and Parajuli in an authentic study on the ecology of the sacred groves tradition use the term 'ecological ethnicities' to specify the pre-modern intimacy with nature as based on 'moral ecology' which "transcends both the domains of religion and of science" (Chapple&Tucker, 2000).

The Rishis of ancient times had expressed reverential veneration to nature as exemplified in the Vedic hymn that praised *Āraṇyāni*, the Lady of the Forest, as 'The Mother of all silvan things, who tills not but hath stores of food' (Rig Veda X: 146.6). We can see the thread of ecospiritualist inclinations in the indigenous belief systems continued into the later evolved systems of classical Indian philosophy like Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. As it is well known, these systems, in spite of their disagreement over metaphysical questions like the eternity of the Self, share the most significant prescriptions to overcome the *avidya* or ignorance of one's inherent divinity and the oneness underlying the apparent diversity. Indeed, the egoistic sense of the I and me as separate and distinct from the rest of the world is a major cause of the human attitude to nature as 'the other'.

It is relevant here to note the concept and cult of *Śakti* worship as one of the earliest ecospiritualist visions in Indian tradition. It represents the metaphysical notion of a unitary feminine principle that underlies the various forms of nature worship followed by different tribal units in different parts of India. Texts like *Dēvībhāgavatam* and *Soubhāgyalakṣmī Upanishad* acclaim *Śakti* as 'the all-pervading, undivided, unlimited and inexplicable reality' that is the immanent potential which enables everything to subsist and thrive. It manifests as the *prāṇa* in living beings and the divinity in gods. In all the details like ontological unity, pervasive immanence and mystic transcendence, the Vedanta concept of *Brahman* is identical with the *Śakti* principle, and hence both share the potential to develop a systematic ecospiritualist vision.

The Buddhist doctrines like *Nairātmya* or no-self and *Pratītyasamutpāda* or dependent co-arising have been recognized as the means to overcome the sense of disconnected and separate self that motivates much of our intolerance and violent actions. Buddhism had anticipated the core theme of scientific ecology namely the interrelationship between all the components of an ecosystem in its basic aphorism - 'When this exists, that is; due to the arising of this, that arises. When this doesn't exist, that is not; due to the cessation of this, that ceases'. It is relevant to note here that the ecospiritualist implications of Buddhism continue to inspire the ecoethical ideals cherished by many individuals and movements that contribute to the current wave of Eco-Buddhism (Batchelor and Brown, 1994).

The metaphysical tenet of the spiritual unity between all components of nature further implies the ethical principle of *Ahimsa* as the paramount ideal of harmonious coexistence. There is no dearth of evidence for the persistent emphasis on the ethical prescription "do no harm" if we look at the value systems represented in Yoga *darśana*, Buddhism and Jainism.

We can summarize here the origin and evolution of ecospiritualism in Indian tradition, which is in general paradigmatic of the eastern vision of human-nature relationship:

i) The pre-modern tribal reverence of nature as the inherently divine source of subsistence.

ii) The extension of (i) into the rural traditions like the practice of protecting sacred groves, flora and fauna in temple premises and observing worshipful rites and rituals to maintain natural wealth.

iii) The formation of systematic metaphysical tenets and ethical prescriptions for ensuring harmony and peace within the individual and with everything in nature.

This is only a broad outline of the evolution of ecospiritualist ideals and practices that continue to exist within and beyond the range of religions. And its expressions and manifestations are too rich and varied to allow an easy timeline depiction.

Ecospiritualism today

The archetypes of ecospiritualism are not limited geographically or culturally and continue to influence and inspire the environmentally inclined minds in the present-day East and West alike. Within the limits of this paper, we shall just mention a few paradigms of ecospiritualist vision in contemporary western thought to show how it remains a living trend in philosophy and praxis. We can see prominent figures of science as well as philosophy sharing the current expressions of ecospiritualism like the Gaia hypothesis propounded by James Lovelock, a British specialist in atmospheric sciences and the concepts of deep ecology put forward by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s. Lovelock speaks hopefully of Gaia as 'an emergent phenomenon, comprehensible intuitively'. Nature is a single, self-regulating system of organisms and their environment evolving continuously. Thus the Gaia hypothesis "states that organisms and their material environment evolve as a single coupled system, from which emerges the sustained self-regulation of climate and chemistry at a habitable state for whatever is the current biota" (Lovelock, 2003, Dutreuil, 2018). Naess with explicit admiration for the ecocentric implications in Spinoza, Buddha and Gandhi could inspire much radicalization of the current environmental ideas. He proposed biospherical egalitarianism and ethical self-realization as the core of a deep ecological concern that is distinguishable from shallow ecology positions. As stated by Naess (2001),

The value is not so much independent from us as independent from our valuation - be it material or aesthetic in nature. Gestalt entities in nature are things to be respected for their own sakes, simply because they are there and near to us. Like friends - we should never use them only as a means to something else. To do so is superficial, seeing only surface interactions.

Today, ecology and conservation of nature has become the crucial point in the action blueprint of religions, spiritual collectives and NGOs the world over. They all recognize the spiritual vision of nature as the 'one nest' in which all coexist and cooperate for today and tomorrow.

FINDING AND CONCLUSIONS

Ecospiritualism is based on the metaphysical conception of the universal life energy that permeates everything in nature. Nature itself is the divine revelation rather than a creation by some supernatural power. Hence, humans are not any special creation, but exist in nature sharing the *élan vital* that energizes everything. To be in nature itself is the necessary and sufficient condition for one's being divine. The original expressions of ecospiritualism can be traced back to the indigenous 'ecological ethnicities' that maintained inalienable relationship with nature. Different forms and systems of nature worship continued through the rural traditions and found metaphysical and ethical expressions in the later evolved systems of philosophy. We have the extensive *Śakti* tradition and its conceptual parallel Brahman in the Vedanta *darśana*. Both represent the principle of the inherent divinity endowed upon all beings which are nothing but the manifestation of the unitary divine power. This is the metaphysical basis of the ecospiritualist vision of unity and equality of everything in nature. The lofty ideal of *Ahimsa* derived from this vision had been reiterated in Yoga, Buddhism and Jainism. The archetypes of this

ideal are being revisited and revived in the present-day world which is facing the worst consequences of human domination and aggression over nature. This is the context to remember and imbibe the spirit of the *MahōpanishadSūkta*

udāracaritāmtuvasudhaivakutum̐bakam,

which means 'For noble people, entire world is a family'.

END NOTES

1- The term refers to the emerging points of intersection between philosophy, mainly its concern for ethics, and the new science of ecology.

2- Coined by French philosopher Henri Bergson in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*. It denotes the mysterious but creative "vital force" that is the source of efficient causation and evolution in nature.

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