

Research Article

An Analysis of Ecological Consciousness in Indian Scriptures and Classical Literature

Dr. Bindunath Jha

Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of English, J. K. College, Biraul, Darbhanga (A Constituent Unit of L. N. Mithila University, Darbhanga), India;
bnjhadreams@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5th October 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17272106>

Abstract: The concept of ecocriticism in literature was first introduced in English literature in the late 1970s by William Rueckert in his article titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, and Lawrence Buell are the pioneers of ecocriticism. Ecological consciousness, including the conservation of natural resources such as water, vegetation, and forests, has been a persistent and enduring theme in Indian scriptures and classical Sanskrit literature. The ecological consciousness, reverence for all elements of nature, the treatment of natural objects as having souls within them, animism, and concern for biodiversity have been eloquently and adequately addressed in the Vedic and Upanishadic literatures. This research aims to reflect upon the voices of ecological concerns, the significance of ecological symbiosis, and the *Vedic* cultural practices contained in Indian scriptures and classical literature. That laid the foundation of ancient Indian cultural, religious, and literary practices. These issues will be analysed with special reference to the *Atharva Veda*, the *Upanishads*, and some of the seminal works of poet-dramatist Kalidasa. Although all the Vedas address the concept of ecological balance, the *Atharva Veda* is exclusively dedicated to preserving ecology. She advocates for human beings' righteous duty towards maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; ecological consciousness; the Vedic culture; Indian scriptures; Indian classical literature

Introduction

Ecocritical consciousness in literary writings and critiques of literary works in the light of the interrelation between ecology, nature, and humans has been a relatively recent trend that emerged in the 1970s, specifically in American literature. Thereafter, its focus gradually expanded to include the critical enquiries of Indian literature and literature from European countries. The contemporary ecological crisis and the depiction of interconnection and interdependence between all forms of nature, including human beings, in Indian scriptures are significant in developing insight into current environmental threats. The paper will also try to trace the roots of interaction, interdependence, and emancipation of human beings as depicted in some of the seminal works in Indian classical literature, especially with reference to the renowned poet-dramatist Kalidasa.

The beginning of anthropocentric culture, as opposed to animistic culture, in European countries can be traced back to medieval Christian views. The dominance of human beings over nature subtly lies in their firm belief in their distinctive abilities to act and exploit the world. The separation of men from nature and the resultant superiority of men have several mythological and religious roots in “Judeo-Christian teleology”, which propounds the prerogative of human beings over all elements of nature. The medieval Christian story of the creation of the world – portraying humans as all-powerful and their ability to name birds, rivers, plants, and planets – further established human dominance, their distinctiveness, and the duality of humanity and nature. This view contradicts the eastern theological beliefs and practices of antiquity, particularly the pre-Christian Greek theology (White Jr. 8-9).

The intellectualism of Greek theology shares certain commonalities with its Oriental counterpart. These theological conceptions are in sharp contrast to the voluntarist Christian theology of the West, which implies the conquest of the entire universe by human beings, thereby treating natural objects as if they were lifeless and mute. In the Oriental theological discourse, particularly in the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions of India, a discernible belief in interaction with nature, interdependence between humans and nature, and the treatment of nature as an active agent in its interactions with people can be observed. Objects of nature are considered in this cosmic framework as a symbolic system that establishes a connection between God and human beings through reciprocal interaction.

Several literary writers and critics produced sporadic works categorised under various nomenclatures, including pastoralism, regionalism, and American studies, during the 1960s and the following decades. Although these works could not provide a firm basis for an organised movement, their influence on and inspiration for the ecocritical writings of the 1980s and 1990s are certainly conspicuous. Examples of such writings include Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* (1973) and Joseph Meeker’s *The Comedy of Survival* (1974). In the 1990s, notable scholars such as Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm, who began collaborating, established ecocriticism as a movement and literary genre. These scholars were associated with ASLE. Glotfelty became the first academician to hold the position of Professor of

Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno. This university also housed the Centre for Environmental Arts and Humanities from 1995 to 2002. All these developments played a decisive role in the establishment of this influential literary movement. This genre of literary theory gained momentum with the publication of seminal works, such as *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Chantal M. Glotfelty and Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Buell (Buell 55).

This theory may be understood as a literary and cultural movement that explores the relationships between literature, culture, and ecology. It examines how literary representations of ecology and nature, the interaction and complex relationship between all forms of species, and the relation between the natural world and human culture are understood. It encompasses a wide range of definitions due to its interdisciplinary nature and revisionist foundation. The most well-known definition, however, is given by Glotfelty: 'the study of the relation between nature and the physical environment' (qtd. in Rangarajan *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* 5). Since the inception of this genre, the effort to define it has brought into consideration a wide range of socio-cultural, ethical, environmental, and anthropocenic issues within the premises of ecology – the issues that the present century is battling with. Multifocal issues, varying perspectives, and divergent orientations of studies have led to a range of varied definitions. These substantially help understand the overall complexity of the ecocritical framework.

Defining the terms, Terry Gifford points out that 'Ecocriticism is a form of cultural critique which, in searching out the motives and consequences of human interactions with the natural world, also investigates how literature reflects, shapes and challenges dominant attitudes towards the environment (Gifford xii-xiii). Nature and all the species of this world have been treated as mute objects, only serving as the means to achieve human ends. Men have failed to interconnect their existence with ecology and environment. This is what Lyotard means while writing about ecology as "the discourse of the secluded". This phrase can aptly be applied to ecocriticism, as the main focus of this movement is to make ecology articulate. Nature has been treated as a marginal subject and rendered a mute participant in human cultural discourse, especially after the Enlightenment. While ecology and ecocriticism suggest the embeddedness and interdependence of all species and objects, environmental criticism emphasises the central position of humans surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment, and this stance is in sharp contrast with the implication of the word "eco" (Glotfelty xx). Ecocriticism analyses literary texts to reveal the underlying ecological assumptions, values, and ideologies that shape human interactions with the environment. At the same time, environmental studies explore literary texts to understand how they represent environmental issues, such as pollution, conservation, and sustainability.

The Indian Scriptures and Classical Literature

The Indian tradition of ecocriticism can be traced back to time immemorial – to the very inception of the Indian knowledge system, as contained in the Vedas and the Upanishads, which form the foundations of religious and cultural practices inherently

linked to a more profound sense of ecological symbiosis. A Hymn in the *Atharva Veda* titled “Bhumi Suktam”, for instance, reads:

Yatte bhūme vikhanāmi kṣipram tadapi rohatu. / Mā te marma vimṛgvari mā te hrdayamarpipam (O Mother Earth, when I dig and till the soil to sow the seed, let the seed grow soon and the ground fill up. O gracious, purifying and regenerative Mother, never would I hurt your vitality and fertility, never will I rip up your heart.) (*Atharva Veda* 12.1. 35:145). The *Vedas* are referred to as Śruti, thereby implying the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another through careful listening. Hence, it is clearly indicative of the assimilation and dissemination, as well as the eco-symbiotic Vedic practices at the mass level. The very earth is treated with utmost reverence in the *Vedas*, and people should ask “forgiveness” even before stepping on it (Buzarbaruah 26). The *Atharva Veda*, in fact, provides a comprehensive treatment of the subject matter of the earth and its entire ecological symbiosis, wherein human beings adopt an ecocentric view, as opposed to the medieval Christian anthropocentric view. All elements of this ecological system – air, water, fire, plants, animals, herbs, seas, rivers, etc., including humans – are treated as being the progeny from the same source of energy inherent in the earth. Such an eloquent and profound understanding of life and nature on the planet is a testament to the deeper ecological understanding that emerges from socio-cultural and religious practices.

The *Samaveda* abounds in references to the worship of natural elements, such as fire, or the agni, which emphasises its role as the protector of human survival and a benefactor to human beings. The significance of fire is also emphasised in the *Yajurveda*, where it is regarded as the lord of the house (grhapati), in addition to the importance attributed to water, which is revered as a protector and preserver of all creatures and non-living entities within this vast ecosystem. The *Satapath Brahman* and the *Yajurveda Samhita* underscore a more profound sense of empathy for the well-being of all creatures on the earth by advocating various forms of *yajna* (offerings), most conspicuously the *bhuta-yajna* that advocates offering of food to all beings for the survival and sustenance with a view to maintaining the biodiversity (Chatterjee 22). During the Vedic civilisation, a deeper understanding of human survival, biodiversity, and ecological balance, as reflected in these scriptures, was integrated into behaviour as an essential part of cultural practices.

The ecological interdependence is further reinforced in various *Upanishads*, especially in *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Chandogya Upanishad*, and *Mandukya Upanishad*, which elucidate the cause-and-effect relation in the evolution of this universe and the interrelation among all living and non-living entities. The *Mandukya Upanishad* elucidates the inseparable bond between the elements of air, water, sky, fire, earth, and the sense organs. In a similar vein, *Taittiriya Upanishad* elaborately discusses how the universe evolved – the sky evolved from the “supreme self-sky”, fire emerged from air, from fire emerged water, the earth originated from water, and all medicines, plants, herbs, and food grains originated from the earth (Ghosh 47-48).

One of the ancient Indian literary/mythological epics, the *Mahabharata* by Ved Vyas, provides several references to the relationship between human actions, ecology, and

dharmā, wherein the presence of the soul in all elements of nature is strongly advocated. It accentuates the interrelation and interdependence between nature, culture, and ethics. It also highlights, through the Khandava episode, the consequences of ecological imbalance resulting from unethical human practices, leading to disastrous consequences – a lesson for men's ethical consciousness regarding ecological balance (Devi and Piraji 55). In ancient India, it was considered essential to legitimise the supremacy of natural elements by designating them the status of gods and goddesses, leading to the worship of various deities, such as Angi, Varun, Vanaspati, Surya, and Marut, within the Vedic religious tradition (Verma 2). In this context, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's retellings of this epic, titled *The One Who Swam with the Fishes* (2017) and *The One Who Had Two Lives* (2018), hold significant importance, as the plots of these works have been developed in line with ecological discourse. Here, it is easily discernible how the protagonists of these two novels, Satyavati and Amba, develop their sense of self and find their paths to emancipation through their close interaction with nature. These novels also depict that unnecessary interference with nature leads to undesirable consequences.

Several episodes in the Mahabharata thoroughly explore the indispensable interdependence between humans and nature. The ethical considerations of the exploitation of natural resources, and also maintenance of ecological balance, have been, for instance, adequately addressed in the Ādiparva through the episode of the Pandavas' exile. It depicts harmonious coexistence with nature and reflects deeper meanings of life to the Pandavas. The opposition between the natural and the material is highlighted through Śakuntala's upbringing in close association with nature in Sage Kanva's Āśram and her marriage to Duśyanta. Above all, the *Bhagavat-Geeta* contains the 'principles of environment and interrelation of all living beings' (Devi and Piraji 55). However, such practices lost their momentum and force with the inevitable industrialisation and advancement in the field of technology. Scriptures and classical literature of a nation are cornerstones of the nation's cultural subconscious, and ecological sensitivity is an integral part of its cultural practices. Thus, to bring ecological concerns to the forefront, revisiting religious scriptures and classical literature is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of these concerns.

Indian classical literature is replete with depictions of not only the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans and nature within the overall ecological scheme, but also a sense of benevolence and respect for life that is ecologically balanced. One of the most renowned classical Sanskrit poet-dramatists, Kalidasa, wrote volumes on the environment and nature, demonstrating a profound appreciation for ecological balance, interdependence, and the reciprocal influence of each element on the other. In *Śakuntalā*, nature plays a crucial role in both the setting and the emotions of the characters. The forest, where Śakuntalā is raised, is depicted as a harmonious and nurturing environment, reflecting the purity and innocence of the characters. The descriptions of flora and fauna are not merely ornamental but are often connected to the moods and actions of the characters. For instance, the presence of flowers, trees, and animals in the forest mirrors the emotional states of the characters. The "Benediction" of *Abhijnanaśākuntalam* depicts a strong sense of reverence for Lord

Shiva, who is the protector of this world in His seven forms (air, water, fire, earth, ether, the Sun, and the Moon):

या सृष्टिः सष्टुराद्या वहति विधिहुतं या हविर्या च होत्री
 ये द्वे कालं विधतः श्रुतिविषयगुणा या स्थिता व्याप्य विश्वम्
 यामाहुः सर्वभूतप्रकृतिरिति यया प्रणिनः प्राणवन्तः
 प्रत्यक्षाभिः प्रपन्नस्तनुभिरवतु वस्ताभिरष्टाभिरीशः
 [Abhijnanasakuntalam Act I 1]

(Mehta 2186)

Another work titled *Rtusamhāram* (Collection of Seasons), as the title suggests, interweaves not only the relation between lovers and beloveds, their emotions, and longings with the varying seasons, but also provides a vivid image of the impact of various seasons on animals and the mechanisms they use for their survival in the ecological system without harming nature. Kale, while discussing the thematic issues of the poem, points out that 'The rhythms of the human and natural worlds image the cosmic rhythms presided over by Mahakala' (43). Various kinds of living beings, that are naturally opposed to each other, are shown as sustaining their lives together in a harmonious way in the unfavourable summer, and that is suggestive of the extent to which even animals respond to nature in maintaining ecological balance (Shah 259). Throughout Kalidasa's works, nature is not depicted merely as a backdrop to human affairs, but as an active participant in the drama of life. The interdependence between human beings and nature is emphasised through metaphors that compare human emotions and actions to the natural cycles. Thus, the coinage of the term "ecocriticism" may be new to the land, but its intellectual roots and tenets are age-old in the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

Ecological consciousness, reverence for nature, and a lifestyle in consonance with ecology have been long-standing Indian cultural practices, in comparison to those of European countries. In the Indian subcontinent, religious scriptures, theology, and literature have been replete with voices advocating for ecological symbiosis, consciousness, concern, and the judicious utilisation of natural resources since the Vedic age and beyond. In classical Indian literature, a synergy between human life and the environment is frequently depicted. Indian cultural tradition is deeply rooted in ecological concerns and the significance of maintaining ecological symbiosis, as evident in ancient scriptures and classical literature. The Vedic cultural practices, particularly in the Atharva Veda, emphasise the preservation of ecology and dictate humans' righteous duty towards maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity. The *Upanishads* and seminal works of poet-dramatist Kalidasa also reflect upon these themes, highlighting the importance of living in harmony with nature and promoting ecological synergy.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Works cited

Atharva-Veda (Vol. 1). Trans. Dr T. Ram. Delhi: Vijaykumar Govindram Hasanand (Digital Distributor: Agniveer), 2013.

Buzarbaruah, Binima. "Environmental Awareness in Ancient Sanskrit Literature and Sustainable Development." *International Journal of Sanskrit Research: Ananta*, Vol. 6, No. 3. 2020, pp. 25-27.

<https://www.anantaajournal.com/archives/2020/vol6issue3/PartA/6-2-51305.pdf>

Chandalia, Dr H.S. *Tribal Literature, Culture and Knowledge Systems*. India, Yking Books, 2017.

Chatterjee, M. "A Critical Inquiry into Ecological Visions of Ancient India Versus Modern West." *Tattva- Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 2. 2016, pp 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.12726>

Devi, R. and P. N. Piraji "Cultural Implications of Nature and Eco-Consciousness in Select 21st Century Indian Retellings of the *Mahabharata*." *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*, Vol. 12, No. 2. 2023, pp. 51–64. <https://iafor.org/archives/journals/iafor-journal-of-literature-and-librarianship/10.22492.ijl.12.2.04.pdf>

Ghosh, V. B. *Sanskrit Rachanay Protifolio Paribesh Sachetanata*. Bidhan Sarani: Sanskrit Pushtak Bhandar, 2006.

Gifford, T. *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry*. St. Martin Press, 1995.

Glottfelty, C. "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glottfelty & Harold Fromm, The University of Georgia Press, 1996. pp. xv–xxxvii.

Madhavan, M. R. *Girls of Mahabharata: The One Who Had Two Lives*. Uttar Pradesh, Harper Collins, 2018.

Madhavan, M. R. *Girls of Mahabharata: The One Who Swam with the Fishes*. Uttar Pradesh, Harper Collins, 2017.

- Mehta, N. K. "Environmental Consciousness in Kalidasa's *Abhijñānasakuntalam* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*". *European Academic Research*, Vol. V, No. 4. 2017, pp. 2184–2193. <https://euacademic.org/UploadArticle/3231.pdf>
- Rangarajan, S. *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*. Orient Blackswan Private Ltd., 2022.
- Shah, M. R. "Ecocriticism in the Poems of Kalidasa." *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Management*, Vol. 2, No. 1. 2015, pp. 358–362, <https://www.allsubjectjournal.com/assets/archives/2015/vol2issue1/43.2.pdf>
- The Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*. Trans. Ralf T. H. Griffith. India: Gyan Publishing House, 2021, pp. 234-235.
- Verma, Dr A. "Ancient Indian Consciousness of the Environment: A Historical Survey". *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research*, Vol. 11. No. 5. 2022, pp. 1–13. <https://tarj.in> DOI: 10.5958/2278-4853.2022.00077.5
- White Jr., Lynn "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis." in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm, The University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 3-14.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.