



The Human Person and Nature in Classical and Modern India

International Conference
Rome, 14–15 March 2013

Abstracts

ISTITUTO ITALIANO
DI STUDI ORIENTALI ISO



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

MNAO
 MUSEO NAZIONALE
D'ARTE ORIENTALE
'GIUSEPPE TUCCI'



भारत के बरत
Ambasciata
dell'India, Roma

Editing and layout by Artemij Keidan

Photo by Italo Casale

The Human Person and Nature in Classical and Modern India

International Conference
Rome, 14–15 March 2013

Abstracts

Berti, Daniela (Paris)

Gods' Rights and Environmental Policy in Himachal Pradesh

A number of stories belonging to Himachal Pradesh's oral repertory, some of which were also put down in writing during colonial times, narrate how a village god who was so far unknown to anyone except a few villagers, may suddenly acquire a wider reputation by provoking natural catastrophes — flooding, drought and landslides. What emerges from these stories is a conception of nature as being fully controlled by deities, and which the latter may use as a means to assert their supremacy over a specific territory, sometimes by eliminating another deity already living there. In this paper I show how this idea of a god-controlled nature is now intermingled with other conceptions whereby nature, though still inhabited by gods, needs to be protected by men. These notions are particularly evident in writ petitions lodged by villagers before the High Court against the promoters of public works (hydroelectric projects, dams, tourist resorts, etc.) which are considered not only to spoil a natural environment but to damage a place where a god allegedly lives. I discuss two of these writ petitions that I followed up during my fieldwork at Himachal Pradesh High Court in Shimla. One concerns the construction of a ski resort funded by the Ford company, against which all the village gods of the area have expressed their disapproval on many occasions through their respective mediums; the other concerns the building of a water tank near a natural source supposedly inhabited by some *jogini* (powerful feminine beings). Based on ethnographic material and court files the paper shows how nature is presented in these petitions both in ecological terms, as a resource having an intrinsic value that has to be preserved in accordance with national and international legislation and in terms of a place over which gods have specific rights.

Boccali, Giuliano (Milan)

The description of Himālaya in Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhava* (I.1–17)

This paper considers every verse and the sequence of the images in the famous passage of Kālidāsa which is the first example of the description of the “mountain” in the classical Indian literature. This survey aims to show that Kālidāsa was able to blend in a single group of verses the image of Himālaya as a real mountain and the one of the happy kingdom and of its sovereign which, following the tradition, had to open the poems.

Candotti, Maria Piera (Turin) and Pontillo, Tiziana (Cagliari)

Is *svabhāva* a strictly grammatical expression in the *Mahābhāṣya*? Notes on the early history of a philosophical term.

As is well-known, the *svabhāvāda* is considered one of the “lost philosophies” of ancient India, perhaps the earliest powerful adversary doctrine of Buddha's teachings or at least a crucial speculative obstacle to their comprehension, as pretended by the Mādhyamika texts.

Unfortunately the later and scanty Brahmanical, Jain and Buddhist sources present two diametrically opposite concepts of *svabhāva*, namely as a precise causality inherent in every phenomenon (and as a consequence as a sort of naturalism) or as a pessimistic accidentalism. From a previous inquiry of ours emerged an intriguing use of the term *svabhāva* meaning 'autonomous' in grammar. Specifically in Patañjali's terminological system *svabhāva* is employed to qualify the denotation of words, as a counterpart of their linguistic form which is declared to be *nitya* 'permanent'. This autonomy of meaning is conceived as the fact that the process of denotation of whole words is independent from the sum of the meanings of their constitutive morphs, i.e., the denotation of *padas* is inherent to *padas* themselves as actually based on their 'self-nature'. This paper will focus on the possible relationship between this technical concept and the more famous speculative usages of the term *svabhāva* involved in the philosophical debate of most schools in Patañjali's times.

Das Gupta, Sanjukta (Rome and Calcutta)

Representing 'tribes' and nature in colonial India: British accounts of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas

This paper explores the depiction of the indigenous people in the reminiscences, diaries and memoirs of the civil and military officers of the British Raj. Most of these writings evoked an orientalist imagery of an unchanging way of life of 'primitives' fixed in a timeless past, and exhibited an implicit faith in the 'civilising' influence of British rule which, they believed, would discipline 'tribals' into 'useful subjects'. To these Europeans, nature in India appeared as an object of 'colonial fear and desire, utility and aesthetics'. Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas in eastern-central India, in particular, were evaluated in ways that combined scenic beauty and practical opportunity, with a harsher appraisal as the land of death and disease. The environment was increasingly exposed to their understanding of civilization and nature, and to scientific scrutiny. The paper also traces the changes in official perceptions over time and highlights the multiple, sometimes contradictory shades of opinions in the colonial discourse on tribes.

Fernández Gómez, Rosa (Malaga)

Savouring the *rasa* of life: the artful yogin in Kashmir Śaivism

The Western prejudice associated with the Indian depreciation of nature has a correlate in the aesthetic domain in the close association of aesthetic experience with the mystic one, understood both of them in quite ascetic terms in the sense of underestimating ordinary experience as an appropriate realm for *rasa* or aesthetic pleasure. Most of the modern aesthetic interpretations of the Indian *rasa* theory of aesthetics emphasize the non-ordinary nature of aesthetic experience (*alaukika*) as much as the state of deep absorption required for the emergence of aesthetic pleasure (*rasa*). The subsequent sharp distinction between life and its representation reinforce the tendency to locate this aesthetic debate on a rather

intellectualistic *cum* transcendental and mystic domain. An ascetic bias, also prevalent in Western aesthetics since its historical inception in connection with Kantian formalistic ideals, may have also reinforced this reading of Indian aesthetics. However this so-called “ascetic reading” of aesthetic experience may have been well grounded and also in the agenda of modernist aesthetics, the current postmodern predicament of *everyday aesthetics* in the Western *milieu*, may inspire us in order to find also some correlates in the Indian philosophical *milieu* associated to the Tantric lore, characterised precisely by the subversion of ascetic ideals. On this basis, this paper aims at reflecting upon this possibility of experiencing aesthetically one’s own life departing from some key texts of Kashmir Śaivism’s metaphysics such as the *Vijñānabhairava* or *Śivasūtra* in connection with the terminology and conceptual background of the *rasa* theory of aesthetics. The intrinsically aesthetic dimension of reality can be approached from two angles: firstly, underlying the artistic aspect of the universe’s unfoldment as the experience of a single universal consciousness, and, secondly, exposing how the Tantric seeker in her ordinary life may adopt an aesthetic attitude.

Freschi, Elisa (Vienna)

Systematizing an absent category: discourses on “nature” in Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā.

When one tries to reflect on “nature” in Indian philosophy, one is firstly forced to reconsider how much this term is culturally loaded in the Western thought and culture. It is in fact difficult to think of “nature” outside the precincts of the Romantic exaltation of wild flora, fauna and landscapes as opposed to civilization and its flaws. In Indian philosophy in general, and in Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā in particular, by contrast, this kind of “nature” is conspicuous for its absence. The physical and biological world becomes an object of investigation only because it is among the objects of cognition (*prameya*), together with the self (*ātman*), the universals, the qualities, actions, etc. Within this framework, I will focus on the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā classification of the *prameyas* which are more closely related to what the West understands with nature (i.e., flora, fauna and the physical world), with a special emphasis on its specifically Mīmāṃsā traits. In this way, one will see, e.g., how Prābhākara authors differ from Naiyāyikas in that they deny the possibility of subtle entities whose bodies would be made of different substances than ours, and how they part company with the Purāṇas by denying the sentientness of plants.

Giuliano, Laura (Rome)

Guhā in Indian art: the place of manifestation. Representation of a concept, rethinking the landscape, recreating the natural space.

The symbolic values connected to the natural cave (*guhā*) in the religious tradition of India are well-known. In Vedic, Brahmanic and Buddhist literature *guhā* is a frequent symbol indicating at a macrocosmic level the centre of the world hidden in the depths of the earth,

secret, inaccessible to the profane, the dark place where the supreme luminous principle manifests itself and the space par excellence of the 'passage' from the experience of multiplicity to the vision of unity. Centre of the universe, *guhā* is also assimilated to the cavity of the heart, the dwelling place of the *ātman*, according to an established correspondence between natural places and parts of the human body. In this paper it will be analysed how this concept and its values are represented in Indian art, examining some depictions on ancient reliefs, the 'recreation' of the natural cave through the medium of rock-cut architecture — perfect example of the integration between man's activity and landscape — and the 'reproduction' of the cavern in the very core of the structural temple.

Lo Turco, Bruno (Rome)

Woman, nature and sati

In modern India the immolation of a wife on her husband's funeral pyre was given a political meaning, which ended up by putting the deep meaning of this rite in the shade. Is it possible, through analysis and comparison, to unearth this meaning? In nearly all cultures, women are seen as a direct access to the dimension that precedes life, which is also the one that follows life. The uterus is the opening through which the sacred and the numinous could break into the social order and dissolve it. More specifically, from the brahmanical point of view there are two channels that bring men into contact with the other world, woman and brahmin. These represent two different kinds of otherness. Brahmins are connected with transcendence, namely the Veda, the invisible dynamic structures around which matter should be structured. Women are an expression of what should be put in order, that is, nature, raw matter and, at the same time, uncontrolled energy. In other words, women represent anti-transcendence, lack of structure. Only a husband has the power to rein in the energy that overflows from a woman. When the husband dies, this energy is left unrestrained. The burning of the wife bars the passage of this inauspicious energy. It is implicitly believed that women should be controlled with as much violence as that which can supposedly spring from them.

Lussana, Gioia (Rome)

Fluid Mother Goddess: water and blood as the flowing sacred essence of Mahādevi in śākta Tantrism of Kāmākhyā

According to the *śākta* tradition of Kāmākhyā (Assam), the Great Goddess performs a specific and concrete role as *tangible wisdom*, identified with the fluid essence of Life: the Feminine Principle is worshipped as the Source that flows and pours itself into the phenomonic existence, generating life as a sacred offer. In this perspective, the connection between Mahādevi and nature will be analysed through the symbolism of two specific topics: water as awakening through the ritual bath of the Goddess (*snāna*), and *flowing blood*

(*rajapāna*) in fertility and ritual sex as the main source of wisdom for initiated people, in both rural ancient India and the wider context of Hindu Tantrism.

Lutringer, Christine (Lausanne)

Experimenting nature: local knowledge and scientific research in India's 'rice bowl'

Agricultural practices are premised on adapted and adaptive solutions, that rely on local ecological and social systems. Local knowledge of the environment is therefore of crucial importance, both in terms of the resources it provides for the communities' livelihoods and of the constraints that they face, in particular in farming systems characterized by little scientific or technological intervention. This paper focuses on Chhattisgarh, historically known as the 'rice bowl' of central India, where the diverse agro-ecological conditions of the region have been associated with a great diversity of the rice varieties cultivated and preserved by local peasants. It examines how this region has become a privileged terrain for innovation and adaptation, both by peasants and scientists. It underlines thereby the interplay, at different levels, between local knowledge and scientific research, showing how traditional wisdom and local cultural knowledge have been used and transmitted in the regional, national and global agricultural research systems. Exploring the strategies of the different stakeholders, the paper finally addresses the larger political implications of the contrasting visions of nature that they convey.

Mastrangelo, Carmela (Rome)

Natural languages and cultural language — substrate influence and classical tradition in the Sanskrit grammars by Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomaeo

Paulinus a Sancto Bartholomaeo is the author of the first two Sanskrit grammars ever printed in Europe — *Sidharūbam seu grammatica Samscrdamica* (Roma, 1790) and *Vyācarana seu locupletissima Samscrdamicae linguae institutio* (Roma, 1804). The friar, who settled in Malabar since 1776 till 1789, studied Sanskrit with the help of two paṇḍits, whose first language was Malayalam. This paper focuses on the influence of the natural language of South-Indian Brahmins as it appears in Paulinus' grammars. It also aims to reconstruct the cultural facts, which caused the emergence and the decline of a South-Indian classical tradition in Sanskrit grammar, from which Paulinus' works derived.

Matta, Mara (Naples and Rome)

Womanizing Nature in Indian Literature and Cinema

This paper seeks to outline the discourse of the relationship between woman and nature in India, as eco-feminists, writers and filmmakers in contemporary India have highlighted it.

Some critics have argued that Nature is often allegorized as either a powerful maternal force or as the site of sexual enticement and ultimate seduction. The dualism woman/nature is pitted against that of man/culture, in a parallelism that entangles the destiny of Indian women to that of Indian natural resources, both downgraded by a patriarchal and exploitative society.

I will address some literary and cinematic works by Indian artists whose literature and films are concerned with women, nature and tribal communities in India, where often the brutalization of the land and the exploitation of the natural resources have been equated to the abuse and the rape of (tribal) women. As Kate Soper has put it in her work *Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature*, "Belonging to culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connotations with nature, she [woman] is seen as situated between the two." In this logic, to destroy *her* Nature is also to undermine *her* culture, in an equation that has been literally implemented through the violence that affects the natural *and* cultural environments of the tribal communities in India.

Milanetti, Giorgio (Rome)

Journeys through nature in Jayasi and Tul'si: hints of an urban-rural divide?

The rich tradition of Avadhi poetry, which evolved since the end of the XIV century, is best represented, on the one hand, by love poems (*premākhyān*) written by Sufi authors, and on the other by the celebrated Tul'si's *Rāmāyaṇa*, or *Rām'carit'mānas*. Though showing common trends and traits, both from the literary point of view and with regard to the spiritual values they promote, Sufi works and Tul'si's poem differ considerably in their depiction of nature. The present paper, analysing a few selected passages from Jayasi's *Padmāvat* and the *Rām'carit'mānas*, and contextualizing them in their respective narrative frames, tries to put in a historical perspective the divergences which emerge from the comparison. It argues, in particular, that the 'topographical' itineraries through natural locations presented in the *Padmāvat* are inspired by the eminently urban culture that was elaborated in Indo-Islamic centres of power, such as Jaunpur (in the core of Avadh region) and, later, Delhi, at the court of the Pathan ruler Sher Shah (to whom the *Padmāvat* is dedicated). On the contrary, the natural scenario within which 'Ram's progress' is set, and the relations that are established with the local tribes, seem to show that Tul'si was mainly interested in disseminating Hindu forms of devotion amongst non-urban peoples. To this regard, a final comparison is proposed between the project of urban-rural integration that may be detected in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the urban-rural opposition that seems to characterize its medieval remake.

Münster, Daniel (Heidelberg)

Agrarian Alternatives: An ethnographic research programme on human-nature relations in contemporary South Asia

This paper will present the ethnographic research design of a new project group on "Agrarian Alternatives" at Heidelberg University. The aim of the project is look at contem-

porary human-nature relations by studying emerging trends in South Asian agriculture. Agriculture, which has long been neglected in environmental anthropology, has recently regained importance in debates about possible ecological futures in South Asia. Unlike most research, which documents symptoms of crisis and decline in South Asian agriculture, I am interested in exploring innovation, creativity and experimentation in agro-environmental practice. It is the aim of the presentation to introduce most dynamic fields of productive change (such as organic agriculture), suggest the study of knowledge as a fruitful methodological entry point and to discuss theoretical dynamics at the interface of political ecology, agrarian studies and postcolonial science studies.

Münster, Ursula (Munich)

Human-Elephant Relations in Contemporary South India

This paper engages with encounters between humans and elephants at the borders of a Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, South India. The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in the Western Ghats is praised by wildlife activists as one of the last harbours for India's remaining megafauna, the tiger, the Indian gaur and especially the Asian elephant. The Sanctuary, which was established in 1973, is an integral part of the UNESCO Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve that was set up in 1986 as the first biosphere reserve in India. Due to a strict enforcement of wildlife laws since the 1980s and the control of poaching, the wildlife population has been steadily increasing. However, what is celebrated as a great success by conservationists in the region becomes a life-threatening problem for farmers and adivasis living in close vicinity to the forest. Animals invade fields and plantations, and encounters with them, especially with elephants, often end violently for both humans and animals. This paper argues that to understand the shaping of environmental subjectivities at the boundary of the Wildlife Sanctuary, ethnographic attention has to go beyond an anthropocentric focus. The complex, historically entangled relationships between humans and animals have to be taken into account.

Prayer, Mario (Rome)

Looking at Man and Nature in Rural Bengal: Manik Bandyopadhyay's novel *Padmā nadir mājhi*.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the approach of Bengali urban intellectuals to economic, social and political issues connected with the rural hinterland is reflected in their literary and non-literary writings. While the colonial situation generated an ambivalent response to the claims of rural society, their patriotism produced an idealized image of bountiful nature in a timeless Bengal in contrast to the present state of decay. In the second quarter of the 20th century, however, a new literary trend emerged in the works of leftist writers. Thanks to their different cultural, social and ideological background, they set aside both the idyllic representation of nature and the nationalist critique, and preferred a more objective description of rural life. Their ideas and approach to man and nature in rural Bengal

are illustrated through a reference to Manik Bandyopadhyay's celebrated novel *The boatman of the river Padma* (1953).

Srivastava, Jayati (New Delhi)

Environment as Discursive Contestation: Narratives of Environmentalism From India.

Environment as a discursive space has anchored a variety of contestations against the model of development adopted in independent India. The dominant body of literature indicates that unlike the West, the 'empty belly' of the grassroots has been at the core of many of environmental movements making it essentially a question of survival and livelihood, narrowly defined, and justice and equity, in an expansive framework. However, since the questions of survival, livelihood, justice and equity cannot be bereft of cultural attributes, this paper locates environmental movements in India at the intersection of economy and culture wherein the idioms of justice and equity are embedded with cultural codes, sub-texts, modes of representations and practices which is informed by the civilisational ethos on the relationship between man and nature.

Tarabout, Gilles (Paris)

Spots of wilderness. "Nature" in the Hindu temples of Kerala

Many Hindu temples in Kerala are called "groves" (*kāvu*), and encapsulate a small, circumscribed spot where shrubs and trees grow "wildly"; this spot is also called a grove. There live numerous divine entities — serpent gods and other ambivalent deities or ghosts — subordinated to the presiding god/goddess of the temple installed in the main shrine.

The communication will elaborate on this situation along two main lines. One will be to trace the presence of these groves and of their dangerous inhabitants to religious ideas found in Kerala about land and deities, and about forests as a major source of divine (wild) power. The other will be to evoke more recent discourses ascribing an ecological purpose to temple groves, thus equating "nature" with a wilderness untamed, though tiny.

Torella, Raffaele (Rome)

From 'Introduction'

The presuppositions implicit in many occidental ideas of 'nature' show how these conceptions are historically determined. In fact, the manners of conceptualizing 'nature' in other parts of the world, and in India in particular, have not necessarily assumed the same forms that have assumed in the West. This is the central reason why a close confrontation with the manner in which 'nature' has been conceptualised and represented in India is an unavoidable step for all those who still consider important to act through and within concepts such as that of 'nature' in order to create new forms of medicine, social organizations, environmental politics and so forth. To this purpose, common formulations regarding the relationship between India and nature must be reconsidered, too. Such formulations largely depend on the first generation of indologists and, even more, on the popular imagery they determined. According to such imagery, India substantially neglects the external world in order to focus just on self-centred meditation as an instrument for liberation. Equipped with such readings, the first to filter through systematically in the West and to be firmly fixed in *communis opinio*, how often must the western traveller, landing in India in the expectancy of an ascetic and disincarnate world, have been stunned by the untiring proliferation of colours, odours and sounds — of life, in all its most splendid and ephemeral forms!

In classical Sāṃkhya *prakṛti* 'nature, primordial matter' is opposed but in a sense also complementary to the antagonist principle *puruṣa* 'the conscious spiritual principle'. An apparently unbridgeable abyss separates the world of nature — comprising the body, senses, passions and mental functions forming an integrated whole — from the world of the spirit, alone responsible for striking the spark of consciousness, without which the continual gross activity of the sensorial faculties, of the inner sense, of the I-notion and the intellect could never finally shine as 'knowledge'. An integrated monism of body, senses, emotions and intellectual faculties consequently exists, but leaves out that very principle that alone can give meaning to the whole. The goal is not the final achieving of greater unity, but the recognition of an irremediable otherness, having reached which, the psyche-body-nature complex progressively withdraws from the scene, "...like a dancer", recounts a famous stanza of the *Sāṃkhya-kārikā* (v. 59), "having presented her performance to her audience", leaving the spirit to shine in undisturbed solitude. The material, emotional and psychic universe thus comes into existence solely so that the soul can recognise itself as being foreign to it and isolate itself in its own self-identity. Even this recognition is made possible by the action of *prakṛti* itself, which thus finds in its own negation its ultimate reason for existence.

I am going to conclude these scattered remarks by highlighting a theme that, at least partly, is common to the Indian *prakṛti* and the western 'nature' (lat. *natura*, gr. *physis*). In both, nature has a double aspect: it exposes itself to our senses in the rich variety of the living world and the universe (Spinoza's *natura naturata*), but at the same time conceals its most essential and profound reality (*natura naturans*) behind the external appearances. Sāṃkhya *prakṛti* (as *natura naturans*) is not accessible to perception due to its 'subtlety'; likewise, Heraclitus' *physis* loves hiding itself (*kruptesthai philei*). Hence the theme of the mystery, or mysteries, of nature. While for the Stoiciens nature is identified with the totality of apparent reality, both rational and corporal, for the Neoplatonicians like Porphyrius, *physis* detests exposing itself to all in its nudity. The phenomena are just a veil it makes use of to conceal itself: only the spiritual eye can lift this veil and grasp its elusive essence.