
Nature and Woman as Life-Giving Forces in Ancient Indian Literature

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Abstract

Ancient Indian literature depicts nature as a dynamic living force intricately linked with the feminine principle. This paper studies the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of the women-nature relation as reflected in ancient Indian literary, philosophical, and mythological traditions. The study examines how nature and woman are collectively represented as creative, nurturing and regenerative forces essential for sustenance of life and maintaining cosmic balance. By analysing the Vedic hymns, Sakta Philosophy and Samkhya thought, the paper highlights the cyclical worldview that emphasizes continuity and renewal over linear and mechanistic interpretations of existence. The study argues that the ancient Indian perspectives advocate mature ecological wisdom and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, the paper asserts that reverence for nature and respect for women are inseparable in promoting sustainability and ecological harmony.

Keywords: Woman–Nature Nexus; Ancient Indian literature; Prakṛti; Śakti; Ecofeminism; Feminine Principle; Ecological Wisdom; Sustainability; Indian Philosophy

1.Introduction

Nature is never considered an inert or passive entity in ancient Indian literature. It is often perceived as a creative, active and dynamic force propagating life and promoting harmony in the universe. This perspective is evident from the earliest Vedic hymns to later Puranic and Sakta traditions. The qualities of nature starting from giving life and nurturing life to regeneration find parallel in the representation of women. Ancient Indian texts reflect the woman-nature nexus powerfully by presenting them both as sacred, dynamic and life sustaining force.

The natural cycles of birth, growth, decay and death are recurring patterns in the natural world and mirror the biological and emotional patterns associated with womanhood. Through such representations, ancient Indian literature reflects and emphasizes the interdependence of life through the symbolic association of women with nature through its philosophical and metaphorical frameworks. Concepts such as *Prakrti*, *Sakti* and *Bhumi* suggest a profound symbolic affiliation between women and nature, depicting both as mothers, nurturers and regenerative forces essential for the sustenance of life and the balance of the universe. Unlike linear or mechanistic interpretations of existence, ancient Indian thought emphasizes continuity and renewal, placing the feminine at the core of cosmic balance and sustainability.

The present paper examines the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of the woman–nature nexus in ancient Indian literature. It seeks to explore how feminine imagery associated with various elements of nature reflects mature ecological wisdom and emphasizes ethical responsibility. Through an analysis of literary, philosophical, and mythological representations, the study aims to highlight the relevance of these perspectives in the contemporary context and underscores the need to revisit, reconsider, and reconstitute modern ideologies that undermine both women and nature. Ultimately, the paper argues that ancient Indian literature offers a holistic ideology in which respect for women and reverence for nature are inseparable in promoting sustainability.

2.Philosophical Framework: Prakrti and Sakti

Women and nature constantly complement and collaborate with each other in propagating, nurturing and sustaining life in this universe. The natural rhythms from birth and growth to decay and regeneration are closely associated with the feminine principle, reiterating the idea that women and nature are sources of creation and renewal. This idea is rooted and strengthened through the feminine representation of rivers as Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswathi, Godavari, Narmada, Kaveri, Tapati, which are revered as embodiments of purity, nourishment and continuity of life. The earth is personified as *Bhu Devi* and the forests and seasons are also frequently depicted through feminine imagery. Such representations reflect a holistic perspective which emphasizes the significance of women and nature in sustaining the cosmic balance and continuation of life. Further, the concepts of *Prakrti*, *Sakti* and *Bhumi* suggest a profound metaphorical and symbolic affiliation between women and nature, depicting both as mothers, nurturers and regenerative forces essential for the sustenance of life and the balance of the universe.

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Prakṛti, the primordial principle, is responsible for creation, growth, and transformation. As Vandana Shiva explains, “All existence arises from this primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (*Prakṛti*)” (Shiva 39). Thus, nature is not an inert mass, as advocated by Cartesian philosophy; rather, it is an ever-active and dynamic living force behind the sustenance and regeneration of life. In the *Kulacudamani Nigama*, *Prakṛti* declares: “There is none but myself / Who is the Mother to create” (Shiva 40).

Samkhya philosophy further strengthens this association by conceptualizing *Prakṛti* as the creative principle, while *Purusa* remains passive and contemplative. All the elements in nature including the physical and the biological, originate from *Prakṛti*, who is regarded as the “mother of all creation” or the “fertile earth”. *Prakṛti* is the mother or the creative womb of this entire universe. Ancient Indian philosophy thus implicitly associates the feminine with creative agency, sustenance and transformation, establishing a metaphysical parallel between woman and nature as indispensable sources of life and vitality.

Sakti is another concept closely related to *Prakṛti*. Sakti represents the cosmic feminine energy that energizes and empowers the universe. Since ancient Indian times, Sakti has been worshipped as both creative and destructive power, without which, even male deities were rendered powerless. This belief is reflected in Indian cultural practices where, while addressing divine couples, the female name often precedes the male counterpart. As Datar observes, “Sakti is the energetic feminine potency of the Mother Earth. The earth is a live, animate organism with an efficient network linked to a biological vision of the ecosystem” (Datar 115).

In religious traditions, goddesses such as Durga, Kali and Parvathi embody Sakti, reinforcing the belief that feminine energy is the origin and nurturer of life in the universe. The philosophical intertwining of *Prakṛti* and *Sakti* establishes a strong foundation for the symbolic connection between woman and nature in the ancient Indian literature. Both are perceived as creative, nurturing, and regenerative forces that maintain and foster cosmic balance. This holistic view point supports and strengthens the interconnectivity among various elements of nature highlighting the need for ecological conservation standing in stark contrast with modern anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies that marginalize both women and nature.

Prthvi Sukta: Articulation of symbolic association between women and nature

In ancient Indian cultural and philosophical thought, the Earth is worshipped as Bhū Devi. She is the universal mother who nurtures all forms of life. The *Prthvi Sukta* of the *Atharva Veda* is a devotional hymn addressed to the Earth as a living and nurturing mother. It is explicit in the most popular articulations of Earth as **माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं**

पृथिव्याः ।

(*अथर्ववेदः 12.1.12*) translated as “Earth is my mother; I am her child” (Griffith, *Atharva Veda 12.1.12*).

This proclamation establishes an intimate filial bond between the human world and the natural world. Unlike modern Western epistemologies, which often depict the earth as an inert or a passive resource, ancient Indian thought, through hymns like *Prthvi Sukta* celebrates the Earth as a life-creating and dynamic force responsible for sustenance and regeneration. The hymn situates humanity not as a master of nature but as a dependent offspring within a larger ecological and cosmic order.

Verse 29 of the *Prthvi Sukta* further reinforces the vision of Earth as the benevolent provider of nourishment, prosperity, and abundance. In this verse, Earth is addressed as the consecrating and duty-abiding force that sustains human life through her generosity: “I address you, O Earth, which consecrates me. This duty-abiding Earth expands with offerings. May we sit on you, O Earth, which fills us with agility, prosperity, food and clarified butter” (*Atharva Veda 12.1.29*). This invocation emphasizes Earth’s role not merely as a physical ground but as a sacred source of material and spiritual sustenance. As Srinivas and Ashok observe, the hymn foregrounds the Earth’s nurturing capacity, portraying her as the provider of food (*anna*), nourishment, and prosperity essential for both survival and ritual continuity (Srinivas and Ashok). The reference to offerings and clarified butter (*ghṛta*) highlights the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, wherein reverence and ethical conduct ensure abundance. This verse thus strengthens the symbolic association between woman and nature by presenting Earth in maternal terms—as one who nourishes, sustains, and empowers life—while simultaneously reinforcing the ecological ethic of gratitude and coexistence embedded in ancient Indian thought (Srinivas and Ashok).

According to the concluding three slokas of the *Prthvi Sukta*, the Earth is envisioned as a living manifestation of the divine. As Kandpal observes, Earth is simultaneously

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portrayed as the life-provider, the healer, and, when necessary, the destroyer, thereby embodying a complete cosmic balance. These verses remind humanity of its ethical obligation to revere and respect the Earth. This vision is articulated in the prayer: “May your dwellings, O Earth, free from sickness and wasting, flourish for us! Through a long life, watchful, may we always offer to you our tribute!” (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.62; Kandpal). The subsequent verse reinforces the principle of cosmic harmony by seeking alignment between human existence and celestial forces: “In harmony with all the powers of Heaven set me, O Poet, in grace and good fortune!” (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.63; Kandpal). Together, these verses affirm the Earth as a conscious and responsive force whose sustenance depends upon reverence, reciprocity, and responsible environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

Ancient Indian literature presents a deep-rooted integrated vision of existence in woman and nature where they share an inseparable link which is manifested through natural cycles of creation, sustenance and regeneration. Through feminine conceptualization of nature as *Prakriti*, *Sakti* and *Bhu Devi*, the ancient Indian traditions foreground the feminine principle as central to cosmic balance and ecological harmony. Ancient Indian texts such as *Prthvi Sukta* reinforce an ethical framework grounded in reverence, reciprocity, and responsibility, positioning humanity as a participant within nature rather than its dominator. This worldview stands in sharp contrast to modern anthropocentric and patriarchal paradigms that objectify and commodify both women and nature, rendering their exploitation socially and ideologically acceptable. Revisiting these ancient perspectives is highly relevant and also crucial in the contemporary context of ecological crisis in order to bring into vogue the alternative models of sustainability rooted in the ethics of respect and coexistence. By reaffirming the woman–nature nexus, ancient Indian literature provides not only cultural insight but also a moral and philosophical foundation for reimagining environmental ethics and gender relations in the modern world.

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