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DOI: 10.15290/CR.2025.49.2.03

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Theology or discourse on ecology? Reading Śiva Mahāpurāṇa as an ecoaesthetical text

Abstract. This paper explores the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa through an ecoaesthetical lens, revealing its relevance in countering the anthropocentric worldview that emerged from European Enlightenment ideals. While modernity often established a hierarchical divide between humans and nature, Hindu philosophy, as seen in the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the inherent divinity within both human and non-human entities. The text advocates for an ethical, non-exploitative relationship with the environment, highlighting reverence, responsibility, and harmonious coexistence. By integrating theological reflections with ecological consciousness, the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa presents a compelling framework for fostering eco-centric ethics. This study underscores the text's potential to inspire a deeper spiritual connection to nature, providing valuable insights for addressing contemporary ecological challenges. Ultimately, the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa transcends its theological origins to serve as a profound ecoaesthetical guide, urging us to rethink our relationship with the natural world and to embrace a more sustainable, compassionate approach to ecological stewardship.

Keywords: Eco-aesthetics, Theo-ethics, Śiva Mahāpurāṇa, Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Sacralization of Nature, Brahman, Ecological ethics

1. Introduction

The legacy of European humanism, particularly during the Enlightenment, while championing concepts like reason and free will, often positioned “Freedom” as a uniquely human attribute, inadvertently establishing a dangerous hierarchy between humanity and the natural world (Rigby, 2014, p. 4). This perspective, championed by intellectuals like Francis Bacon, emphasized humanity's dominion over nature as a mark of civilization's progress. His mechanistic worldview

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is centrally embodied in his utopian work of 1624, *New Atlantis*. However, critical theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) challenge this anthropocentric perspective, arguing that this perspective hinges on the subjugation of what they term the “outer” or nonhuman world. The idea of subjugation was deeply rooted in the Enlightenment’s mechanistic view of the natural world. While laying the groundwork for modern science, thinkers like Descartes and Newton also propagated a vision of nature devoid of intrinsic value or ethical consideration, rendering it a passive object for human manipulation (Jervis & Merchant, 1982). This scientific worldview, fuelled by positivism and the pursuit of objective knowledge, sought to demystify and control nature for human benefit. However, in doing so, it enacted a process of “disenchantment,” stripping nature of its inherent mystery, wonder, and intrinsic worth. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this detachment paved the way for a consumerist attitude towards the environment, reducing it to a collection of resources to be exploited. Countering this detached and ultimately destructive perspective, Adorno proposes a radical shift in our relationship with nature through an aesthetic appreciation that transcends mere utility. By re-engaging with the beauty, complexity, and inherent value of the natural world, we can dismantle the hierarchy imposed by anthropocentric thought and cultivate a more ethical and sustainable mode of being.

Religious traditions, with their inherent capacity to shape values and inspire action, emerge as potent forces in redefining humanity’s relationship with the natural world and fostering harmonious human-earth relations. By imbuing nature with spiritual significance and reverence, these traditions uniquely counteract the disenchantment of the natural world often associated with secular, anthropocentric worldviews. They reintroduce a sense of wonder, awe, and mystery, reminding us that the Earth is not merely a collection of resources but a sacred, interconnected web of life deserving our respect and care. As Callicott aptly suggests, this process of resacralizing nature allows us to tap into the rich “conceptual wealth” embedded within religious traditions to construct more inclusive and globally relevant environmental ethics (Jenkins et al., 2016, pp. xvi-xvii). These traditions offer powerful narratives, symbols, and rituals that can reshape our understanding of the natural world and inspire transformative ethical action. They provide a framework for understanding our place within the web of life, emphasizing interconnectedness, responsibility, and the importance of safeguarding endangered ecosystems, threatened species, and finite resources. As Giner and Tábara (1999) eloquently state, “the sacralisation of nature appears to be a necessary precondition for the practice of ecological rationality.” Hinduism, with its deep reverence for the natural world and its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings, provides a particularly powerful example of this resacralization process. This approach invites us to move beyond a purely transactional relationship with nature and embrace a path of harmonious co-existence, recognizing that our well-being is inextricably intertwined with the well-being of all beings.

It is with this background that I have taken up the study of the Śivamahāpurāṇa, which offers a compelling counter-narrative to the anthropocentric assumptions that permeate this

environmental crisis. The text presents a profoundly ecocentric worldview grounded in the recognition of inherent divinity within both human and non-human entities. Central to this understanding is the principle of compassion and mutual harmony between *Prakṛti* and *Purusha*, a concept that aligns profoundly with the principles of deep ecology. Unlike the shallow ecology (Drengson et al., 2011, p. 3) that has come to dominate anthropocentric thought, deep ecology recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of all beings, rejecting hierarchies of dominance and affirming the intrinsic value of all forms of life. The concept of animism, deeply embedded within Hinduism, further exemplifies this perspective. As White articulated, Animism posits an inherent consciousness or spiritual essence within all environment components, both animate and inanimate (White, 1967, p. 1205). This worldview engenders a profound reverence for nature, recognizing the sacred within the mundane and fostering a harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment. By engaging in a critical analysis of the Śivamahāpurāṇa through an ecoaesthetic lens, we can unearth a path towards a more sustainable and reverent relationship with the natural world.

2. Nature, Brahman, and deep ecology

In Hindu philosophy, Brahman represents the ultimate, all-encompassing reality, the infinite essence from which everything originates and to which everything ultimately returns. This concept is fundamental, suggesting that the consciousness inherent in all beings and objects emanates from Brahman. In the Śivamahāpurāṇa, this notion is closely intertwined with the figure of Śiva, who is frequently identified with Brahman. For instance, Sūta, the narrator, proclaims, “Śiva himself... is the form of Brahman” (1.5.10), and various passages reiterate that Śiva embodies the qualities of the supreme Brahman. This equivalence is further highlighted when Sandhyā, the daughter of Brahma, while eulogising Śiva, addresses him as “the greatest supreme soul, the pure Brahman, the supreme Brahman, and the utmost object of deliberation” (2(2).6.22), and later again refers to Śiva as “Īśānas, Īśvara, Brahman, of the form of Brahman, the Supreme Soul” (2(2).41.35). This concept is vividly portrayed in chapters 6 and 41 of the Satī-khaṇḍa of the Rudra-saṃhitā. Here, Śiva is described as the ultimate source and animating force of the universe, existing beyond the constraints of time and space, without beginning, middle, or end. His pervasiveness is absolute, encompassing the entirety of the cosmos and extending beyond, leaving no realm untouched by his presence. Furthermore, the text emphasizes Śiva’s role as the primordial creator, from whose being all of creation emerges. The Śivamahāpurāṇa’s portrayal of Śiva as both the creator and the creation itself resonates with the Vedantic emanationist theory, where Brahman does not merely create the universe but is a manifestation of Brahman. This idea is beautifully encapsulated in the Chandogya Upanishad’s declaration, “May I become many!” (6.2.3), suggesting that Brahman transforms into the universe rather than creating it as something separate.

Hindu philosophy roots the origin of the universe in Brahman. This ontological perspective highlights the deep connection between the divine and the material world. It reinforces an ecological philosophy based on the interconnectedness and oneness of all existence. Through this

understanding, the Śivamahāpurāṇa advocates for a profound shift in consciousness. It urges individuals to move beyond the illusion of separation and recognize their intrinsic unity with Śiva. The text emphasizes Śiva's omnipresence, highlighting how his all-pervading nature makes all beings equal to him and he has similar feelings for all. Just as an individual perceives their limbs as integral parts of their body, so does Śiva perceive all creatures as interconnected and inseparable from his own being. This interconnectedness forms the foundation for a deep ecological ethic, where respect and compassion extend to all beings, recognizing all life's inherent worth and dignity. The text emphasizes that Śiva's devotees, through their realization of this unity, themselves embody Śiva's qualities, becoming vessels of his divine essence and acting as agents of his compassionate presence in the world (1.1.1, 1.9.37, 1.17.131, 2(1).12.59-80, 2(2).43.14).

The Śiva Mahāpurāṇa, grounded in the doctrine that the individual soul (*ātman*) is identical to the universal soul (*brahman*), underscores the oneness and unity of all existence. This non-dualistic perspective dissolves the divide between the divine and the natural world. Moreover, it challenges hierarchical structures that place humans above nature by affirming all beings' intrinsic worth and sacredness. The text advocates for a vision of interconnectedness, encouraging deep respect for both individual entities of nature and the ecological community as a unified whole. This recognition cultivates an ecoconscious sensibility, encouraging readers to move beyond anthropocentric perspectives and recognize the natural world's unity and intrinsic value. In doing so, the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa's vision advocates for a transformative shift in consciousness which aligns with the principles of deep ecology. Næss's deep ecology, particularly Principle No. 6, calls for substantial shifts in social, economic, and ideological structures to achieve true sustainability (Næss, 1986, p. 14). The portrayal of Śiva as both the creator and the creation itself reflects the deep ecology concept of metaphysical holism, which asserts that reality is an unbroken whole where all beings are inherently interrelated: "We can make no firm ontological divide in reality between the human and the nonhuman realms...[T]o the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness" (Fox, 1984, p. 196). This mirrors the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa's teachings that divine essence pervades all life, emphasizing the sacred interconnectedness of all entities. Moreover, the text echoes deep ecology's call for recognizing the equal intrinsic worth of all beings. Devall and Sessions (1985) argue that "all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth" (p. 67). The Śiva Mahāpurāṇa dismantles anthropocentric hierarchies by presenting a biocentric world-view. Næss underscores that "these values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes" (Næss, 1986, p. 14), a concept reflected in the text's depiction of Śiva as an omnipresent force encompassing all forms of existence. This perspective promotes unity among humans, animals, and the environment, fostering an egalitarian ethos central to deep ecology. The Śiva Mahāpurāṇa echoes contemporary deep ecology by emphasizing the divine nature of all beings and the need for holistic compassion, transcending human-centric views.

The text emphasizes a close relationship between Śiva's pervasive presence and a profound reverence for all beings and elements of the natural world. Notably, while the text identifies the

unmanifested Śiva as the primordial source of creation, it does not subordinate Prakṛti, the material world, to a merely instrumental role, thereby preserving its intrinsic value and significance. It positions *Prakṛti* and its myriad manifestations as integral to the very workings of the cosmos. This establishes a harmonious balance, a beautiful unity, between the divine and the material on a cosmological level. This intricate interplay between Śiva and *Prakṛti* is vividly illustrated in Chapters 10 and 18 of the *Vidyēśvara-saṃhitā*. Here, Śiva's work unfolds through the five-fold duties (*pañcakṛtya*): creation, maintenance, annihilation, concealment, and blessing. These divine actions are directly manifested through the five basic elements of nature, the *Panch Mahabhutas*. Creation is embodied in Earth, maintenance in water, annihilation in fire, concealment in wind, and liberation, the blessed state, in the sky. This association is further elucidated through the life-giving properties of each element: Earth as the source of all creation, water as the sustainer of life, fire as the agent of transformation, wind as the force of change and dispersal, and the boundless sky representing the liberating potential of spiritual awakening. The text presents a continuous cycle of creation and destruction, transcending the illusion of separation. Śiva, as the cosmic creator, both brings forth the universe and dissolves it back into himself, not as annihilation, but as a transformative process that ultimately dismantles the illusion of duality. In a profound gesture of unity, Śiva then absorbs the essence of creation, represented by the ashes, and adorns his body with them. This symbolic act vividly demonstrates the inseparable link between nature and divinity, as described in 1.18.69-72: "With the essence of the sky his hair emerged, and with the essence of the wind, his mouth was formed. The heart was formed with the fire's essence, and the water's essence produced the waist. The thighs were created with the essence of the earth. All his limbs were thus formed." Śiva, as the embodiment of the cosmos, becomes a powerful metaphor for the harmonious fusion of the material and spiritual realms. The transcendent essence of the universe finds expression through his physical form, blurring the lines between the creator and the created. Furthermore, Śiva, in his infinite compassion, urges his devotees to cultivate an awareness of this divine presence within all things through meditation on the five *Mahabhutas*. By recognizing the divine essence within these elemental forms: earth, water, fire, wind, and sky, devotees are encouraged to transcend the limitations of a purely material perspective. This shift challenges the utilitarian view of nature as mere resources. Instead, the *Śivamahāpurāṇa* fosters an appreciation for the inherent divinity in creation, dismantling the sacred-mundane divide. This ecological message reveals the heart of existence, establishing a theological foundation for nature's reverence in Hindu thought.

An ecoconscious reading of the text reveals a deliberate technique of establishing a close relationship between natural elements and deities, describing divinity through natural imagery, *tapas* and anthropomorphism, emphasizing the importance of nature in the lives of the gods. Through these methods, the text elevates nature to a sacred status, placing it on an equal footing with the deities.

The text portrays the gods as deeply connected to nature, with their very existence and identities woven into its elements. This close bond between the divine and the natural world

sets them apart from the idea of a distant, transcendent deity. The depth of this connection is vividly illustrated through the depictions of Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Kārttikeya, Jalandhara, and Gaṇeśa. Visnu, a central deity in the Hindu pantheon, is described as residing within a stream of water. This water is described as a manifestation of Brahman emanating from Śiva himself. The text states, “Several streams of water emerged from the body of Śiva... all the streams of water merged into the *sūnya* (void) and the water was turned into the form of Brahman... lord Viṣṇu, getting fatigued and feeling, confused, kept on sleeping in the water” (2(1).6.41-43). This imagery immediately grounds Visnu within the natural world, emphasizing water as a primordial source of life and a symbol of the divine. He rests upon a serpent bed, surrounded by Garuda and other attendants (1.6.1), holding a conch, a wheel, a club and a lotus as attributes in his four hands (2(1).7.18). Similarly, Brahma, the creator, emerges from a lotus blossoming from Visnu’s navel. He could recognise none else except the lotus. He describes the lotus as full of lustre, having the brilliance of crores of suns, having an endless stalk and many *yojanas* vast (2(1).7.1-9). These vivid descriptions underscore the profound dependence of even the most powerful deities on the natural world. Visnu finds solace and rejuvenation in the water, while the serpent provides him comfort and support, while the conch and lotus further connect him to the natural world. Brahma’s origin story highlights the lotus as a potent symbol of creation and spiritual potential as he bases his identity on it.

The birth and origin of Kārttikeya also intricately intertwine with elements of nature, emphasizing the deep, sacred connection between divinity and the natural world. In Chapter 2 of Kumāra-khaṇḍa within Rudra-saṃhitā, it is recounted how Agni, in the form of a dove, swallowed Śiva’s potent seed. This divine power caused intense burning within him, compelling Śiva to advise Agni to deposit the seed in a suitable woman’s womb to alleviate the suffering. Agni, acting on Śiva’s guidance, released the seed, which entered the bodies of six of the seven Saptarishi wives through the pores of their hair. Overwhelmed by the divine heat, these women, too, could not contain its power and cast it upon the summit of Mount Himavat. Even Himavat, the sacred mountain personified, could not endure the potency of Śiva’s seed and eventually hurled it into the Gaṅgā River. The river’s currents carried the divine essence into a grove of Śara grass. Nourished by the waters of the Gaṅgā and in the warmth of the Śara forest, this divine essence transformed into a radiant and glorious boy. This remarkable birth story reveals a layered process in which natural elements, including Himavat, Gaṅgā, and the forest, each play an essential role in the manifestation of Kārttikeya. Later, the boy was taken to the Badarikā hermitage by the Kṛttikās, who, as celestial figures and manifestations of *Prakṛti* (nature), lovingly raised him, naming him Kārttikeya. In the text, Kārttikeya explicitly acknowledges the Kṛttikās as aspects of *Prakṛti*. Given his cosmic lineage, which originates from *Prakṛti*, Kārttikeya inherently shares a connection with these celestial beings. His maternal bond extends not only to Parvati but also to the Kṛttikās, who contributed to his upbringing. Numerous references within the text, designating Kārttikeya as the son of the Gaṅgā and born in the Śara grove, further highlight his symbiotic relationship with nature. This recognition expands the notion of parentage to

encompass birth and nurturing, symbolizing Kārttikeya as a liminal being born of divinity and natural elements. He thus bridges the human and non-human realms, integrating the divine with the natural. This narrative not only celebrates Kārttikeya as a fusion of Śiva's essence and nature's embrace but also elevates the non-human as central to divinity's origin. Nature is given reverence and status akin to a mother's, highlighting a worldview that views divinity and natural entities as mutually inclusive. The universal acceptance of Kārttikeya by the Gods, including Parvati, signifies a profound acknowledgement of the natural elements as their kin.

In Chapter 14 of the Yuddha-khaṇḍa within Rudra-saṃhitā, the birth of Jalandhara is described. Analogous to Kārttikeya's origin, Jalandhara emerged from the divine fire of Śiva's third eye, which fell into the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the ocean. Taking the form of an infant, Jalandhara was joyfully adopted by the ocean, who nurtured the child with great care. Throughout the narrative, Jalandhara is called the son of the ocean. It underscores how natural elements wholeheartedly accept and nurture beings as their own. This example further illustrates that there are no boundaries between gods and nature; their symbiotic relationship upholds their creation and sustenance. Such narratives emphasize the divine aspect of natural phenomena and encourage us to view nature with a sense of kinship.

In Chapter 2 of Kumāra-khaṇḍa within Rudra-saṃhitā, the narrative surrounding the rebirth of Gaṇeśa beautifully exemplifies the dissolution of boundaries between the divine and nature, suggesting an inherent unity rather than distinction between beings. After Śiva severed Gaṇeśa's head, he instructed his followers to journey north and attach the head of the first creature they encountered to Gaṇeśa's body. The followers encountered a one-tusked elephant, took its head, and affixed it to Gaṇeśa's body. Upon Śiva's command, Gaṇeśa was revived, his consciousness seamlessly restored, awakening as though from slumber. Gaṇeśa, now endowed with an elephant's head, appeared handsome, radiant, and joyfully alive, sparking delight among Śiva's followers and ending their collective sorrow. Parvati and the gods celebrated his revival without hesitation or objection to Gaṇeśa's animal form, revealing the divine acceptance of this transformation. In the narrative, the lack of commentary or resistance from the gods emphasizes that there was no hierarchical distinction between the forms of animals and humans. Instead, all beings are equal. Gaṇeśa's elephant head was neither an anomaly nor an oddity but a revered form of divinity, implicitly challenging any notion that divinity must be anthropomorphic. This acceptance, without question, underlines that normative boundaries about forms and identities dissolve in the divine realm. Here, the emphasis shifts from outer form to inner consciousness, an embodiment of Brahman's supreme consciousness, which unites all beings irrespective of species. This story ultimately positions the ultimate consciousness as the supreme and defining essence, aligning with Śiva and Pārvatī's view of Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya as equal, as they proclaimed: "Both of you are good sons and equal in our eyes" (2(4).19.17). This equality transcends physical form, rejecting any anthropocentric or speciesist hierarchy. This narrative further disrupts the discourse of Anthropocentrism, which creates the conventional binaries that separate humans from animals, challenging anthropocentric perspectives that

claim human supremacy based on unique qualities like reason, language, and consciousness. Thinkers like Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, argue that humans are fundamentally distinct from animals, emphasizing qualities like rationality and self-awareness as unique human attributes. As Matthew Calarco notes in *Thinking Through Animals*, these distinctions have reinforced human exceptionalism and justified the ethical marginalization and exploitation of animals. In contrast, within the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa, Gaṇeśa is described as “बुद्धिसागरः,” or the ocean of wisdom, despite possessing the head of an elephant, traditionally deemed inferior to human intellect. His epithet as the “wisest being” subverts the anthropocentric paradigm, presenting an animal-headed deity as a paragon of wisdom. Here, wisdom transcends species boundaries, elevating Gaṇeśa beyond the limits that classical philosophers imposed on animals. The text’s portrayal of Gaṇeśa thus opens an ethical discourse that values beings for their intrinsic qualities rather than anthropocentric hierarchies.

Ultimately, the text suggests that even the grand narratives of these powerful gods and divine beings can be understood as extensions or reflections of natural processes. By portraying the divine in such intimate terms with nature, the text dismantles the artificial divide between the sacred and the natural. Rather than being external or supernatural beings imposed upon the earth, these divine figures are presented as organically emerging from and existing as part of the natural world. This perspective fosters a deeper respect for nature by recognizing its inherent sacredness and its crucial role in sustaining all life, including the divine. Therefore, the text transcends a purely theological discourse, offering instead a compelling and profound ecological vision that affirms the intrinsic value of all living beings.

3. Eco-care through aesthetic engagement

The Śivamahāpurāṇa masterfully blurs the lines between the divine and the natural, employing vivid imagery drawn from the environment to depict the physical attributes of its deities. The text employs metaphors drawn from nature as a vehicle for ecoaesthetics. This stylistic choice transcends mere literary embellishment and serves as a powerful testament to its profound ecological sensibility, positioning nature as the very language through which the divine is comprehended and revered. Visnu is adorned with the hues of gold, the brilliance of sapphires, and eyes as captivating as lotus blossoms (2(1).6.39-40, 2(1).7.18). These similes, drawn from precious metals, gemstones, and delicate flora, evoke a sense of awe-inspiring beauty and majesty, while simultaneously grounding Visnu’s magnificence within the realm of the natural world. Similarly, Kamadeva, the god of love, is portrayed with striking imagery rooted in nature. His imposing size is likened to a black elephant, his face to the luminous full moon, and his charming teeth to those of an intoxicated elephant (2(2).2.24-29). His allure is further enhanced by comparisons to a conch-like neck, fish-embossed skin, and breath as sweet as a fragrant breeze. Rati, Kamadeva’s consort and the embodiment of desire, is depicted as a vision of exquisite natural beauty. Her face rivals a fully blossomed lotus, her eyes sparkle like those of fawns, peacocks, and red lotuses, and her arms gracefully curve like lotus stalks (2(2).4.9-33). The text meticulously

compares her features to elements of nature, Gaṅgā's waves, banana tree trunks, kimsuka flowers, raven hair like storm clouds, and a naval as deep and alluring as a tranquil lake. This detailed description, replete with natural metaphors, elevates Rati to a goddess sculpted from the very essence of nature's allure. The similes used in these descriptions cover the natural world, including animals, plants, mountains, minerals, celestial bodies, and elements, giving equal importance to both animate and inanimate nature. This creates a world where divinity and nature are deeply interconnected, enhancing the immersive experience and reflecting the characters' divinity through nature's imagery. By using such evocative natural imagery, the text transforms theological discourse into one on ecology and the environment. It invites readers to see the divine not as an external entity but as an organic expression of nature's splendour. These metaphors act as gateways to profound sensory experiences, recognizing nature's power to evoke joy, tranquillity, awe and desire, and highlighting the environment's profound impact on shaping human experiences.

The Śivamahāpurāṇa underscores the profound interconnectedness between spiritual practice and the natural world, emphasizing the vital role of the environment in facilitating spiritual growth and communion with the divine. This emphasis on the sacred significance of nature transcends mere backdrop; it positions the environment as an active participant in pursuing spiritual liberation, further solidifying the text's eco-aesthetic underpinnings. The pursuit of Śiva, the ultimate goal for many devotees, is often depicted as a journey that unfolds in the embrace of nature. Tapas, considered to be a potent pathway to attain Śiva's grace, is imbued with heightened potency when performed in natural settings. Sūtaji, a revered sage and narrator within the text, emphasizes the manifold rewards of performing these practices in proximity to rivers, seashores, sacred trees like the Pipal, Banyan, Wood Apple and Tulasi, and atop serene mountain peaks (1.15.1-5). These natural spaces, imbued with inherent spiritual energy, amplify the efficacy of spiritual endeavours, acting as a passage between the earthly and the divine. The text further equates the sanctity of a forest of Wood Apple trees with the sacred space of a Śiva temple, both considered equally potent in facilitating spiritual communion (1.2.44-46). Numerous instances within the narrative depict divine figures and sages retreating into nature's embrace to perform tapas, further emphasizing the integral role of the environment in spiritual practice. Vedavyasa, the compiler of the Vedas, sought solace and spiritual insight on the banks of the sacred Sarasvati River (1.4.7). Narada undertook tapas in a strikingly beautiful cave near the Himalayan Mountains, beside which the divine Gaṅgā flowed with great force. He practised rigorous self-control, firmly restraining all his senses and keeping his mind focused on Śiva (2(1).2.1-4). Similarly, Sandhya, the daughter of Brahma, retreated to a secluded forest to perform tapas. She positioned herself on the bank of a divine lake, filled with virtues akin to Lake Mansarovar's. The lake was adorned with lotus flowers, resembling the sky at dusk, with the moon rising and stars beginning to twinkle. Nearby, the Candrabhaga River flowed to the south; just as the Gaṅgā flows from the Himalayas toward the ocean, the Candrabhaga also surged toward the ocean, breaking through the western slopes of the mountains (2(2).5.44-48).

Dakṣa, too, engaged in tapas, controlling his senses while fasting and sustaining himself solely on the wind (1(2)12.7).

In addition to emphasizing the sacredness of natural spaces, the text also explores the transformative power of the connection between spiritual practice and the natural world. Parvati's tapas, undertaken in the heart of the forest, exemplifies this harmonious interplay. As she cultivates inner peace and spiritual strength, the surrounding environment mirrors her transformation, becoming a sanctuary of peace and abundance. The text describes how Parvati, embarking on her arduous tapas to win Śiva's love, adorns her surroundings with auspicious plants, their growth fuelled by the potency of her spiritual practice (2(3).22.66-71). Furthermore, the transformative power of her tapas extends beyond the plant kingdom, influencing even animals, traditionally seen as adversaries, to coexist peacefully. The forest, initially a wilderness, blossoms under the influence of Parvati's tapas, becoming as captivating as Śiva's celestial abode, Mount Kailasa. This transformation highlights the text's eco-aesthetic sensibility, where spiritual practice elevates the inherent beauty of the natural world to sacred significance.

All these narratives in the text suggest that true spiritual attainment is intertwined with the environment, as divine beings and sages rely on nature for enlightenment. Human interaction with nature also holds the potential for profound transformation. The text advocates balancing human desires with environmental harmony, emphasizing love, compassion, and restraint. The eco-aesthetic lens urges readers to recognize the interconnectedness of all beings and the impact of our actions on the natural world's delicate balance. Engaging in tapas within nature enhances spiritual experiences, merging individual consciousness with Śiva's universal essence. This process, rooted in meditation and self-discipline, cultivates an awareness of interconnectedness, fostering inclusivity among all beings. The vivid descriptions of nature imbued with divine significance encourage readers to perceive the sacred in everyday life, fostering reverence for the natural world. By observing nature's wisdom, humans can gain insights for a balanced, sustainable life.

The Śivamahāpurāṇa's emphasis on harmonious and compassionate relationships within the natural world is further amplified through its strategic use of anthropomorphism. The text fosters a sense of kinship and shared existence between humanity and the environment by imbuing various elements of nature with human-like qualities and identities. This literary device bridges the perceived gap between the human and non-human realms, encouraging readers to view the natural world not as an inanimate resource but as a community of beings deserving of respect and empathy. The deification of nature is particularly evident in the portrayal of Himavat, or Himachal, the personified embodiment of the Himalayan Mountain range. Himavat exists in two forms: a human form, depicted as a powerful and prosperous king, and a stationary form, representing the majestic physical presence of the mountains themselves. The anthropomorphism of the entire Himalayan range suggests that it is not just individual elements like trees or rivers that hold sacred status but the entire ecosystem itself. When Sati, the daughter of Dakṣa, was spending time in the Himalayas with Śiva, Menā, the beloved of Himalaya, cared for her as

her own daughter and nurtured her with maternal love and care. Moved by this affection, Sati promised that she would become Mena's daughter in her next life. In keeping with this promise, she later cast off her body and was reborn as Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya and Mena (2(3).1.1-9). This narrative illustrates the idea that living with compassion and reverence toward nature can lead to a reciprocal relationship, where nature returns that love with even greater intensity. Parvati not only established a familial bond with Himalaya and Mena but also forged close relationships with her brothers, who are anthropomorphized forms of other mountains.

While Parvati was engaged in intense tapas, her father, Himalaya, arrived with her brothers, Sahya, Meru, Mandara, Mainaka, Krauncha, and others, who are anthropomorphized forms of various mountains, to persuade her to stop torturing herself through penance (2(3).23.1-17). This relationship of Śiva's wife with the mountains is not unintentional but rather done very purposefully. In her wedding with Śiva, various elements of nature were invited, further emphasizing this bond. Mountains like Devalaya, Mandaracala, Astacala, Udayacala, Malaya, and others arrived, in anthropomorphized form, bearing gifts. At the same time, rivers like Sonabhadra, Godavari, and Yamuna, adorned with ornaments, joyfully participated in the celebration of Śiva and Parvati's union (2(3).37.22-46). This reflects the profound affection that Parvati shared with nature, as every element was eager to bless and honour her on her special day. The kinship of Parvati with nature is further highlighted through playful interactions with divine figures. In Chapter 50 of the *Pārvatī-khaṇḍa*, titled "Description of Fun and Frolic", sixteen celestial ladies, including Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Sāvitrī, Jāhnavī, Aditī, Śacī, Lopāmudrā, Arundhatī, Ahalyā, Tulasi, Svāhā, Rohiṇī, Vasundharā, Satarūpā, Saṃjñā, and Rati, along with virgins of the gods, Nāgas, and sages, arrive to see the couple with great respect. The inclusion of both goddesses and anthropomorphized natural elements promotes a vision of equality and unity, suggesting that these natural elements are as revered as divine beings.

A similar respect and kin-like relationship are evident in the portrayal of Nandi or Nandin, an anthropomorphized bull and one of Śiva's chief attendants. Nandi's close relationship with Śiva is well-documented in this text and other Hindu scriptures. In one instance in the *Śivamahapurāṇa*, several gods approach Śiva, but finding him deep in meditation, they turn to Nandin for advice. They address him as "a companion of Śiva and pure assistant... [who is] omniscient" and seek refuge in him. Nandin, moved by their plea, eventually convinces Śiva to hear their request (2(3).24.1-37). This instance underscores the significant role that an animal plays in Śiva's life, as even Śiva, who initially ignored the gods' plea, listens to Nandin.

The narrative of Kārttikeya and the Kṛttikās, celestial beings who embody facets of *Prakṛti* (nature), highlights a deep, compassionate kinship that blurs the line between human and non-human relationships. When Kārttikeya prepares to depart, the Kṛttikās are overtaken by intense sorrow, exclaiming, "O ocean of mercy, how is it that you ruthlessly leave us and go? This is not a virtuous thing for a fostered son to forsake his mothers. You have been brought up by us affectionately. Hence you are our son in virtue of that. What shall we do? Where shall we go? What can we do?" (2(4).5.5-7). In their distress, they embrace Kārttikeya, collapsing in

sorrow at the thought of losing their cherished foster son. Moved by their despair, Kārttikeya restores their consciousness and offers words of spiritual guidance and comfort. This portrayal of the Kṛttikās, with their very human-like expressions of grief and affection, illustrates an anthropomorphized vision of nature that encourages empathy and compassion. Their deep attachment to Kārttikeya, who reciprocates with love and spiritual wisdom, reflects a profound bond that transcends conventional human-nature distinctions. The Kṛttikās' maternal sorrow and devotion reveal nature not as a passive backdrop but as a sentient, nurturing presence capable of complex emotional relationships. By anthropomorphizing the Kṛttikās, this narrative emphasizes the possibility - and indeed the necessity - of cultivating an empathetic and caring connection with the natural world. Through this account, the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa invites readers to see nature as both divine and familial, fostering a deep respect that transcends simple reverence and approaches genuine kinship.

The narrative of Jalandhara underscores how an emotional bond with nature can lead to eco-care and inspire actions aimed at ecological restoration and balance. When Jalandhara hears about the gods churning the ocean, his father in anthropomorphized form, to obtain nectar and jewels, as well as consumption of the *Amṛta*, he becomes enraged. His eyes turn red with anger as he sends a message to Indra, declaring, "O base god, why was my father, the ocean, churned by you with the mountain? Why were all the jewels of my father taken away? What you have done is not proper. Return all of them to me immediately" (2(5).15.27-28). This narrative exemplifies how kinship-like relationships with nature can inspire a protective impulse and a desire to address ecological exploitation. Jalandhara's response to the mistreatment of the ocean highlights how emotional investment in natural elements can drive a strong sense of responsibility toward environmental restoration. When nature is perceived as familial and revered, harm against it stirs emotions akin to personal loss, fuelling the urge to rectify the damage. By anthropomorphizing nature, the Śiva Mahāpurāṇa not only strengthens its sacred status but also encourages readers to cultivate a sentiment of eco-care and advocate for ecological justice.

By equating nature with deities, the text promotes ecological harmony through spiritual reverence, fostering a more compassionate and respectful relationship with the environment. It uses anthropomorphism to deepen our understanding and emotional connection to nature. The depiction of a symbiotic relationship between the divine, ascetics, humans, and nature provides a model for contemporary society. In an ecologically fragile world, the Śivamahāpurāṇa's message of harmonious coexistence is crucial. It reminds us that humanity's well-being is linked to the health of ecosystems, urging sustainable practices and deep reverence for the natural world.

4. Karmic principles and environmental responsibility

Hindu theological concepts extend beyond abstract ideas and carry significant implications for environmental consciousness. These philosophical perspectives offer a rich ethical framework that can inspire initiatives focused on environmental preservation and conservation. The Śivamahāpurāṇa provides such an ethical framework by intricately merging spiritual principles

with environmental responsibility, particularly through the concept of *Karma*, which is guided by eco-conscious ethical dharma. This profound synthesis is evident in its explicit call for compassionate and mindful engagement with all forms of life: “A person should be noble in approach, well-behaved and should have the best of intentions; he should behave with wisdom, and be compassionate to all” (1.12.35). Here, compassion extends beyond human concerns, embracing the entirety of the natural world. The text is replete with prescriptions for ethical actions that cultivate a benevolent relationship with nature, such as “planting shady trees (and) building wells (and) step-wells” (1.14.45). Significantly, these actions are advocated not solely for personal comfort but also for accruing spiritual merit. In another instance, the text urges devotees of Śiva to “plant the flower, set up a garden” (1.11.42-43) as an act of spiritual devotion. This practice transcends aesthetic appreciation, fostering a sense of responsibility and care for the natural world. Thus, it encourages individuals to actively participate in the well-being of the environment by blending spiritual devotion with ecological stewardship.

This commitment to environmental stewardship is further exemplified by the emphasis on safeguarding “the step-wells, wells, tanks, and other water reservoirs” found near sacred sites (1.11.58). The text underscores the spiritual significance attributed to these water sources and highlights the importance of their preservation and conservation. This compels devotees to act with care and respect for the natural world as an expression of their devotion to the divine. Another passage highlights the sacredness of nature by equating the act of watering a tree with a sacred ritual. The Mahapurana declares that a devotee who “pours water over Śiva lodged in the roots of a wood-apple tree” (1.22.24) achieves spiritual purification equivalent to bathing in all sacred places. This elevates the seemingly mundane act of watering a tree to a divine ritual, underscoring the inherent sanctity of nature and the interconnectedness between spiritual practices and environmental care.

Hindu scriptures consistently emphasize the ethical obligation to protect and respect animals, warning against the karmic consequences of causing them harm. According to the Śivamahāpurāṇa, an individual is considered morally reprehensible if they unjustly take the life of a living being without just cause (2.1.21). The sacred text further asserts that “in case one enters into the killing which is prohibited in the scriptures, it is against dharma. By behaving in an irreligious manner one has to face the pain, but if one moves according to dharma, the pleasures are increased” (2.13.57). The text goes to great lengths to emphasize that killing an animal is among the gravest sins. It asserts that even listening to the sacred story of Śiva, which purifies all, cannot cleanse the sin of an animal slayer. In fact, it suggests that those who have committed this sin may even be averse to hearing the narrative of Śiva (2(1).1.22-24). This strong condemnation of animal killing reinforces the concept of Karma as it underscores the profound moral and spiritual consequences of one’s actions. These ethical teachings reflect Hinduism’s deep commitment to compassion, nonviolence, and reverence for all life forms, illustrating a comprehensive approach to environmental ethics and animal welfare. Consequently, the concept of Karma determines that “whatever evil or noble deeds performed by a person, he reaps

the similar type of reward” (1.13.56-58). By explicitly linking individual actions to environmental well-being through the concept of Karma, the text underscores the importance of personal responsibility. Understanding that every choice carries karmic consequences provides a powerful incentive to adopt sustainable practices and contribute to a healthier planet. This connection highlights the immediate and long-term effects of our actions, encouraging individuals to act with awareness and care for the well-being of the environment.

In Chapter 6 of Kumāra-khaṇḍa within Rudra-saṃhitā, a profound ethical lesson is illustrated when a Brahmin, whose sacrificial goat had escaped, approached Kārttikeya seeking refuge and help. Responding to the plea, Kārttikeya dispatched Vīrabāhu to retrieve the goat. Once found, however, Kārttikeya advised the Brahmin to spare the goat’s life, stating that it was undeserving of death. He blessed the Brahmin, affirming his sacrifice was completed without the animal’s death. This act of mercy deeply moved Viṣṇu and the other gods, who marveled at Kārttikeya’s wisdom and compassion. Convinced of his worthiness, the gods accepted Kārttikeya as their leader in the imminent war against Tāraka. This seemingly simple act of sparing a goat serves as a testament to Kārttikeya’s inherent compassion and the ethical convictions that define his leadership. His decision not only spared an innocent life but also established that true reverence to the divine is achieved through compassion and kindness, rather than animal sacrifice. Kārttikeya’s actions here foreshadow his role as a protector of all beings, aligning him ethically and morally as a counterforce to Tāraka, who personifies exploitation and suffering inflicted upon nature. The Śiva Mahāpurāṇa advocates for compassion towards animals, emphasizing ethical behaviour over ritualistic sacrifices. By portraying Kārttikeya as a compassionate leader, the text suggests that true strength lies in empathy and the protection of life.

The mountain Krauñca, tormented by the demon Bāṇa, seeks refuge with Kārttikeya, appealing to his role as protector: “O Kumāra, O Skanda, O lord of gods, O slayer of the Asura Tāraka, protect me who has sought refuge in you. I am harassed by the Asura Bāṇa” (2(4).11.4-5). Here, Krauñca, an anthropomorphized form of a mountain, symbolizes the natural environment disrupted by the violent forces of Bāṇa and his army. Bāṇa’s harassment of Krauñca can be seen as a metaphor for ecological exploitation, where the demon’s actions threaten the ecosystem represented by the mountain. In response, Kārttikeya, embodying both mercy and protection, takes up his spear and reduces Bāṇa and his army to ashes, reassuring Krauñca, “Go home fearlessly. That Asura has been slain along with his army” (2(4).11.11). Through this act, Kārttikeya restores ecological balance by eliminating the forces that harm the natural order. Shortly afterwards, Kumuda, the great son of Śeṣa, lord of serpents, arrives, similarly distressed by the Asura Pralamba. Kumuda’s plea, “I am afflicted by Pralamba and am seeking refuge in you. You are the kinsman of the distressed, the ocean of mercy, favourably disposed to the devotees, the slayer of the wicked, worthy of refuge and the goal of the good” (2(4).11.22-24), demonstrates Kārttikeya’s reputation as the compassionate protector of all beings. Responding to Kumuda’s call, Kārttikeya slays Pralamba, symbolizing his role as a force against ecological disruption. These episodes depict Kārttikeya as a divine figure whose compassion extends to all aspects of

creation, with his actions serving to restore and preserve natural harmony. The ethical teachings embedded here emphasize that divine duty involves safeguarding and protecting the environment from harmful forces. Kārttikeya's intervention exemplifies eco-centric ethics, portraying the moral responsibility to defend against ecological harm.

Kārttikeya's actions within these narratives align with Arne Næss's concept of the "ecological self". His compassionate treatment of nature transcends hierarchical distinctions among beings. Næss's 'Self-realization' theory dismisses the traditional hierarchical framework that places humans above animals, plants, and other life forms, instead urging a perspective where all beings hold intrinsic value. In Kārttikeya's interactions with nonhuman entities such as mountains, celestial beings, and even animals, we witness this non-anthropocentric alignment where he responds to their suffering as if it were his own, demonstrating the "identification" that Næss describes as central to the ecological self. According to Næss, "identification is a spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests" (Næss, 1988, p. 261). This identification is vividly reflected in Kārttikeya's defence of Krauñca, the mountain, and Kumuda, the serpent, both of whom seek his refuge when tormented by demonic forces. By seeing their well-being as his own responsibility, Kārttikeya reflects Næss's "biocentric ecological self", where the boundaries between humans and nonhumans dissolve to reveal a profound oneness with all life (2008). This shift from a narrow self to a capitalized, inclusive Self aligns with Kārttikeya's purpose of preserving life in its diverse forms. In a further expression of Næss's principle that one's self is "no longer adequately delimited by the personal ego or the organism", Kārttikeya embodies an interconnected perspective that mirrors Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship rather than an "I-It" perspective (Næss, 1990, p. 174). His commitment to protecting these nonhuman entities highlights that they are not merely "resources" or entities in service to human goals but are seen as "goals in themselves" with inherent value. Thus, Kārttikeya's actions illuminate an ecosophical approach where self-realization extends beyond human realms to encompass all forms of life, establishing a reciprocal connection that respects nature as an equal partner in the cosmic order.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Śivamahāpurāṇa transcends the limitations of a purely theological treatise, offering instead a profound ecological and theological framework that compels us to re-examine our relationship with the natural world through an ecoaesthetical lens. This approach underscores that the text not only appreciates nature aesthetically but also cultivates a deep spiritual connection, advocating for harmony, respect, and reverence rather than domination. The ecoaesthetical perspective embedded within the text holds immense relevance for contemporary environmental discourse. In an era grappling with the consequences of ecological degradation, the text's emphasis on reverence, responsibility, and harmonious coexistence emerges as a timely and valuable message, offering guidance for navigating the complexities

of the current environmental crisis. Furthermore, the theological concepts woven throughout the narrative provide a comprehensive ethical foundation for promoting environmental awareness. As exemplified in the text, the holistic perspective inherent in Hindu environmental ethics demonstrates the power of religious and philosophical convictions to drive significant positive change and strengthen our bond with the natural world. By incorporating the insights of Hindu philosophy, which recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the intrinsic value of nature, we can envision a future where humans and nature thrive together sustainably. This synthesis of ancient wisdom, embodied in texts like the Śivamahāpurāṇa, and contemporary environmental challenges highlights the enduring relevance of Hindu teachings in addressing the global ecological crisis. Integrating Hindu philosophical and religious principles into current environmental efforts has the potential to foster greater cooperation among different faiths and deepen our collective understanding of environmental challenges. Therefore, the Śivamahāpurāṇa, while undoubtedly engaging in theological discourse, also undeniably serves as a profound ecoaesthetical text and a call to ecological awareness. It offers a rich and multifaceted perspective on the intricate and inseparable relationship between theology and ecology within Hinduism. It reminds us that reverence for the divine and responsibility for the natural world are two sides of the same coin.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the research grant received from the JPN Centre of Excellence in the Humanities, IIT Indore (IITI/JPNC/PRJ/2023/07/P002) to carry out this study.

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