

Rediscovering the Roots of Eco-Consciousness

The wise man first comprehends the light of God in his heart.

Then with three, the mind, the speech, the deeds, purifies the soul.

By his own nature he further makes himself most excellent

And contemplates on earth and heaven.

(*RigVeda*, I II; 26-8)

The concept of "sacred forest" is indeed very ancient. And sacred trees or forests are especially significant in the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cultures. According to Hindu religious belief all trees and plants are created from Brahma's hair. Further, Hindu mythology holds that Vishnu was born under the shade of a banyan tree. And so was the Buddha. Ananda Coomaraswami has identified the *Kalpavriksha*—the tree that fulfills all wishes—as the banyan tree, whose roots could be traced to as far back as the ancient Vedic culture! The early Aryans portrayed Indra as standing with his queen under a tree from whose branches people gathered jewels, clothes, food and drink. Indian thought is thus replete with the imagery of the tree, for the tree often symbolized life that always regenerates itself and is immortal. As early as eight centuries before Christ, Jainism upheld the philosophy of *ahimsa* and propounded a worldview built on respect for and religious veneration of the natural world. The Hindu eschatological view foretells of the whole world flooded during the great *pralaya* and Sri Krishna as the eternal child floating on a banyan leaf, biting his toes. Thus at every point in the great chain of being and becoming, the Indian psyche has grounded itself on intimate links with all nature.

Ecology is a recent science but the poetic roots of a collective eco-consciousness go as far deep as the earliest Rig Vedic hymns. The Vedic *Rishis* sought all knowledge, or "knowledge" itself, because knowledge of the universe becomes knowledge of

God! These intimate relations—between nature, knowledge, God, and all being—form the essence of Vedic hymns. "The world of the Vedic man," argues M. Vannucci in her *Human Ecology in the Vedas*, "is essentially a biological and ecological world..." (p. 42). Beginning from where she left off in her earlier path-breaking book, *Ecological Readings in the Veda* (Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994) M. Vannucci herein makes a fresh attempt to recuperate a lost unified bio-centric worldview. In her own words: "while contemporary scientific research established the foundations of ecological theory on which rational use and management of nature must be based, the ancient Indian sages, the *rsi*, had already established the foundations of an ecologically sound way of life some three to four thousand years ago, or earlier." (p. 167) According to her, the ancient traditional Indian way of life "was objectively correct, rationally sound, and ecologically valid." (*ibid*). It is perhaps the excess pressure exerted on the earth by one single species, *Homo sapiens*, that has led to an erosion of this bio-centric view of life.

It is now a well-recognised fact that we are living in an age characterized by ambiguity: while on the one hand technology has to a great extent transformed the way the world runs, its negative impact(s) have been grave indeed; how could we survive in a world that is drastically moving toward its own self annihilation? Natural and cultural balance is constantly challenged. Already in the over-developed West, deep ecologists are calling for a substantial reorientation in civilization and a "transvaluation" of all values. The crisis facing the whole of humankind is one of global dimension and relevance. It is at this juncture that M. Vannucci's *Human Ecology in the Vedas* becomes exceptionally significant and noteworthy. It traces the arc of a lost biological link. Her argument is not of

course for a simplistic reorientation of time and history, for a mere retrospection, but one that reiterates a need for a logical and timely awareness of certain lost values. We read at the beginning of the book:

Looking at the world we now live in, in spite of all the knowledge, the science, the previously unimaginable technological knowhow, the world looks very much like a madhouse and is much less wise than the world of the ancients (p. 4)

She enjoins us to pray with the ancients: "*May Varuna distinguish wisdom and folly of man,*" (*RV*, VII; 49, 3 AV, I; 33, 2).

With the remarkable insight of a biologist—she is a globally distinguished biological oceanographer—M. Vannucci observes that there is a fundamental difference between what she sees as the science of the ancient *rsis* and the science of the west:

Knowledge in the West was basically used to acquire power; technicalities had priority over pure knowledge. . . . In the East, as revealed clearly in the Vedas, knowledge was gained basically for the purpose of acquiring wisdom (p. 3).

In her reading she sees Vedic man's views directed holistically towards the whole universe. And in his search for wisdom the Vedic seer confronted the cosmic order and primordial rhythm that characterized the entire being and becoming: the *rta*. All life and living were directed by a strong faith in this order and unity. The Vedic view of life was one founded on this *rta*.

The book is divided into two parts—with seven and four chapters respectively—followed by two appendices, a glossary of Sanskrit terms and selected bibliography. Well indexed and neatly produced too. **Part I** endeavors to provide a general frame of mind, and the evolution of thought of the Vedic people, migrating and roving over a

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Human Ecology in the Vedas

M. Vannucci

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variety of landscapes and geographical locales, the formation of their environment-friendly outlook and biologically viable behavioral patterns. **Part II** substantiates this reading through an analysis of certain select hymns.

The Vedas have been read and re-read from a variety of points of view. The most reductive of interpretations looks upon the Vedic hymns as the primitive renderings of a pastoral mind coming to terms with a physical reality through disordered articulations of fear, anguish and prayer. However, as Sri Aurobindo has reminded us in his *The Secret of the Veda* and *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* (translations of some selected Rig Vedic Hymns), the Vedic mantra comprises two levels of meaning: the exoteric—the *Vaikhari* or denotative surface levels, and the esoteric—connotative levels that operate on the deeper dimensions of meaning of the *psyantī vak* (the seeing speech), revealing significance only for the initiated. Although she does not drift into the hieratic dimensions of the mystic, M. Vannucci, in a quite logical manner, reads ecological significance in the *Rig Veda*, “and since the Vedic and Hindu traditions are remarkable in their ecological visions, in them is to be found the original *forma mentis* of Diogenes’ ‘naked biped’” (p. 30).

She argues that the Vedic *rsis* were scientists, in the sense that a “scientific attitude and logical frame of mind” could be discerned as “the golden thread that runs through the Vedas” (p. 32). These ancient seers kept their mind open to newer knowledge as their understanding progressed. According to her, the first intellectual recognition that dawned on the Vedic seer that gave rise to the primordial idea of God was of *Agni*—fire, light, heat, energy. From this followed the recognition of the universal rhythm, the *rta*, that informs and unifies the cosmos. Then came *vak*, word or speech.

In the original order, I would guess that the succession was thus: first was formed the universal concept of Energy and Power, then the concept of Order and Law in Time and Space as well as of Cause and Effect and then, lastly the concept of precise and correct

communication: *Agni, rta, vak*: ‘Brhaspati gave name to objects, sent *vak* out first’ (RV, X; 71, 1); it should be noted that Brhaspati was a man; words are sounds with a meaning and *vak* is sent out to assist with the power of words (p. 20).

Such “knowledge” would necessarily entail a strong desire on the part of the thinking individual to partake and participate in the divine *rta*, rather than remain estranged and isolated as a mere spectator. Thus, were born the rituals and sacrifices. “Most of the Vedic sacrifices, in addition to being propitiatory rites, are also and foremost participatory rituals.” (p. 24).

Religion, as she sees it, is the “simplification of philosophy and science for the use of the common man” (p. 25). Further, religion “presupposes the acceptance of dogmas as undisputed truths by which individuals should abide without hesitation or discussion, but with faith.” What is demanded of the believer is “unwavering faith” and “hence the need of scholarly, inspired, learned class of people to assist man in his quest for God” (*ibid*). It was the study of the Veda, she claims, that helped her towards an understanding of the evolution of the intellect, science and knowledge of man. “The Vedas,” she writes, “are a treasure-mine of information about the science of ancient man and, even more important, of the way man thought, understood or not, and transmitted his knowledge to others” (p. 37).

To say that M. Vannucci’s whole approach to this project is quite serious would be a serious understatement: she considers this as her life’s work. She notes that she embarked on this with an intention of studying the ecological aspects of the entire *sastra* at large, being more than convinced that therein she would certainly find the ancient roots of ecological wisdom, but, in the course of time, the project gradually narrowed in scope on to the Vedas. “I am at present concerned only with the Vedas. The wealth of information I see in these would be enough to fill a lifetime with assiduous study, while my own lifetime is quickly approaching its end” (p. 50). This goes to reveal the intense personal involvement she has in the subject. In

fact, she takes it up with a sort of missionary zeal, however, not to the extent of overdoing it! Her reading is largely impressionistic; she depends to a great extent on her own ingenuity and intuition in finding connections and establishing her arguments. Perhaps, it should be noted, that it is her genuine scholarship and love of “truth” that helps her to navigate the tricky terrain of metaphysics and religion. In arguing that the ancient Indian seers had founded a life based on ecological reasoning, she could easily have slipped into the most common of errors—that of the fundamentalist. This she avoids.

Vannucci points out that the Aryans were pastoral people of the highlands who migrated to the plains; their physical encounter with the rivers, grasslands, the sun and the monsoons gets reflected in the hymns to *Agni*, *Indra*, *Varuna* and the *Sun*.

The *rsis* of the Veda were historical men and at least one woman, *Lopa-mudra*, even if modern critical historical analysis considers “proofs” to be insufficient. The seers/poets/scientists who formulated the hymns lived with nature that they studied and used. A strong feeling of man’s participation in the universal order pervades the Veda; man is inseparable from his cosmic environment, he is not distinct from it but imbued in it (p. 62).

Knowledge in the Vedic sense has much in common with what we call science, and hence “Truth” in the Vedic sense is science as it was practised at the time when the basic instruments of study were the senseorgans, and all “intellectual thinking was considered to be spiritual” (p. 63). Everything was sacred by virtue of its own nature because *energy* pervaded everything. In her readings of the hymns, M. Vannucci, as I have noted, takes special care not to be too reductive; her work sets out but to probe valid signs of biological unity and intimations of the biocentric awareness. The Vedic *rsi*, in her view, was fully conscious of his duty to transfer his knowledge to others. Through her interpretative reading of the hymns to *Agni*, *Varuna* and *Savitri*, she establishes that these original Gods are born out of abstract ideas that evolve into

concepts that later become anthropomorphic and are finally encompassed in the religious canon by rites and rituals (p. 150). *Dharma* is the realization of the rhythmic unity of all beings; it calls for an ethical relationship with all and everything. The order of the cosmos obliged a *dharmic* behaviour on the part of all living and non-living things. And it was ecological.

In the second part she attempts a biological reading of certain hymns. *Manduka, the Frogs* (RV, VII;103), where-in parallels between brahmins and frogs are drawn, is not looked down with ridicule, but, on the other hand, as she points out, these hymns reveal the sensitivity of the *rsi* to the changing environment, to the movements of the sun and clouds and life on earth. Vannucci draws our attention to similar evocation of frogs in other cultures, especially the references in *Zend Avesta*.

She marks out the short hymn of only six slokas on *Aranyani*, as being extra-

ordinarily significant. "*Aranyani* is sacred as part of *rta*. . . She is sacred as a mother, who gives all she has and in turn requests only respect and love . . ." (p. 262). This hymn serves to reaffirm the Vedic ethos. Man must abide by the natural laws or face dire consequences. Love and respect for all nature is at the root of Vedic metaphysics that is conceived in an environmental ethic.

M. Vannucci's readings are not entirely without drawbacks: she follows her own chosen path and her overall intention is to prove what she states hypothetically at the beginning, and to that end she totally disregards or deliberately neglects all other possible angles of perception. In the end, however, one does not disagree with her! Her *interpretative* reading, which is largely impressionistic, as has been pointed out, is built on scaffolding that is theoretically unsophisticated, and at no point does she seek to bring her arguments into continuity with, or at

least in close proximity to, the present day intellectual debates on deep ecology and bioregional narrative. Of course, her genuine scientific involvement and erudite scholarship that are evidenced in every page of the book would remain unchallenged. After all, that is the merit of such a book. Its range and disposition are beyond compare, and the scholarly reader as well as the avid student of environment and philosophy, would find this work intellectually satisfying and sufficiently stimulating. Above all, we need to keep in mind that in "theoretically" contaminated times like the present where theory and counter theory perpetrate unending race for meaningless dominion, what we have remorselessly misplaced are essential values—of life, nature, God. M. Vannucci's endeavour reestablishes such lost grounds of being.

Dr. S. Murali

Department of English
University College, Trivandrum

Rilke, Kafka, Manto: The Semiotics of Love, Life and Death



by Rosy Singh
Harman Series in Semiotics -I,
Harman Publishing House, New Delhi,
2001, pp. 280+xxx, Rs 560;

These three essays on the Semiotics of love, life and death in Rilke, Kafka and Manto by Dr Rosy Singh present the discourse analyses of very diverse discursive formations. Beginning with the mundane socio-cultural contexts fixed in specific space and time of historical dialectics, these eminent writers of east and west have transcended the empirical realities, without however ignoring their basic contradictions, to arrive at the universal human truths.

The first intense meditations on the themes of love, life and death are presented in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. In a most remarkable and unusual structural form that anticipates the *nouveau roman* by several decades, Rilke weaves a cobweb of love, life and death with the sociological and cultural threads leading to

the mental constructs of the most impersonal, mechanical encounters in the clinics and hospitals of modern industrial society. The reader is presented with a spectacle of ordinary, physical end of life, followed by the most extraordinary existential encounters which can be envisaged only at a metaphysical plane. One can comprehend this unusual crisscrossing of the human and the surhuman in the normal socio-cultural-historical context, or, as existential, conceptual constructs in the domain of the *imaginaire*, as Dr Singh has so brilliantly attempted.

These literary discursive formations of Rilke always deal with the simultaneous fusion of the unconscious and the conscious. More often than not such a formal literary discourse leads the readers astray but if one follows the Cartesian dictum that a discourse,

literary or otherwise, must be understood by following syntactically and systematically the interlinking sequences of reason, placing the various elements or parts of a discursive structure within a conceptual whole, the literary critic arrives at a different perception of existential human predicaments. In modern times, Louis Althusser emphasizes the totality and the unity of the discourse when he criticizes the naive Marxists who compare disparate passages from the writings of Marx to prove their predetermined theses. According to Althusser, they destroy the unity of the texts and the discourse which emerges from that unity and make haphazard comparisons. In other words, a text must be studied in its structural constitution of syntactic and paradigmatic formation before its discourse is placed in the