

Divine Rivers: Uncovering Eco-Theology in Amritlal Vegad's *Narmada: River Of Beauty*

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Why are we drawn into nature and feel uplifted and spiritually renewed after spending time in some wild places far removed from the ordinary business of humans? There are many answers to the question, ranging from the healthful benefits associated with the exhilarating effects of fresh air and sitting by an evening campfire and gazing at the stars. Natural landscapes exhibit breathtaking beauty and grandeur; whether the vastness of a pristine wilderness, the majesty of towering mountains, the serenity of a calm lake, or the intricacy of a dense forest, the sheer visual splendour of such landscapes evokes a sense of awe. There is another reason, however, and it is far more profound. Frithjof Schuon speaks of “seeing God everywhere”. The “remembrance of God in all things” and the “metaphysical transparency of phenomena” are the pertinent expressions Schuon uses to underline the immanence of God in the world. It implies that one can perceive or experience the divine presence in all aspects of existence. It implies a way of looking at the world that recognizes the underlying spiritual or divine essence in everything. It is not limited to religious settings or sacred spaces; instead, it is about a heightened awareness of the spiritual dimension in everything. In this context, theological inquiry is the central focus as it is the exploration of the existence and nature of a divine being.

The term ‘theology’ derives from the Greek words “theos” and “logia”, which mean the study of God. It is a discipline that delves into the contemplation and understanding of the divine. The term would pass on to Latin as “theologia”, then in French as “théologie”, and eventually in English as “theology.” It covers various subjects, like rituals, divine beings and the history of religions. It is a methodical study or, in other words, a

rational attempt to distinguish and interpret spiritual beliefs and practices by systematically reviewing and analysing divine attributes and their relationship to humanity.

Theology often begins with accepting certain revelations and acknowledging the divine knowledge, truths, or insights between a divine source and humanity. It is seen as a form of divine disclosure or unveiling of the truths; therefore, the revelations take various forms, such as personal experiences (mystical experiences), inspired writings (Holy Scriptures), prophetic visions, dreams, or even natural phenomena deemed as conveying a message from the divine. They are considered a way for humans to gain insight into the divine and to understand their position in the universe. For instance, in Hinduism, the Vedas and Upanishads are the foundational texts for theological inquiry or considered a revelation of the Almighty. Similarly, in Christianity, the Bible is considered a revelation of Jesus; in Islam, the Quran is seen as the ultimate revelation of Allah.

It is not only through sacred books like the Vedas, Upanishads, the Bible, and the Quran that God reveals himself to humanity. Natural landscapes such as stunning views of the deep Blue Oceans, lush green forests, serene waterfalls, crystal-clear water, and exquisite sunrises and sunsets create a peaceful and ethereal atmosphere that inspires amazement, reverence, and spiritual insights. That is to say, the Almighty manifest Himself to humankind through the shining facets of the grandeur of the natural world; therefore, individuals discover that when they immerse in nature, they feel a profound affinity to something greater than themselves. Likewise, a significant aspect of theology in the environment is called “Eco-theology.”

In light of environmental concerns, Eco-theology is an intellectual foundation that examines the interrelationships between religion, nature and spirituality. It is also known as ecological theology or theology of nature, a relatively modern branch of theology. Eco-theology emerged in reaction to the widespread acknowledgement that the environmental crisis threatens the future of human and non-human life on Earth. As environmental issues have gained prominence in contemporary scenarios,

many theologians recognise the need to engage with ecological questions, developing Eco-theology as a distinct field of study within theology.

The notion of Eco-theology presumes a relationship between human religious/spiritual worldviews and the degradation and restoration of nature. It often draws on insights from various disciplines, including philosophy, ecology and environmental science. It also addresses ethical and moral considerations concerning human interactions with the environment and explores questions about environmental stewardship, exploitation of natural resources, and mistreatment connected to the environment. Ethical guidelines derived from religious texts guide individuals and communities in making decisions prioritising the health and sustainability of ecosystems. Eco-theologians from various backgrounds engage in environmental ethics and stewardship conversations. They represent a specialised and contemporary application of theological principles to the pressing ecological issues of contemporary times, acknowledging the interconnectedness of spirituality, ethics, and the environment.

One of the early Eco-theologians, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, is known for contributing to the spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis. Nasr's lectures at the University of Chicago are summed up in his book *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. The author lays out the signs of humanity's current state, such as the blatant aggression against nature, the burning of tropical forests, the consequences of humankind's abuse of nature and destructive technology leading to climate change and ozone depletion. Concerning these scenarios, the author writes:

There is no way for men to defend their humanity and not be dragged through their inventions and machinations to the infra-human except by remaining faithful to the image of man as a reflection of something that transcends the merely human. Peace in human society and the preservation of human values are impossible without peace with the natural and spiritual orders and respect for the immutable supra-human realities, which are the source of all that is called 'human values.' (14)

The above paragraph expresses that achieving tranquillity requires social harmony, reverence, profound association and spiritual elements, which are the ultimate factors in preserving the ecology and its values. Humanity's dependence on nature in pursuing a harmonious and meaningful existence is essential for survival. It is evident that humans have conquered and dominated nature, resulting in a disturbed balance between humanity and nature. For instance, science does not inherently destroy nature; rather, it is the application of certain scientific knowledge and technologies, often driven by human actions and decisions, which have detrimental effects on the natural world. Therefore, reviving the metaphysical knowledge of nature and restoring its sacred quality is the only way to resolve ecological issues.

Amritlal Vegad, a Sahitya Academy award-winning Gujarati writer and artist, begins circumambulating the holy *Narmada* from *Amarkantak* to *Bharuch*, which flows through, particularly in the Indian state of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and neighbouring areas. Throughout his life, he performed the *parikrama* twice, from 1977 until 2009. The experiences based on the journey are summed up in various books such as *Saundarya ki Nadi Narmada*, *Teere Teere Narmada*, *Narmada Tum Kitni Sundar Ho*, and *Amritasya Narmada*.

The present study primarily concerns the travelogue *Narmada: River of Beauty*, which has aesthetical and theological attributes. Aesthetics in river narratives plays a significant role, enhancing the overall storytelling experiences and deepening the emotional connection. The author uncovers the spiritual elements concerning the *Narmada* River. He writes – “From the depth of my heart I exclaimed, Mother *Narmada*, I have lit a *diya* in your honour and in exchange, light a *diya* in my heart. There is immense darkness within and no way to dispel it. Only you can make it go away, this is all I beg of you, Mother.” (33-34) In many religious and philosophical traditions, including Indian scriptures, the concept of God or the divine often alludes to rivers metaphorically and symbolically. God is frequently associated with purity and cleansing of consciousness and the soul. Just as the divine being purifies the spirit and mind, a river purifies the body and soul through its waters, washing

away sins and negative attributes. Similar to how God represents composure and serenity, rivers symbolize the same. In other words, the quest for spiritual connection with the Almighty is a journey toward contentment. Therefore, the author invokes *Narmada* and appeals to her to purify him in the above lines.

Throughout the travelogue, the author refers to her as ‘*Maiya*’, the lap they grew up on, because the river affects his mindset. For individuals who spend time near a river, whether through contemplative walks along the banks or moments of stillness by the water, the river becomes a silent companion that prompts deep introspection and shapes how they perceive and navigate the world. The relationship with a river influences not only one’s thinking but also the sense of self and association with the natural world. Many frequenting the banks of the river have been instilled with an abiding faith in her generosity and holiness since time immemorial; therefore, there is a custom of exchanging greetings of ‘*Narmade Har*’ when the people meet. *Nar* means ‘humankind’, *mada* means ‘ego’ or ‘arrogance’, and *har* means remove, meaning *Narmada* defeats all human beings’ egos.

At times, pilgrims and people living in the *Narmada* valley sing the *bhajan* in praise of the river: “*Ma Rewa tharo pani nirmal, Khal khal behto jaye re, Amarkanth se nikli, O, rewa jann jann kari rayo thaari sewa, Sewa se sab pawe mewa, Aso ved puran batayo re.*” (Rewa is another name for the river.) The song is in the Gujarati language and holds a deep cultural significance. The English translation is- Mother *Narmada*; you originate from the *Amarkantak* hills with a constant and crystal-clear flow. Additionally, there is a reference to the Vedas and Puranas, suggesting that it serves people by providing essential resources, supporting economic activities, enriching ecosystems, and contributing to communities’ overall well-being and cultural identity, which denotes that people become prosperous through the river’s mercy.

Rivers inspire artistic expressions and folklore in folk cultures. Traditional songs, stories, and artwork often draw inspiration from the river environment. This artistic representation serves as a form of cultural expression and helps pass down knowledge related to the river. It is a

poetic and reverential way of expressing admiration and respect for the magnificence and piety of the river. It encapsulates the river's spiritual, cultural, and environmental significance, reflecting the belief that the river is not just a geographical feature but a sacred, living, breathing and divine entity deserving respect and protection.

For most of history, prior to the emergence of agriculture, societies worshipped nature as non-human deities. Prominent civilizations, like the *Egyptian*, *Indus*, and *Huanghe* valley, were formed around rivers. As the essence of life and the most powerful element, water has a central role. Therefore, rivers are often personified as significant deities. They are the backbone of human civilization and a wonder to behold since they provide a vital ecosystem for thousands of species. This is why every culture, civilization, folk, and literature has a strong connection with rivers. They are a defining feature of sacred landscapes vital to Indian religion and culture. As well as providing sustenance to humans and the land, they nurture and nourish it.

Furthermore, their cultural and religious importance shapes how they are perceived and revered in Indian society. Indeed, temples and pilgrimage sites are frequently located along riverbanks, emphasising their spiritual significance. Right from *Vedas* and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Indian literature has ample references to rivers. It is hard to find classics devoid of river references in Indian English Literature. The coexistence and bonding between humans and rivers have been expressed in an emotional, realistic and artistic manner during all the stages of literature. Rivers shape our world, society and lives. Cities and towns often spring up on riverbanks and are brought to life by the river's flow.

As per the ancient Indian text called *Upanishad*, the divine being infuses the entire universe; everything is permeated by the divine, from a blade of grass to Mount Everest. Every particular to the totality of the universe is the home of the Holy Spirit. It denotes that the god is not outside the world, but the world is an embodiment of the divine. Everything is connected to everything else, and the existence of one depends on the

existence of the other. Thus, the earth, heaven and the entire cosmos are a seamless whole.

Next, the Vedic text, *Bhagavad Gita*, is revered worldwide as the greatest accomplishment of spirituality and the most cherished Holy Scriptures of Hinduism. It is a part of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, written as a dialogue between Lord *Krishna* and *Arjuna*, who serves as his charioteer and divine guide. The verses of *Gita* offer a comprehensive manual for the study of self-realization. Through the text, Lord Krishna elucidates his omnipresence and how he manifests in various aspects of the natural world. *Pavanah Pavatâm Asmi Râmah Shastra Bhritâm Aham Jhashânâm Makarâûh Châsmi Srotasâm Asmi Jâhnavî* (BG 10.31) in the tenth chapter of *Gita* entitled “The Opulence of the Absolute” Lord *Krishna* proclaims that “Amongst purifiers, I am the wind, and amongst wielders of weapons, I am Lord *Ram*. Of water creatures, I am the crocodile, and of flowing rivers, I am the *Ganga*.” The *shalok* indicates the unique spiritual significance of the River *Ganga* (Ganges) among all the rivers emphasized by the Supreme Personality. When Lord *Krishna* states he is the *Ganga*, he highlights the sacred nature of the river and its role in spiritual purification, reinforcing the notion that the divine is present in all facets of the creative aspects of the natural world. He manifests the shining facets of his reality through the magnificence of the natural world. We learn about the artist through his art and discover the creator’s presence in his creation; whether the Absolute is referred to as God, Brahman, Allah, Wakan Tanka or some other name, human civilisation see traces of him in the many wonders of nature.

With its inherent beauty and tranquillity, the natural world provides a serene backdrop for contemplative practices. People seek natural meditation, prayer, and reflection that serve as means to connect with their inner selves, find solace, seek guidance, and foster a deeper understanding of life and existence. Moreover, the environment provides a sense of transcendence, connection with the cosmos, and a reminder of the divine’s omnipotence and majesty. The interaction between humans and the natural landscapes leads to a rich tapestry of cultural

and spiritual narratives that celebrate the majesty of the divine in the natural world.

Conclusion

The ecological crisis, with its truly global dimensions, is one of the burning issues of our time. As human-dominated economies follow unlimited growth ideology for decades, thousands of species are irretrievably lost. As time passes, humanity is moving further and further away from a fair distribution of air, water, and fertile land. We are allowing ourselves to consume more than we are entitled to. Considering all this, humanity must react and redirect the future regarding eco-theological inquiry. There is also a need to deal intellectually with the causes and backgrounds of the ecological crisis to reflect on religious, spiritual and cultural understandings of current developments. To be at peace with the earth, one must be at peace with Heaven; achieving harmony with the earth is about ecological balance and aligning oneself with higher spiritual principles. Eco-theology weaves a narrative that elevates rivers beyond physical entities, positioning them as sacred and vital components of the divine creation. Through a lens of interconnectedness and ethical responsibility, it guides individuals and communities toward a harmonious and sustainable coexistence with rivers, recognizing them as sources of life, inspiration, and spiritual significance and provides a framework for integrating religious and spiritual perspectives into environmental discussions, encouraging a holistic and ethical approach to the care and conservation of rivers and their ecosystems. Rivers, as integral components of ecosystems, are seen as interconnected with the broader web of life. The health of rivers is linked to the well-being of the entire ecosystem, and eco-theology encourages responsible stewardship to maintain this balance.

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