

TAKE

ON INDIA

RNI No. DELENG/2015/60525

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ecology

Ashish Kothari and Radhika Mula

aesth-ethics:
towards blending
ecology, justice, and art



Ashish Kothari

Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, served on Greenpeace International and India Boards, helped initiate the global ICCA Consortium, and chaired an IUCN network on protected areas and communities. He has (co)authored or (co)edited over 30 books (including *Birds in our Lives*, and *Churning the Earth*). He helps coordinate the Vikalp Sangam process in search of alternative well-being pathways, and an international project Academic-Activist Co-produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice. For four decades he has been a keen birder, and continues to marvel at nature's surprises.



Radhika Mulay has a Master's degree in Water Science, Policy and Management from the University of Oxford, UK. Currently, she is working as Research Associate for the ACKNOWL-EJ project and Vikalp Sangam – Confluences of Alternative, with Kalpavriksh- Environment Action Group, Pune.

Our anthropocentric lifestyles draw a boundary between nature and culture, and put humans at the centre of the universe. Modernity deludes us into thinking that we are not part of nature; capitalism and modern technology create the illusion that we can survive forever in our techno-bubbles. The consequent alienation from the very elements that give us life, and the temporary replacement of these elements by machine and market-mediated objects (bottled water) or techno-whiz products (artificial beaches), have till recently allowed us to perpetuate enormous harm to the planet without immediately realising the consequences. But as the planet bites back with increasingly frequent climate disasters, we are progressively realising we are responsible, like no other species has ever been, for catastrophic impacts on life itself. We are also more acutely aware of how these ecological injustices relate to the gross inequities and divides within humanity itself, in particular how the decisions of a tiny minority of politically and economically powerful people force us to continue on a collision course with the earth.

Ugly gashes across the landscape left by mining and industries are not only an aesthetic eyesore, but an ethical failure. They signify a loss of

sensitivity and empathy, of cognition. As a species priding itself in being sentient and intelligent, our custodianship of the planet has been pathetically wanting. Can we be different? Would some form of reconnect with the rest of nature, wherever we are, help? Would the belief that human beings are the centre of the universe dissolve as one starts to understand the deeper workings of nature?

Naturing — the act of being in and with nature — and more specifically birding, can help make this connection. Birding is not just about bird watching but connecting with birds and their natural surrounds through all our senses. Not only are we aware of visions, sounds, smell, taste and touch, but the more we sense the 'jizz', or the *birdness* of a bird, we also connect through intuitions or a sixth (nth?) sense. Thus, immersing oneself in nature offers an insight into the intricate workings of holistic ecological (including human) processes, which are otherwise reduced to mere technical concepts in our reductionist definitions. Being with birds stirs emotions within us, a sense of awe, beauty, romance; it is a supremely aesthetic experience. The gait, flight, song, display, and very being of a bird, contain the wonders of nature, of evolution. The surprises

or mysteries encountered at every step in nature are not just humbling, but affect us viscerally, offering possibilities to transcend the mundane. This connection of 'being' with a bird, or any form in nature, is akin to immersion in art, of realising that nature *is* art.

Appreciating beauty in nature, or nature as art, does not require us to go to a national park or tiger reserve. It can happen in the backyard, from our balconies, wherever we are. This is why birds are particularly well-suited, as they are all around us. And as we engage in such immersion in our everyday lives, the dualism between artists and non-artists, between artistic and non-artistic perception, could dissolve. Appreciating nature as art brings out the art in each of us, inspiring song, poetry, drawing, drama, dance, stories, myths, flights of fancy, and any of the myriad other art forms. This is profoundly transformative, for not only do we become aesthetes, we also begin to empathise with birds, with the rest of nature, and in this way express our ethical or spiritual selves. We do not know a single person who has appreciated nature in this manner, who is not also passionate about protecting it from the excesses of human hubris.

This transformation towards an 'aesth-ethics' of life, towards a merger

Previous page:
Ashish Kothari, *Flamingo Flock preparing to Land*, Bhigwan.



Ashish Kothari, *Swamphens*: 'Who says birdwatchers are not being human watched? Nature has agency, and the humbling effects of being watched by it are profound'.



Ashish Kothari, *Magpie*: 'A yellow bellied blue magpie jumping in a Himalayan grassland; or, here's a delicious mystery, is it actually levitating?'

of art and ethics, could also have significant consequences for our relationships 'within' the human species. Empathy towards life in general would naturally encompass empathy towards other people, and in this sense generate just and respectful relationships in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of our lives. This is one basis for an ongoing process we are involved with, called Vikalp Sangam¹, a confluence of practices and concepts of radical alternatives to the currently dominant structures leading us to inequity and unsustainability.

A confluence of peoples, much like a confluence between humans and the rest of nature, inspires us to look beyond our existing boundaries and limitations. The worldviews of indigenous peoples across the world, for instance, are a powerful mirror

showing up the dualistic, exploitative, and alienating nature of today's dominant structures. Their art forms transcend the nature-human divide, as one sees in the drawings of the Worli adivasis of Maharashtra in India (unfortunately often appropriated without credit by NGOs and government agencies for 'fancy' conference folder covers and what-not), or the flowing art of the aboriginal peoples of what is today called Australia. Without essentialising or 'romanticising' them, there is much that *Homo industrialis* can learn from such peoples, especially on how to live responsibly with the earth. There is also much that right-wing 'superficial-ists' of all religions can learn from them, especially on how to be profoundly ethical and spiritual without despising the 'other'.

Artistic creations inspired by nature (or indeed, by the anti-aesthetic of industrialism, ugly

gashes in the countryside included) also open up spaces for conversation about issues that are hidden or taboo, or for bold visions that break through the conventional. Thus, art could become a significant medium for not only protest, but to explore the potential of envisioning a different world, and a space for creation of new possibilities. Communities and people need utopias to guide them, even in their small steps (how else do we gauge if these steps are in the right direction?). And while laws and policies and schemes may be necessary to make such visions practically possible, these are often just contracts that deal with the formal relations of humans with each other and with nature. Art reaches the emotional or the non-rational side of humans, creating deeper and longer-lasting impressions and transformation. Combined with ethics, such transformation can lead to a world based

on social equity, direct democracy, ecological wisdom, cultural diversity ... towards a radical ecological democracy or eco-swaraj². We need to build, rebuild, and internalise such an 'aesth-ethics', and help in creating a different world where we all think like nature, whole and interconnected.

Ashish and Radhika are with Kalpavriksh, Pune. Thanks to Nishok G.U. for insightful comments.

1 See <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center>

2 <http://greattransition.org/document/radical-ecological-democracy-a-path-forward-for-india-and-beyond>

Image courtesy: Ashish Kothari.