

Introduction

The present volume brings together findings presented at the European Conference for South Asian Studies (ECSAS), held in 2021 in Vienna, within the framework of the panel convened by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz, Ewa Dębicka-Borek and Ilona Kędzia, and focused on mutual relations between culture and nature in South Asian literary production. The volume also includes invited publications exploring the same subject. Contrary to the prevailing approaches, which often consider nature and culture as separate domains, the concept that links all the papers presumes that these two domains are interrelated and that their interrelatedness manifests itself in different ways in texts. In this regard, the authors responded largely to the conveners' call, inspired by Hubert Zapf's (2016) theory of cultural ecology of literature, to treat the region their research is focused on as a space (1) of mutual relations between nature and culture, a space that (2) gives rise to literary texts and other products of culture seen as ecological phenomena, i.e. as grounded in the two axioms of ecological thought: interconnectedness and diversity.

The environment is one of the factors decisive for cultural choices and the development of particular cultural phenomena and traditions. With this in mind, we attempt to demonstrate that any region of South Asia may be viewed in terms of a specific cultural ecosystem mirrored in the network of its textual traditions, where the literature and other art forms are “developed in coevolution and

competition with other forms of cultural production” (Zapf 2016: 12). The papers collected in this volume show that such a methodological framework, even when applied to the vast and spectacular cultural production of South Asian literatures and arts by way of various individual approaches, proves helpful in analyzing and understanding the rich reservoir of ideas underwriting the cultural production. As we aim to show, productive and meaningful relations between nature and culture might be traced both in the written and the oral narratives of both Sanskrit and vernacular traditions. Further, they might be rendered by means of religious, scientific and poetic compositions, or even folktales. Similarly, the points of reference might differ: whereas some authors focus on literature as Zapf’s “ecological force,” that is literature understood as “a site of reconnection, reintegration, and, at least potentially, of regeneration on psychic, social and aesthetic levels” (ibid.), others reach for other innovative theories used in literary and cultural studies—such as material ecocriticism, which highlights the agency of non-living matter—to complement the picture of mutual relations between culture and nature.

Anjali C and Vishakha Kawathekar, in their contribution titled *Lessons of Sustainability: The Folk Reading of a Ritualistic Landscape*, address the issue of mutual relations and interdependencies between the agrarian landscape and the practice of *teyyam* in the region of Kolattunāṭu (Kerala). They inquire into the role of tribal culture which preserves a multitude of indigenous knowledge systems and allows to trace linkages of *teyyam* to the agricultural practices and ecological worldview of the tribes. The research of the authors entails analysis of *teyyam* liturgies and, as the authors put it, “the ways in which they communicate exemplars of ecological and social sustainability.” Being partially the result of the participant observation, interviews with participants, and examination of oral sources, the article brings original material viewed from the culture-nature relation perspective. As the authors demonstrate, one of the most decisive elements shaping the *teyyam* practice is the specific geographical and topographical character of the Kolattunāṭu.

Among other important factors impacting the practice is the phenomenon of the sacred grove, *kāvu*, which, unlike the temple, is an open space and as the author proposes, “ecosystem in itself.” Tracing relations between this specific cultural landscape and the ritual, the authors refer, on the one hand, to *tiṅai* (physiographic zone) concept, known from Tamil poetry and, on the other, to the folk elements. The *teyyam* practice has also a social and political dimension related to the agricultural, marginalized groups connected with royalty and local deities instead of the Brahmanical temple cult. Choosing as the example the deity of Muttāpan, the authors demonstrate the important role of nature and the ecological perspective present in every aspect of *teyyam* worship. They also note the danger in the changing attitude toward *teyyam*, especially in seeing it less as having ecological and social roots and more as being a part of “a religion-centric, upper-class Hindu system.”

Jonas Buchholz, in his article, *The Country and the City in the Kāñcippurāṇam*, looks at the first two chapters of the Tamil *Kāñcippurāṇam*, an 18th-century Tamil *sthalapurāṇa* of Kāñcipuram authored by Civañāṇa Muṇivar. Whilst at the narrative level the text follows an undated Sanskrit text, the Śaiva *Kāñcīmāhātmya*, its literary style is much more ornate and poetic. The two initial chapters do not correspond to the Sanskrit text but follow a distinctly Tamil literary mode; one concerns the sacred country around Kāñcipuram (*Tirunāṭṭuppaṭalam*), the other the sacred city (*Tirunakarappaṭalam*). In addition, the text makes use of Tamil literary conventions, such as the concept of the five “landscapes” (*tiṅai*), each of which is evoked in the portrayal of the region around Kāñcipuram. Similar sections are found in almost all texts of the genre, but also in the earlier Tamil texts, such as the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*, on which the description in the *Kāñcippurāṇam* seems to be modelled. Buchholz locates the *Tirunāṭṭuppaṭalam* and the *Tirunakarappaṭalam* of the *Kāñcippurāṇam* in the framework of the literary tradition of which they form a part but also looks at them from the perspective of cultural ecology. To this end, he investigates the descriptions of the Toṅṭai country, and characterizes them as multi-layered, for, where-

as they are extremely idealized and conventional, at places Civañāna Muñivar skillfully incorporates passages which to some extent reflect ground realities of the physical landscape.

Focusing on the region of South India, and especially Tamilnadu, Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz in the article, *Along the River, towards God: raṅga Shrines along Rivers*, examines the concept of the networks of religious centres styled *pañcaraṅga* and *triraṅga*. These are connected not only through their Vaishnava affiliation and the particular form of the god known as Raṅganātha, but also by way of their special distribution along the rivers: sometimes on their banks and sometimes on the river's islands. The founding myth of the main shrine in Śrīraṅgam, which the author investigates through the lens of the Sanskrit text of the *Śrīraṅga-māhātmya*, emphasizes the role of a specific environment marked by a river as a proper place to attract god and stimulate the establishment of a religious spot. This main shrine is, in a way, replicated along the Kāverī by means of the concept of a series of shrines called *raṅga*. However, whereas the *pañcaraṅga* hypothesis is not supported by the existence of one particular mythical story connecting all five of them, the network of *triraṅgas* along the Pallar river is presented in one particular text of the local *māhātmya* of Kāñcīpuram. As Czerniak-Drożdżowicz demonstrates, under the umbrella of the *raṅga* concept the growing number of pilgrimage places has been successfully using the environmental values of the region in the interplay of culture, religion, architecture, art and literature with nature.

Ewa Dębicka-Borek in her article, *Storied Hills: On Landscape, Narratives and Sacredness of Ahobilam*, discusses the inter-relatedness of nature and culture, perceived from a wider perspective of Zapf's cultural ecology of literature, in reference to selected hill-related narratives encapsulated in the Sanskrit *Ahobilamāhātmya*, i.e. the glorification of Narasiṃha's center in Ahobilam (current Andhra Pradesh), where the god is uniquely believed to manifest himself in his nine aspects. She argues that as the products of mutual connections between nature and culture, these narratives

invest the site with the notion of sacredness by means of presenting the hills as Narasiṃha's residence, and express the reintegration of the local and Brahmanic elements. Moreover, the hill narratives of *Ahobilamāhātmya* appear to channel some shifts in perceiving the (rather unchanged) natural landscape of Ahobilam. By focusing on extolling the nine variegated forms of Narasiṃha that dwell there, the *Ahobilamāhātmya* seems to deliberately present the natural settings of the site as more hospitable than those described earlier in Tirumaṅgai Ālvār's poem, to which Ahobilam—then shown as particularly difficult to reach and unwelcoming—owes its original recognition as one of the 108 *divyadeśas*.

In her contribution titled *Medicine within a Cultural Ecosystem: Representations of Nature in Tamil Siddha Medico-alchemical Texts and the Integrating Role of the Siddhars' Literature* Iłona Keđzia-Warych applies Zapf's concept of literature as an integrating force and the perspective of material ecocriticism to the body of Tamil medico-alchemical texts, namely the two texts ascribed to two prominent Tamil Siddhars, i.e. Siddhar Pōkar and Siddhar Yākōpu alias Irāmatēvar (ca. 17th–18th century). Having discussed how the two authors represent nature in their works, mostly in regard to how they invest nature with extraordinary powers and sentience, the author argues that such a strategy allows them to interconnect the spheres which, from a contemporary secular perspective, have been seen as disconnected, in other words, to conceptualize and contextualize liberatory practices within the domains of nature and medicine.

Borayin Larios and Hemant Rajopadhye, in their contribution, "*Dattātreya's Dwelling Place*": *Socio-religious Dynamics at a Contemporary Urban Temple under a Holy Tree*, map the interplay of forces shaping religious practices in contemporary urban India with special attention to the relation between nature and culture. The authors, drawing on the ideas of Latour (1993) and Connolly (2013) who postulate the agency of material objects and nature, analyze not only the role of natural phenomena, in this case, the *udumbara* tree, but also the processes of appropriation, adoption and adaptation of local elements into a broader religious context. The methodological

approach employed by Larios and Rajopadhye uses the notion of “spatial turn” in social sciences to acknowledge the place-making practices as well as the practices of “solidification of tradition” as addressed by Schaflechner (2018). While researching the persona of Datātreya and the role of the *udumbara*, the authors make special note of their progressive Brahmanization which culminates in the establishment of the present day Śrī Gurudev Datta Mandir in the Gymkhana area of Pune. Apart from providing a chronological description of the development of the place and the temple over the years, they also point out the emergence of certain eco-friendly practices which seem to be partially the result of the “westernization” of the temple’s clientele.

Iris Odyuo’s article, *Crafting of Ornaments and Their Accessories in Folktales and Folksongs among the Nagas*, revolves around the question of how the production of material culture is reflected in the Naga folktales and folksongs and *vice versa*. Found with slight variations throughout the Naga areas—which stretch along the northeastern territories of Indian States of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and northwestern Myanmar (Burma)—the ornaments have been considered the most valuable items due to social, economic, political and ritual reasons. Although much of Naga art is made of perishable material and in the past, the constant threat of enemy attack, the fear of disastrous fires, and the rituals and taboos surrounding certain arts, prevented artists from devoting much of their time to producing lasting art forms, the arts have flourished. Taking as the case study some particular topics such as body tattoos, songs, decorative ornaments and weapons that symbolize personal achievements and valour, Odyuo argues that an intimate relationship with nature lies at the basis of all aspects of Nagas’ life finding its expression in their material arts. On the other hand, folktales and folksongs enshrine the unwritten lives and wisdom of the Nagas through which they impart accumulated knowledge from one generation to the next.

Cinzia Pieruccini, in her contribution titled *Sacred Groves, the Brahmanical Hermit, and Some Remarks on ahimsā and Vegetari-*

anism, addresses the notion of the so-called “places of protected vegetation” and their being, at the same time, sacred religious spots. Such sites are examples of the mutual relationship of humans with the divine and nature. The in-depth research regarding these locations draws attention to their connection with the local, sometimes tribal communities and their role in the process of Sanskritization of local cults. The spots are often perceived as the remnants of the pre-Vedic times, but Pieruccini highlights the fact that: “the projection of the origin of the sacred groves in India into a distant past does not, in general, appear to be substantiated by clear evidence.” She traces the ancient sources of the idea, especially in connection with the forest hermitage, thus she reflects on the stages of life (*āśramas*) and especially the hermit phenomenon by re-visiting *dharmasūtras* and *dharmasāstras*. She refers to vegetarianism and *ahiṃsā* as important factors defining the life of a hermit. She notes that the hermit’s way of life entails “a specific mode of interacting with wild nature” and assumes a possible relation between ancient hermitages found in Sanskrit normative literature with the present-day understanding of the sacred groves.

Paola M. Rossi contributes an article titled *Indra-kavī: Ṛgvedic Lordship, Bovine Environment, and Onomatopoeic Poetry* in which she investigates the possible impact and correlation of some material and environmental conditions of the Vedic communities of the Old and Middle Vedic Period on the Ṛgvedic poetry, which, as she says: “is the refined cultural product of the primordial *kavīs* who were endowed with poetical skills and inspired vision (*dhī*).” She investigates the changing conditions, connected with the change of habitat, but also with the emergence of new lifestyles resulting from economic, political, religious, and social developments. Tracing relations between intriguing poetry and bovine behaviour, she uses the example of the Indraic myths presenting the god as a warrior and a poet but also a cowherd. Through the specific usage of onomatopoeic language imitating the sounds of nature, the passages describing Indra root him in the bovine, environmental context. Rossi assumes a possible influence of and relation to the *vrātya* community

in shaping Indra's persona and thus his associations with Rudra and notes the interplay and interconnectedness of the animal and human domains within the "poetry of cowherdship" which was later absorbed into ritual context.

Lidia Sudyka in her contribution, *From Fields to the Throne: Keladi-Ikkeri Rulers and the Culture of Nature*, examines attitudes towards the environment and biotic resources as expressed in the *Śivatattvaratnākara*, an encyclopedic work in Sanskrit authored by the Keladi-Ikkeri king, Basavarāja (r. 1697–1714). After years of acting as intermediaries between the Vijayanagara kings and the people of their locality, the Keladi-Ikkeri Nayakas eventually became independent rulers of the western, exceptionally biodiverse strip of Karnataka known as Kanara-Malnad. By analyzing the *Śivatattvaratnākara*'s structure and close reading of excerpts which deal with descriptions of natural surroundings (what is noteworthy, similarly evoked by Pietro della Valle, an Italian composer and musicologist, who visited India between 1623 and 1624), the Keladi-Ikkeri Nayakas' foundation and dynastic legends, various branches of knowledge such as horticulture, or qualities of a king, Sudyka aptly demonstrates how the treatise's content reveals singular modes of perceiving nature, and relations between nature and culture, or, in other words, how "the richness and diversity of regional ecosystems translate into complexity of the inner landscapes of mind."

All the contributions, through their multi-directional inquiries into different aspects of the relationship between culture and nature, legitimize conveners' initial suppositions and result in valuable presentations showcasing important and emblematic examples of such interrelations. Although numerous factors are taken into consideration while studying Indian literature and culture, the aspect of natural determinants of the culture, the agency of nature and the awareness of their mutual interactions, seems to have been hitherto a neglected but obviously significant element.

In the *Varia* part of the volume, Gregory M. Clines's contribution, *Guys Who Bond: Fraternal Love in Hemacandra's Triṣaṣṭiśa-*

lākāpuruṣacarita, looks at the Jain stories about fraternal love viewed as “a durable and covert fetter” trapping the soul in the transmigratory cycle of rebirth and re-death. The author refers to the concept of illustrious personages included in the list of the 63 *śalākāpuruṣas*—the *baladevas* who are described by Cort (1993) as “righteous Jainas who stick firmly to the central Jaina ethical principle of *ahiṃsā*, nonviolence” and their half-brothers, the *vāsudevas*, who “engage in war and kill their enemies, the Prati-*vāsudevas*, for which they are reborn in hell.” By focusing on certain specific fraternal relations, some of them known also from the epics, Clines discusses different kinds of relations only to concentrate on the proper fraternal relation of Jina Mahāvīra and Ajitanātha and their relative siblings as described by Hemacandra. The author suggests that through the very presence of different examples of fraternal relations such as those of *baladevas* with *vāsudevas*, and of the Jinas with their siblings, the Jain tradition provides readers-devotees with an ability “to read comparatively across the different character archetypes gathered therein.”

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