

## The Cosmic Earth in Prithvi Sukta: An Eco-Spiritual Perspective on Environmental Stewardship

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### ABSTRACT:

As an emerging academic discipline, Religion and Ecology addresses the unifying ways in which religions across the world propound the sacredness of Mother Earth and the responsibility of humans towards it. This study is concerned with one of the most eco-centric excerpts in Hindu ethos, i.e., the Prithvi Sukta of Atharva Veda. It aims to consider this text as a stimulus for ecological revitalization. The analysis focuses on prioritising the intrinsic, rather than the instrumental lens for understanding Earth. Emphasis is placed on instances that place Earth as mother-figure, a manifestation of divine, sustainer, and a space for transformation, proving that revisiting ancient texts' eco-philosophy can significantly contribute towards recognition and interpretation of the predicaments. The study is foregrounded on the eco-prophetic and eco-spiritual approach of the entire text. The examination seeks to emphasize the significance of apologetic approach for ecological revitalization, as propounded in John Haught's study, also highlighting how ideal comprehension of spiritual and sacramental approach can instigate responsibility towards nature, besides focusing on the prominent emotions eco-spirituality tends to possess. Overall, the work will put forth the anthropocosmic perspective to understand the reciprocal relationship between humankind and the cosmos, which Prithvi Sukta places before its readers.

### KEYWORDS:

Eco-spirituality, sacredness, eco-prophetic, ecological philosophy, environment ethics, Vedic ecology.

Religion and Ecology, one of the newly popular fields, integrates the literary, theological, cultural, and ecological. Globalization and growing materialism throughout time have led to a significant disconnect between what religions taught and what people really practised. The branch of religion and ecology deals with bridging this gap and understanding the inherent relationships of man, nature, earth, cosmos, and the sacred. The emphasis is on how human civilizations are influenced by natural world, and the myths, religions, and rituals that serve as symbolic representations of it. Therefore, revisiting the religious literary canons can pave a subtle path for uplifting ecological consciousness.

In the Indian subcontinent, the Aranyakas, Brahmanas, and Vedas, considered to be the products of divine intervention and revelation, transmitted by sages, became the foundation of many philosophical and theological texts. Of the Vedas, the Atharva Veda embodies a rich and multicolored tapestry of ecological lessons that have been kept in the literary history, but are sometimes underappreciated and rarely put into practice. It praises elements, rituals, faiths, and cycles that exist in nature. Also recognized as Atharvangiro Veda, Brahma Veda, Bhishag Veda, and Kshatra Veda, it contains up to 20 Kandas, 730 Suktas, 36 Prapathakas, and 5987 Mantras. “The Atharva Veda is somewhat removed from the other three by the “popular” character of many of the prayers against ills, incantations, and spells which it contains” (Panikkar, 1994). It also contains several hymns with important eco-philosophical content. With 63 Mantras, Prithvi Sukta is the first one in the 12th Kanda.

The holistic understanding of ecology sustained in the human consciousness, as propagated in the Prithvi Sukta, initially addresses Earth as a divine and cosmic womb, carrying life and nurturing the soul. All elements emerge out of this divine womb and are children of this universal mother.

...When she was as yet hidden in a fluid state in the bosom of the primeval waters, the seers were already seeking to discern her by means of sacrifice. A geographical description... a highly poetical vision of nature, follows. The earth is composed of hills and plains, of snow-clad peaks, of deserts, oceans, and rivers, of lakes and streams, trees and plants, rocks and stones (Panikkar, 1994).

In addition to the physical descriptions of the Earth, that all creatures relate to, there are illustrations of its transcendent and cosmical refinements. The introduction to Prithvi Sukta in Gita Press Gorakhpur presents Earth as a manifestation of Supreme Consciousness, through the term “chinmay swaroop”. The constituents of sukta are attributed as both metaphysical, i.e., “aadhighbhautik”, and supernatural, implied by “aadhidaivik”, reflecting the eco-prophetic idea of considering Earth with a more intrinsic than instrumental lens. Earth receives the status of possessing a living spirit, pervading its corners. “...spirits exist in space, in a way quite similar to how bodies do... space was ‘absolute’: infinite, eternal, and real” (Thomas, 2024). Additionally, the concept resonates with ecocriticism, which rejects everything being socially and linguistically produced. Nature, for eco-critics, transcends the boundaries of human world. It operates beyond our conceptual understanding, shaped by cultural perspectives. Its impact on us varies

based on how we interact with and treat it. Prithvi Sukta exclaims this idea with multiple depictions that follow.

Earth is humanized, but more noticeably, it is given the status of a sustaining figure and a life-provider. Prithvi Sukta is one of the initial literary sources which designates Earth as a Mother. Earth is referred as Mother seven times in the text. She is “golden-breasted/ who bears the Sacred Universal Fire” (Hymn 6), to “purify us wholly” (Hymn 12), and is “sushined by Heavenly Law” (Hymn 17). She is intangible, surreal, and sublime. The implication of holiness and reverence are initial steps towards combating environmental concerns in eco-spiritualism. An entity should be emotionally attached to its sustainer. Prithvi Sukta identifies this relation to stimulate a sense of care and servitude from humans towards Earth, as She is also the,

High Truth, unyielding Order, Consecration,  
Ardor and Prayer and Holy Ritual  
uphold the Earth; may she, the ruling Mistress  
of what has been and what will come to be... (Hymn 1).

Concerning the mother-child bond, Panikkar observes that this relationship between Man and nature is not a technical one, in technocratic or scientific sense. He mentions, “it is not a relationship of dominion or exploitation... Just as a cow is thankful if human hands relieve her of the burden of her extra milk, so the earth is happy to be worked by Man” (Panikkar, 1994). The relationship is thus, synergistic. It is based on shared endeavor and symbiotic relationship. Sixth shloka attributes a sense of wholeness and holiness to this relation, designating Mother Nature as “Bearer of all things”, “hoard of treasures rare”, “sustaining mother” providing shelter to all — a beholder of the priceless assets. It also portrays Earth as bearer of “Sacred Universal Fire”, an implication of one of the constituent elements of Panchatattva, i.e., agni, essential for human existence and its balance with universe. Furthermore, Earth’s “immortal heart, enwrapped in Truth/ abides aloft in the highest firmament” (Hymn 8), and the fragrance emanating from “plants and waters, that sweet perfume that all celestial beings are wont to emit” (Hymn 23) are a few other instances of elysian description of a unifying space for all animate and inanimate inhabitants.

The instances in Prithvi Sukta also demarcate the evidence of God's existence in nature, or perhaps God being manifested as nature, emphasising a Pantheistic setting, unaffected by any theoretical construction(s). As a sacred entity, Earth is to be revered and reciprocated in terms of care and responsible

attitude. The allusions, including, “Mother of plants and begetter of all things,/ firm far-flung Earth, sushined by Heavenly Law,/ kindly and pleasant is she” (Hymn 17), protected by the Lord, “May she who is clothed with Fire, whose knees/ are blackened, grant me sharpness of wit/ and furnish me with splendor” (Hymn 21), “O patient Earth, by Sacred Word enhanced,/ bearer of nourishment and strength” (Hymn 29) consolidate the belief of a divine presence with divine powers in nature.

The spiritual sense is not restricted to the macrocosm of Earth as an entity, but also to the microcosm of the elements that exist within. Ecological awareness is ensured through an intensive recognition of everything that is an indispensable part of it. For instance, throughout the sixty-three hymns, there is a significant allusion to edibles that Earth offers, including medicinal herbs, crops, milk, ghee, rice, barley, etc. that grant life value to humans. This reverberates the idea of the co-existence and consortium of man and nature that has been quite archaic, yet an instance of “modern organization with a methodological expression called recruitment of human resources” (Reddy, 2019) which exhibits Prithvi Sukta’s teachings as a vision of “ancient Indian seers which is much similar to that of a professional managerial genius with ecofriendly consciousness” (Reddy).

O patient Earth, by Sacred Word enhanced,  
bearer of nourishment and strength, of food and ghee— (Hymn 29)

Besides,

Earth is the source of food, of rice and barley;  
from her derive the five tribes of men.

To rain-steeped Earth, the Rain-giver’s wife, be homage! (Hymn 42)

This is what the Bhumi Sukta or Prithvi Sukta teaches us. The hymns are an extension of gratefulness. They are an acceptance of the minuscule existence of humans before the surreal and dynamic presence of Earth that sustains all the life forms. Hence, it is essential to understand eco-communion, when ecology is more than just the physicalities and the tangible that resides in it. A person is rather instantiated in direct and intimate contact with their surroundings by this idea of intimacy with the natural world, which is culturally validated by an anthropocentric image of the planet. Philip Lutgendorf in “City, Forest, and Cosmos” considers forest as a space of transcendence, rather than any civilized or developed zone. He asserts, “It is generally in the forest, rather than in the city-

state, that transcendence of human limitations becomes possible and the communication occurs between heaven and earth.” (Lutgendorf, 2000). The statements made in the Prithvi Sukta also evoke similar arguments, inevitably much before the composition of the Sanskrit classics, i.e., Ramayana and Mahabharata, which are the foundational texts for Lutgendorf’s study. Ecology is transformative space, not merely in an instrumental sense but in a broader intrinsic and metaphysical sense, thereby emphasizing how nature acts as a pathway, a portal, a transition zone towards divinity and the abstract, ensuring spiritual contentment with its vitalizing forces through sections like: “I cleanse myself, O Earth, as with a filter” (Hymn 30), “may you grant us the blessing of all that is wholesome” (Hymn 46, 47), and “dispose my lot in gracious fashion that I be at ease” (Hymn 63).

This interconnectedness also echoes in Arne Naess’s idea of Deep Ecology, which recognizes intrinsic value over utility of things, while recognizing ecological sustainability. Christopher Key Chapple calls it “intimacy with place, a sense of being in the world with immediacy, care, and frugality” (Chapple, 2004), which Prithvi Sukta is well equipped with, as seen in aforementioned instances of Earth’s divinity.

The hymns in Prithvi Sukta, thus, do not merely confront the readers as the eco-sensitive domain of lifestyle conceptualization, but also appropriately validate their inherent eco-consciousness by being eco-prophetic. It also appears to be apologetic towards nature for using its resources, thereby gradually wishing for her regeneration her, proclaiming that humans do not intend to violate the essence, the heart of this pious land. For instance, the thirty-fifth shloka reiterates this idea of emotional reciprocity towards Mother Earth, “O Earth, may you of that have quick replenishment!/ may my thrust never reach right unto your vital points, your heart!”

...Just as the Hymn of the Person in the Rig Veda identifies human physiology with the cosmos, correlating the feet with the earth and the head with the sky, so also a vision of deep ecology in the context of the Hindu faith will seek to integrate and include its understanding of the human as inseparable from and reflective of nature (Sharma, 2019).

The Sacramental aptitude that researchers have inclined themselves to in the recent past also appears in this eco-prophetic text that demarcates nature as the origin, stimulus, and processing space of all abiotic and biotic events. The cycles in nature are a testament to nature’s generating and flourishing, thereby catering to the essence of perpetual life-cycle that undergoes transitions to bloom,

heal, and restore itself. The contemporary Argument of Design “also known as the physico-theological or teleological argument... founded on the apparent design, order and purpose observed in Nature” (Vicuña, 2014) can be understood as an extension of these literary references. A BBC post on God’s existence in nature explains this theory, mentioning the most basic instance of trees exhaling oxygen and absorbing carbon dioxide is naturally well-suited for majority of life forms. Besides, the special location within the solar system helps Earth maintain life. It is neither too close to the sun, where it would burn up, nor too far away, where it would freeze.

So, Earth is in a state of homeostasis, offering ideal conditions for life regulation, more of a tendency of self-regulation in the middle of varying external stimuli.

Eco-spirituality can also be understood through the eight primary emotions that pervade throughout the text. In an article contributed to the National Library of Medicine, the idea of “positive emotions” (Vaillant, 2008) is emphasized, asserting the presence of awe, love, joy, hope, faith/trust, forgiveness, gratitude and compassion in various mammals, while demarcating “spirituality is virtually indistinguishable from these emotions and is, thus, rooted in our evolutionary biology... these emotions are also the same ones for which most religions strive, spirituality is a common denominator for all faiths” (Vaillant, 2008). The emotive aspects of Prithvi Sukta also encapsulate these eight emotions to establish an intricate relation between man and nature. Awe is unvarying for the physical and the abstract magnanimity of the Earth. Love and joy direct human-conscience to adore all animate and inanimate entities and relish, revere, and respect the mutual existence. Hope and faith suggest the instances when man ardently looks at Earth as a sustaining figure that shall succor the existence of all that dwell on its space. Forgiveness is expressed when the ill-deeds or any lack of reciprocity seek absolution from the divine. Gratitude and compassion appear simultaneously to reflect appreciation of everything one has because of Earth, to feel indebted and obliged.

Apologetics, directed towards the religious and classical literary canons can significantly metamorphose the declining status of ecological stability. Although specifically adhering to the texts of Christianity, critics like John Haught do not consider textual pieces of evidence as too effective to combat environmental concerns, referring them as “least revisionist” and not going far enough for “the radical renewal” that “the ecological crisis seems to demand” (Haught,

2003). However, this approach can be more reformative and transformative than Haught's beliefs. Haught's previous claim, which regards an Apologetic approach as the means to compensate the ignorance towards "the wealth of ecologically relevant material in the tradition", can be more useful to corroborate the diverse sources from other religions' texts for a comprehensive and inter-textual comprehension of eco-sensitive and eco-prophetic traces that exist in all of them. Haught doubts if such an approach is fundamental enough, whereas I believe only religious canons can prove to be the foundational and fundamental modes of recognizing, interpreting, and withstanding ecological catastrophe.

The concluding three shloka of Prithvi Sukta fulfil a conception of holiness and wholeness of Mother Earth. Earth becomes a living entity, a nourisher, a higher spirit, and one granting wishes, a living manifestation of the divine. She is the life-provider, the healer, and can also be a destructor if required. She merely asks for respect and reciprocity, and all the heavenly joys shall brim the earth and the earthlings.

**May your dwellings, O Earth, free from sickness and wasting,  
flourish for us! Through a long life, watchful,  
may we always offer to you our tribute! (Hymn 62)**

**In harmony with all the powers of Heaven  
set me, O Poet, in grace and good fortune! (Hymn 63)**

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