

**NATURE'S VOICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
ECO-SPIRITUALISM IN VACHANAS AND
GIEVE PATEL'S 'ON KILLING A TREE'**

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ABSTRACT:

Literary works are very powerful means to explore human relationships with nature. Literature attempts to rediscover the mystery and wonder of the world. Many poets and writers have tried to establish a meaningful relationship between literature and nature. Vachanas are such literary works written by Sharanas and Sharanas. For them, nature is a principal source of inspiration and spiritual enlightenment. They see nature as a living entity and believe that it is endowed with life, feeling, and purpose. Vachanas explore themes of spirituality, social reform, and human condition, often using nature imagery to convey deeper truths. For Vachanakaras, God prevails in every bit of nature.

On the other hand, Gieve Patel's poem On Killing a Tree vividly describes the process of killing a tree, highlighting the resilience of the tree and the cruelty of human actions. The powerful images and metaphors convey the violent act of man on nature and the severe consequences of such violent actions.

A comparative study of these works explores the attitude of man towards nature, imagery, metaphor, and environmental messages. The paper also searches for a connection between nature and spirituality, emphasizing the sacredness of nature. The paper brings out the combination of ecological awareness with spiritual practices, promoting harmony with nature.

KEYWORDS:

Vachanas, Eco-spiritualism, nature, literature, resilience, consequences.

Introduction

Indian literary traditions, both classical and modern, reflect profound ecological awareness rooted in spirituality and ethics. Among these, the Vachana movement of 12th-century Karnataka and modern Indian English poetry provide compelling perspectives on environmental consciousness. Vachanas are short, powerful prose-poems composed in the 12th century by Bhakti poets in the Kannada language. They articulate a vision where nature, labour, and devotion are inseparable. On the contrary, some modern literary works, influenced by industrialization and urban alienation, portray nature as wounded and violated. The best example is Gieve Patel's *On Killing a Tree*, which symbolises modern ecological anxiety. Comparing these two traditions helps to see the continuity and transformation in Indian eco-spiritual thought.

This paper compares the eco-spiritual vision found in Vachana literature with the modern ecological protest expressed in *On Killing a Tree*. Though they differ in form, ideology, and historical context, both traditions give a voice to nature and reject human violence against the natural world. Instead of plunging directly into the title, let me explain eco-spiritualism and its main concerns. The first part of the paper consists of an introduction to eco-spiritualism.

Eco-Spiritualism

There is not a single founder of the theory, but this theory emerged from ancient indigenous wisdom and gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s. Thinkers like Thomas Berry, who linked ecology and spirituality, Arne Naess, who developed Deep Ecology, Françoise d'Eaubonne (coined ecofeminism), and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (faith/evolution) explored the spiritual dimension of cosmic evolution by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life and the intrinsic value of nature. They stressed the ethical responsibility of humans and their conscious participation in earth's evolutionary journey, thus urging a transformative shift from human domination

of nature to harmony, care, mutual interdependence, and ecological justice.

The main belief of the theory is humans and the Earth are deeply interdependent, and ecological crises are spiritual crises according to them. The indispensable aspect is a shift from domination to reverence and care. By employing the above framework, the paper reads Vachanas as early eco-spiritual texts and Patel's poem as a modern eco-ethical critique.

Eco-Spiritualism in Vachana Literature

The Vachana movement was not merely a socio-religious reform but also a literary and ethical revolution. The Sharanas rejected caste hierarchy, ritualism, blind beliefs, and exploitation of the marginalized, advocating equality, dignity of labour, and compassion for all beings. For them, nature is an active expression of the divine.

Many Sharanas appreciated in their Vachanas the plentiful gifts of nature. The Sharanas metaphorically used elements of nature to perceive and express the presence of God and His benevolent nature. They did not forget their responsibilities towards the environment in which they lived and showed intolerance towards the killing of animals and the destruction of nature.

Basavanna, the leader of the Vachana movement, was a great lover of nature and all living beings. For him, kindness and mercy are ecological ethics and the weapons to transform an individual. One should have mercy not only towards human beings but also all other living beings. His love and concern for all living beings is revealed in the following Vachana:

Can there be religion without mercy?

All living beings need mercy.

Root of all religions is mercy.

Lord Kudalasangama

Will not approve of anything other than this. (I.247)

Similarly, Patel also expresses a stark critique of modern ecological violence in his poem *On Killing a Tree*. He portrays the tree as a resilient, living organism, whose destruction requires deliberate and brutal effort.

It takes much time to kill a tree,

Not a simple jab of the knife

Will do it.

The poet also believes in nature as a living entity, resisting destruction. The poet through the poem ironically conveys a profound message to the readers on saving trees which are living beings just like human beings or any other form of life.

Basavanna, illustrating the mind's fickleness and the desire for steadfast devotion, writes:

My spirit leaps about

a monkey on a bough:

Let me not stand where I should stand;

Let me not meet where I should meet.

O Lord Kūḍala Saṅgama,

Out of thy mercy grant

I live within the lotus of thy feet,

A bumble-bee!

He asks Kudalasangama Deva (his deity) to make him a bumble-bee, to stay fixed at the lotus of His feet.

Another Vachana "The ocean surges when the moon rises" highlights natural forces and cosmic connections, reflecting the pull of the divine and the presence of divine powers around. For Patel, the tree "bleeds," "heals," and "struggles," affirming its living

status. So there is a shared vision in both expressions, i.e., nature possesses life, dignity, and agency.

The bleeding bark will heal
 And from close to the ground
 Will rise curled green twigs,

Akkamahadevi, known for her mystic height and poetic excellence, perceives forests, mountains, birds, and stones as manifestations of divine presence. For her, nature becomes a sacred space where the self seeks union with God. Her Vachanas erase the boundary between the human and non-human worlds, echoing mystical presence and deep ecological thought.

The whole wood is but a wishing tree,
 And all are life-restoring trees.
 Every stone is an alchemic stone
 And every place is a holy place.
 All water is but unageing nectar,
 And every beast a man-like beast.
 Every stone you stumble on,
 A wishing stone.

As I went round observing the mountain,
 I saw the plantain-grove! (SVS, vol.V, V.299)

Mahadeviakka was recognized by her fellow saints as the most profoundly poetic among them. In her Vachanas, the stages of human love become metaphors for the stages of mystical ascent. Through this inward journey and intense quest for the divine, she uses ample images from nature, transforming the natural world into a language for spiritual longing and union.

You are the entire wood,

And the entire divine trees in it.

You are all the birds and beasts

Sporting under the trees...

why don't you who are all pervasive, show yourself to me.

O Chennamallikarjuna! (VWS, V.300, p 195)

In the following Vachana, Allamaprabhu wonders about the relation between two sets of different entities and their merging with the Lord. Through his wondering style, Allamaprabhu succeeds to bring in an awakening in the individuals.

Where the mango tree and where the koel bird?

What bonds them together, Lord?

The sour berry from the hill and salt

from the sea;

What bonds them together, Lord?

Guhesvaralinga and us;

What bonds us together, Lord? (II 56)

Nature is composed of diverse entities that often appear unrelated at first glance. However, when we cultivate an inner awareness and learn to perceive the finer details of nature and to connect them with the self, the world reveals itself in its fullest and most radiant glory. Devara Dasimayya, whose profession was cloth-weaving, was a devotee of Shiva. He was one of the earliest Vachana-writers. His Vachanas are very simple and meaningful. He thanks God and his gift (nature) and appreciates the blessings of nature. It can be witnessed in the following Vachana:

The earth is your gift, the harvest your gift,

The circling and blowing winds, your gift,

Those who eat your gift, and praise others,

What shall I call such curs, O Ramanatha? (VII. 742)

Devara Dasimayya's approach is grounded in non-violence and deep compassion toward all living beings. His refusal to pluck flowers or harm insects reflects an advanced ecological sensibility. His Vachanas recognize life in plants and elements of nature, anticipating modern biocentric ethics.

On the contrary, through vivid images, Gieve Patel brings out violence and the alienation of humans from nature. Man's cruel effort to kill the tree/violence towards nature becomes graphic realism and moral shock.

The root is to be pulled out –
 Out of the anchoring earth;
 It is to be roped, tied,
 And pulled out – snapped out
 Or pulled out entirely,

In the above lines, he condemns the human brutality to uproot life, exposing the ethical emptiness behind environmental destruction. Patel emphasizes deliberate, systematic destruction, making the barbaric act of killing a tree an act of moral violence. Hence both Vachanas and the poem share similar ethics that all life is sacred and deserves protection.

Both Vachanas and Patel's poem affirm the sanctity of life and condemn violence against nature. They challenge anthropocentrism and insist on ethical responsibility. The transition from the sacred ecology of the Sharanas to Patel's ethical protest reflects changing historical realities. However, the underlying concern for nature remains constant.

Conclusion

This study reveals that though separated by eight centuries, eco-spiritualism in Vachana literature and eco-ethical protest in On

Killing a Tree form a continuous ecological discourse in Indian literature. Sharanas articulate eco-spiritualism as a religious duty, whereas Patel frames ecological concern as an ethical urgency in a modern, mechanized, materialistic age. Together, they assert that harming nature is both a moral and spiritual failure. By giving voice to nature, these texts urge humanity toward compassion, restraint, and harmony.

Thus together, they show that nature's voice transcends time, speaking through devotion in the medieval period and protest in modern literature, making eco-spiritualism not merely a concept, but a lived ethical necessity.

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