

Beyond Anthropocentrism: Rabindranath Tagore's Ecological Consciousness as a Resource for Contemporary Environmental Ethics

Raja Sharma Dey¹, Prof. Ajit Kumar Behura²

PhD Researcher, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (ISM) Dhanbad,
Jharkhand, India¹

Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT (ISM) Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India²

Abstract: This paper undertakes a systematic philosophical examination of Rabindranath Tagore's ecological consciousness and evaluates its enduring relevance for contemporary environmental ethics. Situating Tagore within the intersecting traditions of Upanishadic non-dualism, Baul immanentism, and Romantic naturalism, the paper identifies three constitutive dimensions of his ecological philosophy: the relational ontology of nature expressed through his concept of "jeevan-devata"; the ethical orientation of "viswa-bodh" or cosmic awareness as a cultivated moral capacity; and the pedagogical institutionalization of ecological values at Shantiniketan as a living experiment in environmental education. The paper then brings these ideas into critical dialogue with major currents of contemporary environmental ethics—deep ecology, biocentrism, ecocriticism, and environmental pragmatism—identifying both significant structural convergences and philosophically important points of tension. It further subjects Tagore's ecological vision to rigorous scrutiny from the perspectives of postcolonial ecocriticism and political ecology, arguing that while his aesthetico-spiritual framework offers genuine and underexplored philosophical resources, it requires supplementation by sustained attention to power, environmental justice, and the material conditions of ecological harm. The paper concludes by proposing three reconstructive moves through which a critically updated Tagorean environmental ethics can make a genuinely distinctive contribution to global ecological discourse in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Tagore, Ecological Consciousness, Environmental Ethics, Deep Ecology, Biocentrism, Viswa-Bodh, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Advaita Vedanta, Shantiniketan, Anthropocentrism

I. INTRODUCTION

The global ecological crisis of the 21st Century—driven by human-induced climate change, accelerating biodiversity loss, large-scale deforestation, and the transgression of planetary boundaries—has rendered the question of humanity's ethical relationship with the natural world among the most urgent in contemporary philosophy. Environmental ethics, as a sub-discipline of moral philosophy, has responded to this crisis by systematically challenging the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in mainstream Western moral traditions and by exploring alternative frameworks capable of grounding the inherent worth of non-human life and the moral standing of ecological systems as such.

In this context, the ecological thought of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) deserves renewed and sustained philosophical attention. Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate in Literature and one of the most consequential intellectual figures of the modern era, articulated across his poetry, essays, fiction, and educational philosophy a vision of humanity's relationship with the natural world that is philosophically rich, culturally distinctive, and practically urgent. Yet, while Tagore's literary and aesthetic dimensions have been extensively studied, his ecological philosophy has received comparatively little rigorous philosophical engagement—particularly in relation to the frameworks and problems of contemporary environmental ethics. This neglect represents a significant lacuna both in Tagore scholarship and in the broader project of developing a pluralistic, non-Eurocentric environmental philosophy.

This paper seeks to fill this gap through a critical philosophical analysis structured in five stages. Section II reconstructs the philosophical foundations of Tagore's ecological consciousness, identifying the three principal dimensions of his ecological thought. Section III maps the convergences and divergences between his thought and major currents in contemporary environmental ethics. Section IV examines the specific contribution of his Indian philosophical inheritance—Advaita Vedanta and Baul immanentism—to the distinctiveness of his ecological vision. Section V subjects that vision to critical scrutiny from postcolonial and political-ecological perspectives, identifying genuine limitations that must be addressed. Section VI proposes three reconstructive moves toward a critically updated Tagorean environmental ethics adequate to the present moment.

Two preliminary clarifications are in order. First, this paper treats Tagore as a philosopher in the substantive sense—not merely as a literary figure who happened to express environmental sensibilities, but as a thinker who

articulated a coherent, argumentatively defensible set of positions on the moral status of nature, the grounds of ecological obligation, and the link between moral theory and its application in real life. Second, the paper addresses what might be called “comparative philosophical reconstruction”—reading Tagore’s texts carefully and charitably, identifying the philosophical commitments implicit in his literary and essayistic writings, and bringing them into critical dialogue with Western environmental philosophy without either assimilating them to Western frameworks or treating them as incommensurably other.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TAGORE’S ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A. *Relational Ontology: Nature as Living Community*

The most fundamental feature of Tagore’s ecological philosophy is his systematic rejection of the Cartesian-Newtonian conception of nature as inert matter subject to mechanical laws and available for human manipulation. In its place, Tagore articulates a relational ontology in which nature constitutes a living community of subjects, each animated by an inner life that demands genuine moral recognition. This vision finds its most powerful expression in his concept of “jeevan-devata”—the god of life or immanent life-force—which permeates all existence and makes possible authentic relationship between human and non-human beings. Rather than a hierarchical ordering in which humanity occupies the apex, jeevan-devata suggests a horizontal community of life in which human beings are participants rather than sovereigns.

In his essay “The Religion of the Forest” (1919), Tagore explicitly theorizes two opposed civilizational orientations toward nature: the city-based civilization of control and exploitation, which he associates with Western modernity and industrial capitalism, and the forest civilization (“*Aranyak*” culture) of ancient India, which he associates with receptivity, attentiveness, and harmonious co-existence. The hermitages (“ashrams”) of the ancient sages were located in forests not as a matter of practical convenience but as a deliberate philosophical statement: wisdom requires sustained, attentive relationship with the non-human world, and the self that emerges from such relationship is constitutively different from the self shaped by urban commerce and technological mastery. This contrast is not merely descriptive; it carries normative weight, implying that the forest-civilizational orientation provides a superior model for the ethical constitution of human life.

It should be emphasized, however, that Tagore’s conception of relational ontology does not merely represent a revival of pre-modern naturalism. He was acutely aware of the dangers of romantically idealized nature and was genuinely engaged with the scientific understanding of nature available in his time. His ecological philosophy is better understood as an attempt to integrate scientific naturalism with a relational, ethically charged understanding of the human place in nature—an attempt that anticipates contemporary efforts in ecological philosophy to move beyond the nature/culture binary.

B. *Viswa-Bodh: Cosmic Awareness as Ethical Capacity*

Central to Tagore’s ecological ethics is what he calls “viswa-bodh”—cosmic awareness or universal consciousness—elaborated most systematically in his philosophical lectures collected in *Sadhana* (1913) and *The Religion of Man* (1931). Viswa-bodh is not merely an intellectual recognition of one’s connection to the natural world; it is an active, affective, and irreducibly ethical capacity—the capacity to be genuinely moved by the suffering, beauty, and vitality of other beings, and to be morally responsive to the claims they make upon us. As such, viswa-bodh constitutes something closer to a moral perception or moral sensibility than to a propositional belief: it represents a mode of existence in the world rather than simply a means of understanding it.

This concept functions in Tagore’s philosophy as simultaneously an epistemological category (a mode of knowing the world that transcends subject-object dualism) and an ethical one (a cultivated disposition of care, attentiveness, and responsiveness that constitutes the moral life in its deepest sense). The cultivation of viswa-bodh is, for Tagore, the central task of education and the ultimate criterion of human excellence. A person who has genuinely cultivated viswa-bodh is not merely intellectually aware of ecological interdependence in the manner of a systems ecologist; they are constituted by their relationships with the natural world and feel morally implicated in its flourishing or degradation as intimately as in the flourishing or suffering of other persons.

This ethical framework has significant affinities with what Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings have called the “ethics of care”—the conception that moral life is fundamentally grounded in relationships of attentiveness along with responsiveness, rather than in the application of abstract principles to particular cases. It also resonates with recent developments in moral psychology, particularly the work of Jesse Prinz and Jonathan Haidt, that emphasize the indispensable role of emotional attunement and imaginative engagement in moral perception and motivation. Tagore’s philosophically distinctive contribution is to extend this relational, care-based ethics beyond the sphere of human community to encompass the natural world as a whole—a move that neither Gilligan nor Noddings fully anticipated, but which follows coherently from the relational ontology underpinning his thought.

III. TAGORE AND CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: CONVERGENCES AND TENSIONS

A. *Deep Ecology: Affinities and Divergences*

Arne Naess's formulation of **Deep Ecology**, first articulated in his seminal 1973 essay *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement*, marked a decisive shift in environmental philosophy by distinguishing between two contrasting ecological orientations. Unlike shallow ecology, which evaluates the natural world primarily in terms of its instrumental value for human welfare, deep ecology recognizes the inherent value of all living beings irrespective of their utility to humanity. This philosophical framework was later elaborated by Naess and George Sessions through the Deep Ecology Platform, which advances the principles of biospheric egalitarianism and challenges anthropocentrism as the normative basis of environmental ethics.

Tagore's ecological philosophy converges with deep ecology in its critique of anthropocentrism, its affirmation of the intrinsic value of non-human life, and its insistence that genuine ecological consciousness requires a fundamental transformation of the human self—what Naess calls the expansion from the “ego-self” to the “eco-self.” Tagore's concept of *visva-bodh* is a striking structural parallel to Naess's notion of self-realization as the identification of the self with wider and wider circles of being. Both thinkers share the intuition that the ecological predicament originates in a more fundamental crisis of identity—a failure to recognize that the bounded, possessive individual self is an impoverished and ultimately incoherent conception of what a human being is.

However, there are also important divergences. Naess's deep ecology is grounded in a secular philosophical framework that draws on Spinoza and Whitehead; Tagore's ecological philosophy is inseparably connected to his engagement with the Upanishadic tradition and his vision of a spiritually animated universe. More significantly, Naess's concept of biocentric egalitarianism maintains that every living being possesses equal intrinsic worth—an idea that sits uneasily with Tagore's view that nature is not merely intrinsically valuable but is the medium of a spiritual relationship between human consciousness and the divine. For Tagore, nature has value not merely in itself but as the site of a relational encounter that is constitutive of human flourishing. This gives his ecological ethics a teleological dimension that is absent from Naess's framework.

B. *Biocentrism: Taylor and Tagore*

In *Respect for Nature* (1986), Paul Taylor develops a biocentric ethical framework that recognizes every living organism as possessing a good of its own—a telos or directional tendency toward flourishing—and that this good generates a prima facie duty of non-interference on the part of moral agents. Taylor's “biocentric outlook on nature” involves understanding the self as an inseparable constituent of the wider biotic community in which all organisms have equal inherent worth.

Tagore's ecological vision is congruent with Taylor's biocentrism in its insistence on the moral standing of non-human organisms and its critique of the assumption of human superiority. His poetry—particularly the *Gitanjali* and the poems collected in *Balaka* (1916)—consistently represents plants, animals, rivers, and seasons as active presences with their own dignity and interiority. His educational philosophy at Shantiniketan explicitly cultivated in students a disposition of care and attentiveness toward living beings.

The critical difference lies in the metaphysical grounding of these parallel ethical orientations. Taylor grounds biocentric ethics in a secular naturalistic teleology: organisms have a good of their own because they are inherently goal-directed systems whose functioning tends toward characteristic forms of flourishing. Tagore grounds his ecological ethics in a relational spirituality: non-human beings matter morally because they are participants in the living community of being that is constitutive of human consciousness and spiritual life. This difference has significant practical implications: Taylor's framework is designed to generate specific action-guiding principles of non-interference and restitutive justice that can adjudicate conflicts between the interests of different organisms, while Tagore's framework generates a more holistic but arguably more motivationally powerful ethic of care, attentiveness, and reverence. The two frameworks are best understood as complementary rather than competing: Tagore provides the affective and motivational resources that Taylor's more procedural approach arguably lacks, while Taylor provides the normative precision that Tagore's aesthetico-spiritual framework tends to leave underdeveloped.

C. *Ecocriticism and the Literary Ecology of Tagore*

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as a critical approach that investigates the dynamic relationship between literary works and the natural world. It asks what values are encoded in literary representations of nature and how literary culture shapes and is shaped by ecological conditions. In this framework, Tagore's literary corpus presents one of the richest ecocritical archives in world literature.

Tagore's representation of the natural world in his poetry, fiction, and drama resists both pastoral idealization and Romantic sublimation. The river Padma—which flows through the landscape of his fiction, most notably in the stories of *Galpaguchcha*—functions not merely as a geographical backdrop but as a moral landscape: a space in which characters confront the limits of human agency, the impermanence of social arrangements, and the claims of a wider community of being that exceeds and outlasts human purposes. His nature imagery is systematically ethical in its

implications: rivers flow regardless of human agendas; trees give shade without calculation; rain falls indiscriminately on the just and the unjust. These are not merely aesthetic observations but moral exemplars that implicitly and persistently critique the calculative, instrumental rationality that Tagore identified as the dominant—and destructive—ethical orientation of industrial modernity.

A critical ecocritical reading, however, must also note the gendered dimensions of Tagore's nature imagery. Within the ecofeminist tradition, scholars such as Val Plumwood and Karen Warren have emphasized the association of nature with femininity in Western cultural traditions has served to legitimize both the subjugation of nature and the oppression of women. A similar critical analysis can be applied to Tagore's texts, where nature is frequently feminized and associated with nurture, receptivity, and care. This does not undermine the ecological significance of his vision, but it does require careful critical attention to the ways in which his ecological philosophy is inflected by the gender assumptions of his cultural context.

IV. THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT: RESOURCES AND DISTINCTIVENESS

A. Advaita Vedanta and Ecological Non-Dualism

Tagore's engagement with the Upanishads and the Advaita Vedanta tradition provides his ecological philosophy with a distinctive metaphysical foundation that differs significantly from the theistic and rights-based frameworks dominant in Western environmental philosophy. The Upanishadic teaching of "*tat tvam asi*" (that thou art)—the Advaita Vedānta doctrine that the individual self (Ātman) is essentially non-different from Brahman—implies that all beings share a common ground of existence, and that harm to the natural world is therefore simultaneously a form of self-harm and a violation of the deepest ontological truth about what one is. This non-dualist insight provides what many Western frameworks struggle to supply: a metaphysical basis for ecological obligation that is not merely consequentialist or deontological in character, but ontological—grounded in the nature of reality itself rather than in the preferences or rights of separate individuals.

It is important, however, to distinguish Tagore's appropriation of Vedantic non-dualism from a straightforward endorsement of classical Advaita philosophy. Tagore was explicitly critical of the world-negating tendencies of some strands of Advaita thought—the view that the empirical world of multiplicity and difference is ultimately illusory (*maya*) and that liberation consists in transcending it. His ecological philosophy is emphatically this-worldly: it insists on the moral and spiritual significance of the particular, sensory, embodied world of nature, rather than treating it as a veil to be pierced or transcended. In this respect, his appropriation of Vedantic thought is closer to the "*vishistadvaita*" (qualified non-dualism) of Ramanuja than to Shankara's classical Advaita.

B. Baul Philosophy: Immanence and Embodiment

A second, less widely recognized strand of Tagore's ecological thought derives from his deep engagement with the Baul tradition of Bengal—a heterodox, syncretic spiritual movement that rejects caste hierarchy, doctrinal rigidity, and transcendental religion in favour of the divinity of the immediate, embodied, sensory world. The Baul philosophy of "*maner manush*" (the man of the heart) posits that the divine is encountered not in temples or scriptures but in the rhythms of the natural world and the relationships of daily life.

This Baul-inspired ethics of immanence gives Tagore's ecological philosophy a practical, place-based, and embodied character that distinguishes it from the more abstract frameworks of both classical Vedanta and Western environmental philosophy. It positions him in productive dialogue with contemporary environmental philosophies that emphasize embodiment and particularity—such as the land ethics of Aldo Leopold, the ecofeminism of Val Plumwood, and the place-based environmental philosophy of Edward Casey and Jeff Malpas. Against the tendency of both utilitarian and rights-based environmental ethics to abstract from the particularities of place and relationship, Tagore's Baul-inflected ecological philosophy insists on the moral significance of specific rivers, specific trees, specific seasonal rhythms.

V. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: LIMITATIONS AND LACUNAE

A. The Aestheticization of Nature and the Problem of Politics

The most significant limitation of Tagore's ecological philosophy, from the perspective of contemporary environmental ethics, is its predominantly aesthetic character. For Tagore, the ecological relationship is fundamentally a relationship of beauty, joy, and spiritual uplift—an experience of *ananda* (bliss) that transforms the human self and reconciles it with the wider community of being. This aesthetic-spiritual framework is philosophically rich and motivationally powerful, but it tends to underemphasize the harder, more conflictual dimensions of ecological ethics: the politics of natural resource distribution, the structural and economic drivers of environmental destruction, and how ecological degradation differentially burdens marginalized communities along lines of class, caste, and gender. In essence, Tagore's ecological philosophy offers a more compelling explanation of what it means to live in harmony with nature than it does as a practical guide for action when systemic power structures actively block or prevent that harmony.

This shortcoming becomes especially evident when Tagore's ecological philosophy is examined alongside the political ecology of scholars such as Rob Nixon. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" emphasizes the gradual, scattered, and often invisible forms of environmental damage—including industrial pollution, soil degradation, aquifer depletion, and toxic contamination—that disproportionately harm the poor, the dispossessed, and geographically marginalized communities. Tagore's vision of nature as a site of spiritual encounter and aesthetic joy is largely silent on these forms of ecological harm, and his emphasis on the cultivation of inner consciousness—however philosophically admirable—tends to redirect attention away from the structural, institutional, and political dimensions of environmental injustice. A philosophy of ecological consciousness that cannot account for the specific harms suffered by Dalit agricultural communities, displaced forest-dwellers, or communities living downstream from industrial effluents is, in an important sense, incomplete.

B. Postcolonial Critique and the Question of Universalism

Another significant critical approach comes from postcolonial ecocriticism, which maintains that environmental ethics should focus not only on the relationship between humans and nature, but also on the interconnections between colonialism, capitalism, and ecological destruction. Scholars such as Amitav Ghosh and Ramachandra Guha have argued that the dominant frameworks of Western environmental ethics—including deep ecology—reproduce a form of ecological universalism that occludes the specific histories of colonial appropriation of natural resources and the differential vulnerabilities of colonized peoples to environmental harm.

Tagore's ecological philosophy is, in some respects, vulnerable to a similar critique. His vision of a harmonious world civilization grounded in the unity of humanity and nature—articulated most fully in his lectures collected in *Nationalism* (1917) and *The Religion of Man* (1931)—tends toward a universalism that can obscure the particular struggles of colonized peoples and the decisive role of colonial capitalism in producing the ecological crises of the modern world. The "forest civilization" that Tagore celebrates as a model was itself the product of particular social arrangements involving caste, gender, and class hierarchies that his universalist framing tends to romanticize rather than interrogate. A critically reconstructed Tagorean environmental ethics must, therefore, engage more explicitly with questions of colonial history, environmental justice, and the politics of ecological knowledge—including the question of whose knowledge about nature has historically been recognized as legitimate and whose has been suppressed or appropriated.

C. The Empirical Challenge: Tagore and Contemporary Ecology

A third important consideration is empirical rather than political in nature. Tagore formulated his ecological philosophy in the early decades of the twentieth century, before the evolution of modern ecology as a recognized scientific discipline and before the full articulation of evolutionary biology's implications for our understanding of natural processes. His vision of nature as a harmonious, spiritually animated community of being is difficult to reconcile—at least without significant philosophical mediation—with the picture that emerges from contemporary ecology: a dynamic, non-equilibrium system characterized by competition, predation, parasitism, disturbance, and mass extinction as well as by cooperation, symbiosis, and interdependence. An ecological philosophy adequate to the twenty-first century must engage seriously with this empirically complex and morally ambiguous picture of natural processes, rather than grounding its normative claims in an idealized vision of natural harmony that contemporary science cannot support. This empirical challenge does not invalidate Tagore's ethical insights; it does, however, require that those insights be reformulated in a framework consonant with what we now know about the actual dynamics of ecological systems.

VI. TOWARD A CRITICALLY RECONSTRUCTED TAGOREAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The critical analysis of the preceding section does not undermine the philosophical significance of Tagore's ecological consciousness; it clarifies what a Tagorean environmental ethics adequate to the present must look like. Three reconstructive moves are proposed.

First, Tagore's aesthetico-spiritual ecological framework must be supplemented by explicit and systematic attention to environmental justice. A Tagorean environmental ethics for the twenty-first century must take the differential vulnerabilities of marginalized communities to ecological harm and must recognize that the cultivation of ecological consciousness cannot be adequately pursued in abstraction from the structures of social and political inequality that determine who bears the costs of environmental degradation and who benefits from natural resource exploitation. This supplementation does not contradict Tagore's deepest commitments—his lifelong critique of caste hierarchy, his vision of a democratic community of equal persons, and his insistence on the dignity of all human beings are entirely consistent with a robust commitment to environmental justice—but it requires making explicit and operationally concrete what remains merely implicit in his texts.

Second, Tagore's ecological universalism must be inflected by postcolonial awareness of the specific histories of colonial ecological destruction and the differential distribution of ecological burdens and benefits. A Tagorean environmental ethics must recognize that the "forest civilization" he idealized was itself a site of social contestation, and that the relationship between Indian communities and their natural environments has been shaped by colonial and post-colonial political economies as well as by indigenous philosophical traditions.

Third, Tagore's relational ontology and ethics of care must be brought into productive dialogue with contemporary ecological science. The core insight that human beings are embedded in and constitutively dependent upon ecological systems—and that this embeddedness generates genuine moral obligations—is entirely consistent with, and indeed supported by, the picture of nature that emerges from systems ecology and evolutionary biology, even if the specific features of that picture are more complex and less harmonious than Tagore's vision suggests. A critically reconstructed Tagorean environmental ethics would draw on both the philosophical depth and motivational power of his relational ontology and the empirical insights of contemporary ecology, using each to enrich and discipline the other.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Rabindranath Tagore's ecological consciousness constitutes a philosophically significant and critically rich contribution to environmental ethics. Rooted in the Upanishadic tradition of non-dualism and the immanent spirituality of the Baul tradition, expressed through a lifetime of literary and philosophical work, and institutionalized in the pedagogical practice of Shantiniketan, Tagore's ecological vision offers three principal contributions to contemporary environmental discourse.

The first is a relational ontology of nature that challenges the Cartesian-Newtonian framework still dominant in both mainstream ethics and mainstream environmental policy, and that provides a philosophically rigorous foundation for recognizing the inherent worth of non-human life. The second is an ethics of *viswa-bodh*—cosmic awareness—that grounds ecological obligation not in abstract principles or formal rights but in the cultivated capacity for attentiveness, care, and moral responsiveness to the claims of the natural world. The third is a model of ecological pedagogy, embodied at Shantiniketan, that demonstrates the practical possibility of integrating ecological consciousness into institutional life and educational practice.

These contributions are not without limitations. Tagore's aesthetico-spiritual framework requires supplementation by attention to environmental justice, postcolonial history, and the empirical complexity of ecological science. A critically reconstructed Tagorean environmental ethics—one that retains his philosophical insights while addressing these lacunae—can make a genuinely distinctive contribution to global ecological discourse.

The ecological crises of the twenty-first century are, at their root, crises of consciousness and culture as well as of technology and policy. They call for precisely the kind of fundamental transformation in human self-understanding and ethical orientation that Tagore spent his life articulating across literature, philosophy, and educational practice. To engage seriously with his ecological philosophy is therefore not merely an exercise in intellectual or cultural history; it involves contributing to the urgent philosophical task of reimagining humanity's relationship with the natural world—the foundation on which the future of all life on this planet depends. For scholars working in the Indian philosophical tradition, and particularly for those at the intersection of philosophy, ecology, and cultural studies, Tagore's thought constitutes an invaluable and still largely underexplored philosophical resource—one that, critically reconstructed and brought into dialogue with the best of contemporary environmental thinking, has the potential to make a genuinely original contribution to one of the defining intellectual and moral challenges of our time.

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