



Eco-Spirituality and Posthuman Thought in Swami Vivekananda's Travelogues

Subhashis Banerjee

Department of English, Nagaland University (A Central University), Kohima

Abstract: *Swami Vivekananda, a towering figure of the 19th century, traversed continents spreading the message of Vedanta and universal spirituality. His travelogues, rich in philosophical insights, transcend anthropocentric narratives and delve into the interconnectedness of all life forms, thereby laying the groundwork for a posthuman ecological perspective. This study explores how Vivekananda's writings advocate a harmonious existence that dismantles the rigid binaries between humans, non-human entities, and the environment. By employing a posthumanist framework, the research illuminates the ways in which Vivekananda's reflections on nature, society, and the divine contribute to contemporary ecological thought.*

Keywords: Posthumanism, Ecology, Travelogues, Vivekananda, Vedanta, Interconnectedness, Spirituality, Non-Anthropocentrism

1. Introduction

Swami Vivekananda's extensive travels across India, Europe, and the United States were not merely physical journeys but profound intellectual and spiritual odysseys, through which he disseminated a universal vision of human existence intricately interwoven with the cosmos. His teachings, encapsulated in his lectures, letters, and essays, articulate an expansive worldview that transcends narrow anthropocentric paradigms and resonates strongly with contemporary posthuman ecological thought. Posthumanism, as a philosophical approach, challenges human exceptionalism by situating human beings within the broader web of life, emphasizing interconnectedness, and urging a reconsideration of our role in the ecological system. Similarly, Vivekananda's philosophical and spiritual framework emphasizes the unity of all existence, drawing upon the Vedantic idea of oneness (Advaita) that posits no essential separation between the self and the universe. His message of universal interconnectedness not only critiques the exploitative dichotomies between humanity and nature but also offers a holistic understanding of existence that aligns with the core principles of posthuman ecology. As he journeyed through different cultural and geographical contexts, Vivekananda imbibed diverse perspectives and tailored his teachings to

bridge Eastern spiritual traditions with Western scientific rationality. He sought to dismantle the rigid binaries that have long shaped human thought, such as mind versus body, humanity versus nature, and spirit versus matter. In doing so, he prefigured many tenets of posthumanism by articulating a vision of life where humanity is not the sovereign ruler of the Earth but a vital thread in the intricate tapestry of existence. This vision is profoundly ecological, urging a reorientation of human values toward harmony with the environment and advocating for an ethical responsibility to all forms of life. His reflections on the sacredness of nature, the spiritual dimension of ecological balance, and the need for sustainable living practices are remarkably prescient in light of contemporary environmental crises. For instance, in his speeches at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Vivekananda expounded on the unity of religious and philosophical traditions, emphasizing the importance of compassion and coexistence—principles that extend to how humans interact with the natural world. By advocating for a harmonious relationship between human beings and their environment, he implicitly critiqued the industrialization and materialism that alienate people from nature and disrupt ecological systems. His travels brought him face-to-face with the stark realities of social inequality, environmental degradation, and

cultural alienation, prompting him to champion a form of spirituality that was deeply rooted in social and ecological justice. His interactions with the impoverished masses in India and his observations of the industrial West's environmental excesses further solidified his resolve to promote a more balanced and integrative worldview. Moreover, Vivekananda's ecological vision was not abstract but deeply practical. He advocated for agricultural reforms, the upliftment of rural communities, and the equitable distribution of resources, recognizing that sustainable living required systemic changes in economic and social structures. His emphasis on self-discipline, simplicity, and the renunciation of greed aligns with contemporary calls for a degrowth economy and sustainable lifestyles. Furthermore, his insistence on the spiritual basis of ecological harmony presents a compelling counter-narrative to the technocratic solutions often proposed in modern environmental discourse. By rooting ecological consciousness in spiritual awakening, Vivekananda underscored the necessity of inner transformation as a precursor to external change. His teachings challenge the reductionist tendencies of modern science, which often divorces ecological issues from their ethical and spiritual dimensions. Instead, he called for an integrative approach that harmonizes scientific understanding with spiritual insight, thereby fostering a more profound respect for the natural

world. This integrative vision has significant implications for contemporary environmental ethics, as it suggests that the ecological crisis is not merely a technical problem but a moral and spiritual one that requires a fundamental shift in human consciousness. Vivekananda's emphasis on the universality of spiritual truths and his critique of dogmatic religious and scientific systems provide a valuable framework for addressing the fragmentation and alienation that characterize modern ecological thought. His philosophy encourages a move away from the mechanistic and utilitarian views of nature toward a reverence for life in all its forms, advocating for a deep ecological perspective that recognizes the intrinsic value of every being. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of the Anthropocene, an era defined by human-induced environmental changes, as it calls for a re-evaluation of humanity's relationship with the Earth and its ecosystems. By framing ecological issues within a spiritual and philosophical context, Vivekananda's teachings offer a holistic approach to environmentalism that transcends the limitations of purely scientific or policy-driven frameworks. His vision inspires a form of ecological activism that is rooted in compassion, interconnectedness, and the recognition of the sacredness of all life. In this way, his contributions to ecological thought anticipate and enrich the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism, urging a reimagining of human identity and agency in

relation to the larger ecological web. Thus, Swami Vivekananda's journeys and teachings serve as a profound reminder of the interdependence between human and non-human worlds, offering a spiritual and ethical foundation for addressing the environmental challenges of our time.

2. Posthumanism and Ecology: A Conceptual Framework

Posthumanism, as a theoretical approach, critiques the human-centred worldview that has dominated Western thought since the Enlightenment. It calls for a profound shift in perspective, advocating for a re-evaluation of the human's place within the broader ecological web and emphasizing relationality and interdependence. In rejecting the anthropocentric paradigm that places humans above or apart from other life forms, posthumanism aligns itself with ecological thought that transcends binary oppositions such as nature versus culture and subject versus object. By dismantling these rigid dichotomies, it fosters a more inclusive and holistic understanding of life, recognizing the fluid and entangled relationships among all entities, both human and non-human. The work of posthumanist theorists like Rosi Braidotti, who foregrounds the relational ontology that underpins existence, underscores the necessity of viewing life through a lens that acknowledges interconnectedness rather than separateness (Braidotti 13). This perspective is particularly crucial in an era of environmental crises, where

the limitations of human exceptionalism have become glaringly apparent. Posthuman ecological thought insists that the survival of life on Earth requires a radical reimagining of ethics, agency, and accountability, where the human subject is decentred to make room for the voices, agencies, and intrinsic worth of other forms of life and matter. Interestingly, such ideas resonate with ancient philosophies that predate the modern era, demonstrating that the seeds of posthuman ecology have long existed in diverse intellectual traditions. The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, for example, offers profound insights that align with the principles of posthumanist ecology. Vivekananda emphasized the interconnectedness of all beings and the unity of existence, ideas deeply embedded in the Vedantic tradition. His assertion that the same divine essence pervades all forms of life challenges hierarchical notions of human superiority and reinforces the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism. By advocating for a spiritual ecology that regards the self as intrinsically linked to the universe, Vivekananda's teachings invite a rethinking of ethical responsibility toward the environment and all living beings. This perspective harmonizes with posthumanist calls for a broader ecological consciousness, one that recognizes the interdependence of all life forms and rejects exploitative attitudes toward nature. Furthermore, the emphasis on relationality in Vivekananda's thought parallels contemporary

posthumanist discussions about the porous boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. His philosophical framework provides a bridge between ancient wisdom and modern ecological imperatives, highlighting the enduring relevance of holistic and integrative worldviews. As posthumanism seeks to chart a path beyond the anthropocentric legacy of the Enlightenment, it finds an unexpected ally in philosophies like Vivekananda's, which offer time-tested insights into the relational fabric of existence. Together, they underscore the urgent need for a paradigm shift that acknowledges the deep entanglements and mutual dependencies that sustain life on this planet, advocating for an ethics of care, humility, and co-flourishing in an interconnected world.

3. Vivekananda's Vision of Interconnectedness

In his letters and speeches, Swami Vivekananda frequently extolled the unity of existence, a concept deeply rooted in Vedantic philosophy. His holistic worldview emphasized the interconnectedness of all life forms, transcending the boundaries of human and non-human entities. In a letter to Alasinga Perumal, Vivekananda articulated this profound vision: "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal" (Complete Works 1:124). This statement encapsulates his belief in the spiritual and ecological unity of the cosmos.

By highlighting the divinity inherent in every aspect of creation, Vivekananda bridged the perceived chasm between humanity and the natural world, advocating for a harmonious coexistence rooted in mutual reverence and responsibility.

4. The Himalayas: A Source of Spiritual and Ecological Awakening

Vivekananda's extensive travels through the Himalayan regions profoundly shaped his ecological sensibilities. The majestic peaks and serene landscapes of the Himalayas served as a spiritual sanctuary where he could reflect deeply on the interdependence of all life forms. He often described the mountains as divine embodiments, emphasizing their role in fostering spiritual growth and ecological awareness. "The silence of the Himalayas speaks volumes to the seeker; it teaches the insignificance of human arrogance in the face of eternity" (Complete Works 6:97). These reflections underscore his belief that nature is not merely a backdrop for human endeavours but a dynamic teacher offering wisdom to those who approach it with humility and reverence.

Vivekananda's reverence for the natural world was not confined to its aesthetic or spiritual dimensions. He also recognized its practical and life-sustaining aspects. The Ganges River, for example, was for him a sacred entity that epitomized the life-giving forces of nature. In one of his letters, he wrote, "The Ganga is the

mother of us all; she nourishes, cleanses, and uplifts” (Complete Works 4:222). By framing the Ganges as a nurturing force, he highlighted its ecological importance, sustaining countless beings across its course. This perspective aligns with contemporary posthuman ecological ethics, which advocate for recognizing the intrinsic value of non-human entities.

5. Dismantling Anthropocentrism in Vivekananda’s Thought

One of the central tenets of posthuman ecology is the rejection of anthropocentrism—the belief in human superiority over other life forms. Vivekananda’s writings consistently challenge this hierarchical worldview, urging a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of existence. During his visit to the United States, he expressed admiration for the ecological ethos of Native American cultures, which he saw as embodying the true spirit of Vedanta. “Their respect for the land, the water, and the sky reflects the true spirit of Vedanta” (Complete Works 3:45). By drawing parallels between indigenous ecological practices and Vedantic principles, Vivekananda underscored the universal relevance of living in harmony with nature.

In his lecture “The Spirit and Influence of Vedanta,” he elaborated on this vision: “The Vedantic ideal teaches us not to separate ourselves from the universe but to feel one with it” (Complete Works 2:313). This statement dismantles the hierarchical binaries that place

humans above other life forms, promoting a philosophy of interconnectedness that resonates with posthumanist calls for a more inclusive ontology. By rejecting the dualistic separation between humanity and nature, Vivekananda laid the groundwork for a more integrated and compassionate ecological worldview.

6. Nature as Teacher and Healer

Vivekananda’s travelogues are replete with reflections on the lessons he gleaned from the natural world. His writings on the Himalayas, rivers, and forests reveal a profound respect for nature’s role as both a teacher and a healer. He saw the cycles of life and death, growth and decay, as manifestations of a divine order that offers wisdom to those who observe it attentively. In his meditations at the Belur Math, located near the Hooghly River, he often contemplated the river’s ceaseless flow as a metaphor for life’s impermanence and interconnectedness. “The river flows,” he wrote, “carrying life, sustaining it, and yet moving on, unperturbed by the fleeting concerns of man” (Complete Works 5:101).

The Himalayas, too, served as a source of inspiration for Vivekananda’s ecological philosophy. He described the mountains as “majestic teachers” that instil a sense of humility and awe in those who seek spiritual growth. “The grandeur of the Himalayas reminds us of the vastness of the cosmos and the insignificance of our individual egos” (Complete Works 6:97).

By positioning nature as a repository of wisdom, Vivekananda challenged the anthropocentric notion of nature as a mere resource to be exploited. Instead, he advocated for a relationship of mutual respect and learning between humans and the natural world.

7. Ethical Implications of Vivekananda's Ecology

Vivekananda's ecological vision carries profound ethical implications that extend beyond human-centred moral frameworks. By framing nature as a divine manifestation, he called for a moral responsibility toward all life forms. His oft-repeated admonition to "love and serve all beings" (Complete Works 7:52) transcends anthropocentric philanthropy, encompassing animals, plants, and even inanimate elements. This holistic ethic aligns with contemporary environmental movements that advocate for the rights of nature and challenge the exploitative practices of industrial modernity.

Furthermore, Vivekananda's critique of colonial exploitation highlighted the environmental degradation caused by imperialism. He lamented the destruction of India's forests and rivers, which he saw as a direct consequence of unsustainable practices imposed by colonial powers. "The plundering of our sacred land has brought ruin not only to our people but to the very earth that sustains us" (Complete Works 3:210). By linking ecological degradation with social injustice, Vivekananda underscored the interconnectedness of environmental and human

well-being, a theme that remains highly relevant in today's discourse on environmental justice.

8. Relevance to Contemporary Environmental Discourse

The ecological insights offered by Vivekananda hold significant relevance for addressing today's environmental crises. His emphasis on interconnectedness provides a philosophical foundation for combating pressing issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. By integrating spirituality with ecological awareness, Vivekananda's writings offer a counter-narrative to the technocratic and utilitarian approaches that often dominate contemporary environmental policy.

The global rise of eco-spiritual movements reflects the enduring appeal of such integrative perspectives. Scholars like Arne Naess, who pioneered the concept of deep ecology, and Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist, have drawn upon Eastern philosophies to articulate frameworks that challenge reductionist and exploitative paradigms. Although Vivekananda's contributions to these discourses are less widely recognized, they merit deeper exploration. His travelogues and philosophical writings serve as a bridge between ancient wisdom and modern ecological consciousness, inspiring a holistic approach to environmental stewardship.

9. Lessons from Indigenous and Vedantic Ecological Practices

Vivekananda's engagement with indigenous ecological practices provides valuable insights for contemporary environmental thought. His admiration for Native American respect for the land, water, and sky resonates with the Vedantic principle of oneness. Both traditions emphasize the sanctity of natural elements and advocate for sustainable practices that honour the interconnectedness of life. By drawing attention to these parallels, Vivekananda highlighted the universal relevance of ecological harmony, offering a cross-cultural framework for addressing environmental challenges.

In his reflections on Vedanta, Vivekananda frequently emphasized the non-dualistic nature of existence, urging individuals to see themselves as part of a greater whole. This perspective challenges the exploitative mindset that has contributed to environmental crises, advocating instead for a relational approach that values the intrinsic worth of all beings. "To harm nature is to harm oneself," he argued, underscoring the ethical imperative of ecological stewardship (Complete Works 2:313).

10. Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's travelogues and philosophical reflections offer a rich tapestry of insights that transcend the boundaries of human-centred thought, presenting a profound ecological vision that remains remarkably relevant to contemporary environmental challenges. His emphasis on the interconnectedness of all existence—a concept

rooted in Vedantic philosophy—resonates deeply with the tenets of posthumanism, which seeks to deconstruct anthropocentric hierarchies and advocate for a more inclusive and non-exploitative worldview. At the heart of Vivekananda's teachings lies an ethical framework that challenges the dominion-driven mindset of humanity, urging instead a recognition of the intrinsic value of every form of life. His reflections often highlight the harmony and interdependence between humanity and nature, portraying the cosmos as a unified whole where no entity exists in isolation. This perspective offers a stark contrast to the mechanistic and reductionist paradigms that have historically dominated Western thought, contributing to the exploitation and degradation of natural ecosystems. By drawing on Vivekananda's ecological vision, one can critique the modern obsession with technological mastery and control, which often leads to environmental neglect and crisis. His reverence for nature invites a reconsideration of our place within the broader web of life, emphasizing humility, stewardship, and mutual respect rather than conquest and domination.

The alignment of Vivekananda's philosophy with posthuman ecology is both striking and transformative. Posthumanism challenges the anthropocentric worldview that has perpetuated environmental exploitation, advocating instead for a more symbiotic relationship with the non-human world. Vivekananda's teachings echo

this ethos, urging humanity to transcend its egoistic impulses and embrace a more holistic understanding of existence. He often spoke of the divine immanence in all beings, asserting that the same universal spirit pervades every aspect of creation. This spiritual egalitarianism undermines the hierarchical structures that place humans above other life forms, fostering a sense of kinship and solidarity with the natural world. Moreover, his emphasis on self-realization and inner transformation as the basis for ethical action provides a counter-narrative to the consumerist and exploitative practices that dominate modern industrial societies. By internalizing the interconnectedness of life, Vivekananda believed that individuals could cultivate a sense of responsibility that extends beyond their immediate interests, embracing a more inclusive and compassionate approach to environmental stewardship.

Critically engaging with Vivekananda's ecological insights through the lens of posthumanism reveals profound implications for addressing the multifaceted environmental crises of our time. The relentless pursuit of economic growth and technological advancement, often at the expense of ecological integrity, reflects a fundamental disconnection from the natural world—a disconnection that Vivekananda's philosophy seeks to mend. His call for a shift from materialism to spiritual awareness challenges the commodification of nature, advocating for a paradigm where the earth is not

merely a resource to be exploited but a sacred entity to be revered and protected. This spiritual reorientation aligns with posthuman ecological principles, which emphasize the need to rethink human exceptionalism and cultivate a more reciprocal relationship with the environment. By fostering a deeper awareness of the interdependence between all forms of life, Vivekananda's teachings encourage a move toward sustainable practices that honour the intrinsic worth of the natural world.

Furthermore, Vivekananda's emphasis on ethical inclusivity offers valuable insights for reimagining environmental justice in a globalized world. The ecological challenges we face—from climate change to biodiversity loss—are inherently interconnected, transcending national and cultural boundaries. His vision of universal brotherhood and compassion underscores the importance of collective action and solidarity in addressing these global issues. By advocating for a sense of shared responsibility, Vivekananda's philosophy provides a moral foundation for collaborative efforts to protect and preserve the planet. This approach challenges the individualistic and profit-driven ethos that has fuelled environmental degradation, promoting instead a communal and altruistic ethic that prioritizes the well-being of all life forms. In this context, his teachings serve as a clarion call for a more equitable and sustainable future, where the rights and needs of marginalized communities—both

human and non-human—are acknowledged and respected.

The intersection of Vivekananda's thought with posthumanism also invites critical reflection on the role of technology and its impact on the environment. While technological advancements have undoubtedly brought about significant progress, they have also contributed to a growing disconnection from the natural world, exacerbating ecological imbalances and fostering a culture of excess and waste. Vivekananda's critique of unbridled materialism and his call for spiritual awakening offer a counterpoint to the technocentric narratives that dominate contemporary discourse. By emphasizing the need for mindful and ethical engagement with technology, his teachings encourage a more balanced approach that prioritizes ecological harmony and sustainability. This perspective aligns with posthuman ecological thought, which advocates for the responsible use of technology in ways that support rather than undermine the well-being of the planet.

In addition to offering a critical framework for rethinking our relationship with the environment, Vivekananda's philosophy also provides practical guidance for cultivating ecological consciousness. His emphasis on self-discipline, simplicity, and compassion serves as a blueprint for living in harmony with nature. By embracing a lifestyle that prioritizes mindfulness and moderation, individuals can reduce their

ecological footprint and contribute to the creation of a more sustainable world. This shift requires not only a change in individual behaviour but also a transformation of societal values and structures. Vivekananda's call for education and awareness as tools for social and spiritual upliftment highlights the importance of fostering ecological literacy and promoting sustainable practices at both the individual and collective levels. Through education, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of life and the ethical imperatives that arise from this awareness, empowering them to take meaningful action in addressing environmental challenges.

The critical relevance of Vivekananda's ecological vision extends beyond theoretical discourse, offering a roadmap for transformative action in the face of urgent environmental crises. His teachings inspire a shift from exploitative paradigms to a more harmonious and sustainable relationship with the natural world, paving the way for a future where humanity coexists with nature in mutual respect and reverence. By revisiting and reinterpreting his philosophy in light of posthuman ecological principles, we can uncover valuable insights for addressing the systemic roots of environmental degradation and fostering a more just and sustainable world. His vision of interconnectedness and ethical inclusivity serves as a powerful antidote to the alienation and fragmentation that characterize much of contemporary life, offering a path



toward ecological renewal and spiritual awakening. In this way, Vivekananda's legacy continues to illuminate the path toward a more harmonious and compassionate relationship with

the natural world, inspiring us to envision and work toward a future where humanity thrives in balance with the broader web of life.

References

- [1] Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
- [2] Vivekananda, Swami. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Advaita Ashrama, various volumes.
- [3] Naess, Arne. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements." *Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1973, pp. 95–100.
- [4] Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. South End Press, 2005.