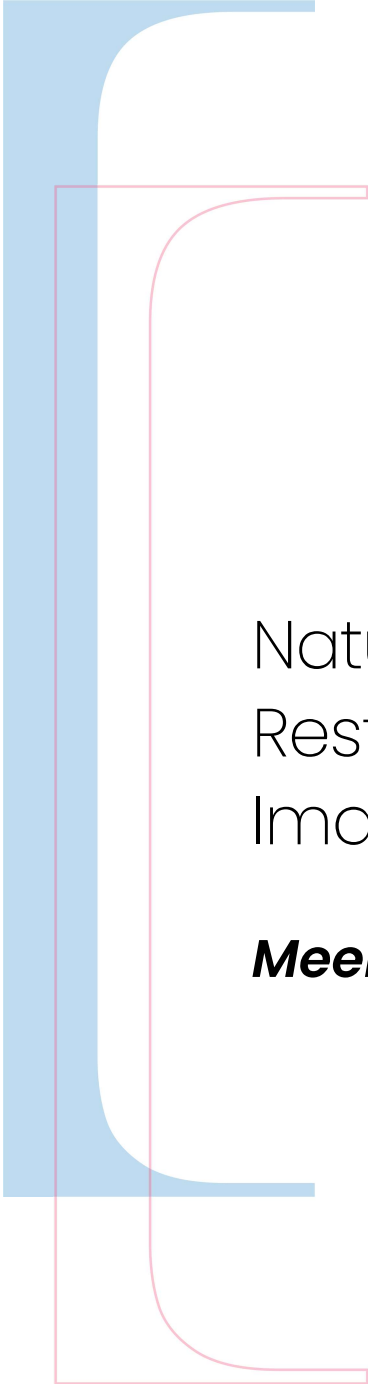




Nature and Natural: Sustaining, Restoring, and Greening our Imaginations

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Abstract:

This short essay looks at the idea of nature as it has been conceptualized in relation to human beings and the ways in which humans have tried to incorporate the idea of conservation or restoration in urban landscapes. I argue that such restoration focuses on visual aesthetics rather than the intrinsic good of nature or natural environment creating gardens that are highly manipulated by human action. I take two examples of heritage trees and a local park to show how humans add both symbolic and material components to nature in their habitats.

Key words: Nature, Artifact, restoration, parks, heritage trees, restoration, value

Introduction

In the modern world pro-environmental behaviour or eco-friendly behaviour seems to be a buzzword that is thrown along with a set of other words such as green, recycling, minimalism, natural, chemical free and so on. This narrative of a nature-friendly lifestyle and attitude is continuously propagated by media organizations that are seeking to make a difference in the environment, the government, scientists interested in conservation and sustainability, many individuals and influencers who are worried about the state of the environment. In an attempt to study the ground level effect of such interpretations of how nature and nature conservation have influenced people, I studied local environmental landscapes and events in my own neighbourhood and the city of Bangalore. The paper looks at the concept of nature, the popular viewpoints about what constitutes nature and seeks to posit that the discourse of nature

is socially or culturally constructed and is different from the physical reality of our surroundings or what we can loosely refer to as the natural world. The vision of nature as culture thus posits that all knowledge of nature is filtered through cultural lenses, scientific as well as popular understanding. Of course, a synthesis of the two would require a shift in perspectives as right now neither has the place for the other. From a survey of literature and writing about nature, we notice that terms such as 'green business' or 'ecological economics' or 'artificially created lake,' sustainable development and so on are popular and stimulate public imagination. The impact of the vision of nature as creatable or modifiable would therefore have a lot to do with the perception of nature as culture and vice versa.

In his essay, "Science Nature and Globalisation", Frank argues that the entity nature was conceptually reconstituted over the course of the last century from the conception of nature as a cornucopia of resources towards a conception of nature as a universal life sustaining "environment" or "ecosystem"¹ (Frank, 1997). Frank's classification of the concept of nature is in the form of a typology. In his paper he divides the idea of nature into different models that can be viewed historically such as:

1. Savage model - this typology contains models which classed nature as animate spiritualized nature opposed and dangerous to the human.
2. Edenic model - Under this type come the models of views of a nature, that is spiritual yet subordinate to human society. Nature is useful to human beings in both inspiring awe and in rejuvenating spirit.
3. Rights model places nature as spiritually or morally integrated with the society. Frank classifies the idea of the Jain religion in this model. Up to this model type, nature is depicted as spiritual. In the next three classifications, the models are based on function integration.

¹ The word ecosystem can be a reference to nature especially in the newer conservation philosophies.

4. Feral model – like the savage model, places the concept of nature as opposed to the human. Nature is conceived of as a dangerous physical entity filled with insects, weeds, and uncontrollable phenomena such as earthquakes or floods.

5. Resource model – in this nature is viewed as a subordinate physical entity that is a source for human benefits.

6. Ecosystem model – in this model, the ecosystem is physically integrated with the human being. Nature and man are seen as a physical- interdependent- whole.

According to Frank, (1997) who has studied the rationale behind environmental protection treaties, there has been a change over from the earlier models to the last one in the list, the ecosystem model. This happened because of a redefinition of nature that shifted the cultural framework to allow the environment to be defined as functionally important for human beings:

“In constructing a concept of nature that is pervasively bound up with human life processes regardless of national boundaries, the redefinition of nature as a global ecosystem provided a powerful rationale for international coordination around nature.” (Frank, 1997)

The divide between what is natural and what is not nature seems to be mainly based on the context of its creation. Human created things are not nature. The answer to the question ‘what is nature?’ is fluid. If we engage with the concept of nature from the viewpoint of a social phenomenon, as well as the meanings that it holds for people, we are faced with the phenomenological problem, the ambiguity of the term nature. For an urban dweller the term forest which is a very common term connected with nature would mean greenery or trees, and for a desert herdsman, the sand dunes would still be jungle or forest. Due to ambiguity of what nature actually is or what it represents for people in general, it is possible that conflicting, differing and sometimes contrary paradigms of nature among cultures of communities of people can co-exist even in the same geographical region.

The natural world or the real world around us is perhaps what leads to the conceptualizations of nature. Dorbin and Weisser (2002., p. 573) suggest that all nature is constructed through discursive practices: "All reality including nature, is discursively constructed. The environment is an idea that is created through discourse."

They claim that the relationship between discourse and the environment is reciprocal and dialogic. (Dorbin and Weisser, 2002., Ibid.) The diversity and richness of language reflects the diversity of the world in which such language arises. The preservation of the denizens of those places with rich biodiversity would preserve in a sense the biodiversity of the environment itself. If this is true, then it can be said that the categories of nature may vary from culture to culture. Like the phenomenon called snow would have over 60 meanings in the phenomenal world for a person dwelling in the northern icecap, the phenomenon called nature or even the different words used to describe the world around them would have different meanings for different people. It is clear from the above argument that we cannot explain nature as a concept without considering who it is a concept for and when it is such a concept for them. A contextual reading of the concept of nature is very important. Historically, the notion of a nature opposed to human beings used during enlightenment periods by both the people who wanted to conserve it as well as the scientists who made it into an object of study. For example, for the Romantics, man was an "outrage" against nature, for the scientists, nature was an object to be discovered by man who was extra nature because of his rationality.

Torrance (1999) claims in his paper on nature and history that, the history of the concept of nature bears primary testimony to the shifting variations and multiplicities of the differing human experiences of the extra-human world around us. Further, he remarks that nature was a primary concern and had been long invented or discovered long before, and furthermore he posits that the concept of nature is central to the history of western thought. (Torrance, 1999) While it is clear that there exists a concept of nature that can be traced historically, Torrance in the same article says-

In a very real (though widely) overlooked sense, then, nature – the phenomenal world in all its diversity, but our way of understanding its

dynamic underlying processes its history: for like human history itself, it is what we have made it, as well as what it has made us. (pp.144–145)

Without reducing the exploration of nature into a mere linguistic concept, I would like to add that to a large extent current literature and research for the most part has ignored the interpretation of nature in the everyday life of people and communities. This has occurred due to the idea that nature and culture exist in opposition to each other and always counterpoised. This is true for science and true for religion as well.

The vision of nature as culture thus posits that all knowledge of nature is filtered through cultural lenses, scientific as well as popular understanding. Of course, a synthesis of the two would require a shift in perspectives as right now neither has the place for the other. The following sections in the paper examine some examples of the interplay between nature and culture.

Natural Trees as human markers

When nature becomes a part of history very specifically, trees are earmarked as ‘heritage trees’.

“Every country has its heritage trees – old trees, wide trees, tall trees, rare trees, “weird and wonderful” trees, and trees with historical and cultural significance.” describes a heritage tree protection website. The movement to protect trees that are linked to cultural memories of people and local histories of people illustrates the coming together of history and the environment in a unique way.²

Some years ago, the Karnataka heritage society, a local organization in the state of Karnataka began a project to identify and protect trees that were designated as heritage trees. The most notable heritage trees are the banyan and peepul as they often are very old (for us they mark the passage of time in generations) or are very huge and occupy a large place through their trunks and canopy.

2 For more see Nagendra, H., and S. Mundoli, report on heritage trees, 2020

Heritage trees are trees which are exceptional or notable for a variety of reasons, such as;

1. Veteran trees of great age and antiquity
2. Trees which are closely associated with our culture or history
3. Trees of exceptional size and record dimensions
4. Botanically rare or unusual trees
5. Trees associated with historical figures
6. Named trees
7. Trees which form part of historic landscapes

The heritage tree movement traces its conservation from the Romantic Movement of conservation started by John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club in 1892. Jesse Hoskins in the same year protected 90 acres of old-growth Giant Sequoias by homesteading and residing in the base of the Hercules Tree. Many cities and countries have heritage tree preservation movements both for nature conservation and as sites of historical events. Some environmental organizations have taken on heritage tree preservation in Bangalore and even have a tree walk in Lalbagh to identify rare and unique trees.

On one hand there is the need to preserve trees as a part of the urban greenery; on the other hand, what is evident is that trees become place markers for events and spaces. Trees are planted by Very Important Person(VIP), trees that were planted by historical personalities (such as Tipu Sultan) all become "Heritage Trees". Why is it that trees become markers of history?

This is not a new phenomenon in a nation where trees have symbolized events for a long time. The *Bodhi* tree where Buddha attained his enlightenment or the Asoka tree forest where Sita was imprisoned – all form a part of the cultural memory of the subcontinent's people.

Yet the new wave of planting trees by VIPs is different. The tree is not the symbolic discourse or a representation of a cultural or religious event but a *spatio-temporal marker*, indicating a particular place and time. It does not, like a foundation stone, remain an unfading testimony to a visit or an event in the past.

It doesn't even automatically carry the name of a VIP like a cited plaque. Instead, it grows only sometimes marked by a short-lived board that says 'planted by so and so'. It is instead marked in the memory of the people, passed down through the medium of oral and written histories of landscapes – "This tree was planted by the prime minister." The growth of the tree strengthens the memory of the person who planted it, a living testimony to an event. In the same conversation is also included, the whole value accorded to planting trees as an act of altruism (as the kings did in the days of the yore). In one tree-planting ceremony multiple discourses are captured – History, environmentalism, gaining merits (Punya) as well as privilege of the land on which such an event has occurred.

Public trees that were not planted very specifically by VIPS or kings also share the historical memories of people for their everyday life. The banyan tree bus stop or the old house next to a peepul tree functions as space-time markers for people. Here the marking is more spatial than temporal. The tree provides a background for the events to occur. The tree under which the chaiwallah sits or the bus halts would be an example. In that sense it goes back to the original symbolic meanings that it would have for people like the *Bodhi* tree or the *Aswattha* (ficus) tree.

What is interesting is how nature as trees become history and history becomes nature in the construction of the discourse of Heritage trees. In this interaction between human memory and nature we cannot deny that there is a strange symbiosis of human and nature, each preserving the memory of the other. Not that the tree remembers of course, but by its very presence it becomes a dynamic mnemonic for the human.

Last but not the least, in the development plans for the city in Bangalore, a number of trees may be axed. What is being ultimately erased is history– history that is not written in pages in print but history that is written in the landscape in the memories of people. People forget soon and it is trees that acted as mute reminders. When the tree is no more, the history around it would also be no more.

Green- lungs of a city: parks as visual nature

Many urban neighbourhoods look up on including green areas of parks or spaces in between housing and buildings and consider this one of the ways that they contribute to the sustainability of the environment particularly clean air and hello groundwater recharge true soil. In this small essay, I engage with everyday narrative of sustainable living that people tend to practice and propagate as a part of an eco-friendly lifestyle. Embedded in this discourse about nature is dirt or the notion of pollution, one that is given by aesthetic sensibility rather than preservation of nature. When talking about nature, media like newspapers, and websites, nature channels like the national geographic greatly influence what we in contemporary times, perceive as nature.

For instance, if we look at advertisements and photos of nature that are prevalent in the public domain that carry some sort of natural theme, there are two aspects of use of nature in them that one can perceive easily. One is the use of natural objects to metaphorically represent familiar natural images. A cheetah morphs into a powerful and speedy bike or a car turns into a wild and strong bull. They are the same type of images as evoked by the picture of a particular state calling itself a “sunflower state” welcoming, the bee-investors. Metaphors of nature are thus used by advertisers for any purpose, maybe to drive a psychological need in the consumer or emotionally entice them to buy into their argument for a product. I feel that this is no different from linking job success to a fairness cream or a cricket score to a shaving gel. These are all advertising strategies, and the objects of nature are no different. Most of the audience are now not buying into these symbols, unless they are uneducated or devoted fans of a star believing that their heroes or heroines really use the products they advertise. The second type of advertisements like the ones selling real estate, use the cultural perception of nature to sell a property. This property that is a building that one would associate least with nature and most with an artificial habitat for human beings. Yet the nature that is portrayed symbolizes a particular vision of nature.

On one hand, it seems that the media representation of nature feeds into the way nature is constructed culturally. On the other hand, it also seems possible that what is in these ads is a mere representation of what is there already in people’s

minds. Trying to find if the cultural construction was first or the representation in peoples' minds was first is a question that is unanswerable. However, what is the concept of nature that is invoked by the "Green paradise" type of real estate ads or the images of landscapes in gated community residential areas can easily be reflected upon. These photographs represent Nature in an urban area or what is referred to as green spaces or lung spaces of the city.

According to debates in environmental ethics of what is regarded as nature, there are many scholars who argue that nature that maintained by human interference is not nature at all.

Most 'nature spots' are constructed in urban areas in the form of parks, gardens and landscapes or green belts that claim to restore "nature" and conserve it in the midst of a concrete landscape. The idea of such natural restoration or "greening" of urban spaces draws from the similar visual indicator that we have seen the advertisements.

The nature that gated community ads are referring to is created restored and maintained natural surroundings which Katz calls as artifactual reality. Katz (1997) argues that any humanly designed entities cannot be called natural as nature something that does not have a purpose. The distinction between what is artificial and what is natural is significant in the discourse of nature especially inside urban environments where even nature seems to be created artificially.

Katz (1997) suggests that the value of this Artifactual nature would have changed:

"Nature restoration projects are the creations of human technologies, and as such, are artifacts. But artifacts are essentially the constructs of an anthropocentric world view. They are designed by humans for humans to satisfy human interests and needs. Artifactual restored nature is thus fundamentally different from natural objects and systems which exist without human design. It is not surprising, then, that we view restored nature with a value different from the original." (p.101)

The parks, landscapes and "natural surrounding" may be for relaxation, fresh air or tranquility. Any human restoration of nature is designed to fulfill a human

purpose. For Katz however anything that is “Intrinsically functional” is an artifact and lacks natural value. In other words, for Katz, the amount of manipulation and control that is exercised over these restored artifactual nature separate it from human activity that may in some ways be natural, such as childbirth or feeding on plant food etc. For Katz and others nature has intrinsic value and is not to be valued culturally or functionally. Arguing for an environmental ethic that addresses the value of nature from a non-anthropocentric perspective, Katz posits that degraded nature cannot be replaced by these restored artifacts. While it is certainly true that no planted forest can substitute for a pristine forest, it also seems that he disregards any positive role humans can play in restoring degraded land says Hettinger (2002). For Katz (1997, p.105) in all these instances of nature manipulation, nature losses autonomy and the freedom to develop on its own.

What one can derive from Katz is that these artifacts can be culturally represented as nature and used by developers and other builders to claim that they are adequately compensating for loss of any natural vegetation or land cover. One can argue that naturally grown vegetation or at the least already existing trees would be more natural than planted high maintenance gardens.

These increasing trends to bring nature! into the city represent an aspect of the human- nature relationship which portrays nature as an artifact, adding to the glory of human technology that recreate the pristine beauty of the wild for us in our urban backyard. What is more interesting is in this landscape of nature, all that is perceived as the ‘good’ parts of nature is constructed leaving out the wild and dangerous parts. Weeds, insects or snakes, all a part of original environment in the city or the real nature are filtered out leaving behind a ‘sanitized’ tame malleable ‘natural’ landscape.

Rolston (2005, 62) claims that human beings are naturally political and build themselves a polis in which they can socialize. According to him the architectures of nature and culture are different, and culture will always seek to improve nature, the management intent spoils the wilderness. Culture processes by their very ‘nature’ interrupt evolution he claims.

Yet human beings have dimensions within themselves which relates to the wild or the rural. The parks and the gardens seem to create a wild' or natural area of or the urban dweller that fulfills this need. These gardens and areas are in demand as they bring the natural landscape to that halfway point between human-made and entirely natural. The normal reaction of urban dwellers to wild is one of threat and fear and there are communities that would be happier with plastic plants and trees. Yet these advertisements and what they represent is the notion that a nature that is tamed is more worth than either the pure wild or the totally built environment.

Still, our homes are cultural places in their construction, but there is always a natural foundation, a sense of belongingness to the landscape. For all those boundaries that we defend against the external world, our virtues are not confined to those of maintaining our separateness. Rolston (p. 65)

The other issue here is the notion of the real estate commodifying the aesthetic appeal of nature. While nature is unpredictable, unstable, and constantly changing, the artifacts of nature! are maintained at stability of a built environment. No erosion denudation or asymmetry is allowed except if it is in the plan. Flower beds are laid with seasonal precision so as to never be bare. Lakes are filled and maintained even in hot summer months. In a way the nature! as an 'aesthetic' value is marketed. Not only the land but air water and any feature of the landscape are used to increase the appeal of what would normally be a built environment, totally created by humans for human habitation.

The human is nature and belongs to it and so anything he creates becomes unnatural and the dominant. In the study of nature categorization. every time an object of perception is classified as nature, person who is classifying seeks to see if there is some human and the picture or not. The problem is also very difficult to solve. At what point of time does something stop being nature and become artificial?

The main argument seems to be based on the point of creation, source, or origin. While putting together of things available in nature and creating something

is synthetic or artificial, people do not perceive the creation of a bird's nest as artificial. The bird's nest is still considered to be natural yet, what do we as Human beings do to the substances and nature? It seems as though once the human hand has touched it, *nature* ceases to be *nature*. A rock or a mountain is a part of nature and yet a statue made of that very rock even if representing an animal or trees, still it's excluded from what we called *nature*. What transforms nature into culture? This seems to be a question that Bernard (1930) seeks to explore in his essay.

The digging stick, taken at first from nature, is later sharpened by man (culture) and later: - still is pointed with a flat stone, a shell or a bone and finally with metal. Archeologists cannot tell us where nature left off fashioning the first hatchet or *coup de poing* and man began to do the work better. (p.40)

Likewise claims Bernard (1930) those human beings at first the imitated nature, copied empirical models of natural environment, copied empirical models of nature and used these models to design a projective invention in the form of cultural and symbolic categories. This I think is the crucial divide between *Natural* and *Artificial*- the change from the empirical to the abstract. The shift from images to verbal or visual symbols. The use of mathematical formula, computation transforms *the Nature* we experience into *the Culture* of the Human beings.

Totally ignoring the natural component of these landscapes on one hand is to ignore the role that these spaces play in built environments. At the same time to consider that these are a substitute for natural landscapes is to ignore the fact that many development projects erase the natural and cultural landscapes beyond recognition, bring in exotic species and introduce features into a terrain that are not necessary at all. Many of these natural features are permanently erased that may be impossible to replace or replicate.

The second level at which I address this is that among the various theories that explain nature and society a phenomenon such as this (advertisements, gardens, and landscapes) can be best explained through a theory of social construction

of nature. Nature values derive from the myth of a divine garden such as Brindavan. Somehow a return to nature represents for people a wholesome set of values as opposed to the corrupt and 'polluted' environment of the city. Nature purifies and restores. This wholesomeness is also shown in the kinds of wholesome and high value activities that the people shown in the advertisements are engaging in.

Activities of a general nature that have higher value as being fulfilling such as those of parenting, spending time with loved ones, leisure or intellectual activities ,fun and health activities along with the surrounding sell the idea of a pure wholesome life. The addition of nature! also brings in the concept of the 'noble Savage' those people who have not lost touch with their pristine beginnings in the wild nature.

At the same time, this project of representing *artifactual nature* and attributing value to it is supported by endless stream of nature journalism – A steady stream of nature photographs, essays, pictures and outdoors which add to the "nature is great and good" idea in people's minds. These journals, articles and other forms of nature writing are confined to a certain section of middleclass urban Indian at whom again these same advertisements for the high ended gated naturescapes communities are directed at.

The advertisers are not at fault. In some way they only use what is already a prevalent mode of thinking among India's urban class – Nature is good; at the same time nature as an artifact that is good is defined by the concept of a landscaped and maintained park or a garden. The question that remains to be answered is what is the way in which the concept of nature got constructed as the mild and benevolent garden? It is also clear that this is not a phenomenon confined to urban India but is common all over the globe.

Photo essay:



1. This is a typical termite hill in an empty plot near my house. This for most of my neighbours is religious- Havu huttha or the snake-hill but not parisara or nature.

2. The landscaped park with a walking path is reminiscent of a mini Mughal Garden in sharp contrast to the built houses the manicured lawn and plants shine green in bright electric floodlights.

3. Manicured land need sprinklers and high maintenance. The black spot is a sprinkler.



5. What was interesting about this particular park was that one side was 'developed' and the other play area of the park was natural- a dusty playground for the children of the gardener and their friends. The next two sets contrast the older scheme of the park with the newer one.

8. The gazebo and water fountain that I call rang mahal. The play area that I call aangan inset -the gardener's children

7. The fence railing – contrasted by decorative plants. 6. The other side of the story



9. The final show

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