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Max Oelschlaeger aptly remembers Henry David Thoreau as the “philosopher of the wilderness.” Indian and Eastern philosophy in general have a rich wilderness tradition. India’s pre-Christian Hindu religion and the later manifestations of it in Buddhism and Jainism emphasized compassion for all living beings and saw man as part of nature. They did not envision wilderness as evil or man as having ‘dominion’ over all he surveyed. As Roderick Nash says, “Wilderness, in eastern thought, did not have an unholy or evil connotation, but was venerated as the symbol and even the very essence of Society.” Then the logical question would be, whether Thoreau has anything to offer to India. The answer to this question lies in India’s philosophical and economic history.

The guiding spirit of the Indian independence movement—Mahatma Gandhi, who is venerated as the Father of the Nation—was deeply influenced by Thoreau. Gandhi’s attitudes towards the materialistic, consumerist western culture were not just shaped by eastern philosophy; Gandhi, with his western education, was the ideal product of an east-west symbiosis. Writings of Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Thoreau played a crucial role in shaping Gandhi’s philosophy and strategy. Thoreau’s essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” was a major political influence on Gandhi in shaping his vision of Satyagraha—the form of non-violent political resistance. Gandhi’s economic vision of a decentralized village oriented and nature friendly development was also compatible with Thoreau’s three famous maxims of life: “Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity.” In a resurgent, post-independent India, Gandhi’s economic vision was relegated to the marginal alternative movements. Thoreau’s idea of civil disobedience lived on through Gandhi’s Satyagraha. Thus, the political and economic impact of Thoreau’s writings in post-independent India have been minimal. However, Thoreau has a presence in the cultural sphere—and its extension to environmental awareness.

The resurgence of environmental consciousness in the Indian psyche happened after a quarter century of planned economic development. Madhav Gadgil, the pioneering environmental writer, says, “The origins of Indian environmentalism lie in the early 1970s, when a number of events heralded a new awareness.” Details of those events is not our subject matter here. The philosophical moorings of early Indian environmentalism were largely Gandhian. In the wake of the revival of Hindu nationalist and fascist political and cultural movements, it was dangerous to espouse Indian philosophy in a religious way. Thoreau and Gandhi with their secular credentials were ideal apostles. Thoreau, though inspired by Emerson, moved away from Emersonian Christian transcendentalism. As Oelschlaeger says, “Emerson and the other transcendentalists unquestionably left their mark on Thoreau, but transcendentalism is a poor framework for understanding Thoreau’s idea of wilderness.” Thoreau rejects the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm, which has its origin in Christian ethics, when he writes, “The true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience. We do not learn by inference and deduction and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy. It is with science as with ethics—we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Draconian is as false as any other.”

Two of Thoreau’s works—the essay titled “Walking” and his book *Walden*—became popular in the Indian environmental and cultural sphere after the 1970s. His famous saying in “Walking”—“In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World”—became the byline for wilderness enthusiasts and cultural anarchists. Perhaps Thoreau is best known in India through this saying in eight words and by his triple elegy of “Simplicity. . .” in *Walden*. The name of this Concord pond has come to symbolize peace and serenity. I know of many friends who have given the name “Walden” to their homes. You will also find this name being given to tourist and commercial outlets. *Walden* has also been translated into a few regional languages.

In India, Thoreau mainly lives in the cultural and literary sphere. And rightly so, because Thoreau is as much an artist as a naturalist. Thoreau’s observations about what is relevant in literature—“in literature it is only the wild that attracts us”—rings a strong chord in the Indian literary mind rooted in the epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Thoreau continues, “It is the uncivilized, free and wild thinking in *Hamlet* and the *Iliad*, in all the scriptures and mythologies, not learned in the schools that delight us. As the wild dusk is more swift and beautiful than the tame, so is the wild thought. . . . A truly good book is something as natural and as unexpectedly and unaccountably fair and perfect, as a wild flower discovered on the prairies of the west or in the jungles of the east” (“Walking” in *Natural History Essays*).

In the fledgling discipline of ecological literary criticism in India, Thoreau exerts a benign influence. In America, Thoreau’s first resurgence was as the beacon of the wilderness movement in the

initial decades of the twentieth century. However, in the last decade of the twentieth century, Thoreau was rediscovered again as the inspiration for the deep ecological and the eco-critical movement. In fact, American eco-critics such as Lawrence Buell emphasize Thoreau's literary significance. Buell attributes Thoreau's canonization in America as a hero of high culture to his contemporary literary relevance. Buell says, "To read Thoreau in the light of this expanded conception of the environmental intertext is at once to redefine his cultural significance and to help revise our understanding of what counts as the American environmental imagination." If Thoreau is thus not canonized in Indian cultural history, it is because of the strong ancient Indian philosophical tradition of thinking about man and nature. Thoreau's relevance to India is that he articulated an alternative to the industrial era. Gandhi, who was inspired by Thoreau, did this for India in the political and economic sphere. In the realm of culture, India has many literary and philosophical stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Sisirkumar Ghose, Aurobindo who pioneered such an alternative aesthetic vision. Thus, Thoreau's place in Indian cultural tradition, though not canonical, has become more relevant in the wake of skepticism about modernism and the depredations of globalization.

Works Cited

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