

A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism

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**Volume 16 Issue 4 (December 2014) Article 9****Rayson K. Alex,****"A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/9>>Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.4 (2014)**Thematic Issue ***New Work in Ecocriticism***. Ed. **Simon C. Estok and Murali Sivaramakrishnan**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/>>

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**Abstract:** In his article "A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism" Rayson K. Alex places Indian ecocriticism in its historical context distinguishing it from the Western ecocritical canon by identifying and contextualizing three phases of ecocriticism in India. Looking at the present Indian ecocritical scenario, Alex compares and contrasts it with Western ecocritical studies. He offers a brief analysis of the themes of papers presented in conferences on ecocriticism in India and of the syllabi and teaching strategies adopted in various institutions of higher learning which have introduced ecocriticism as optional/mandatory courses to show the growth of ecocriticism in India. Alex finds that present ecocritical scholarship in India is largely influenced by Western ecocriticism, although it originally began with the use of Indian theories and texts. Alex calls for a commitment to a regional approach in Indian ecocriticism and points to social issues that ecocriticism in India needs to address in the near future: land, ethnicity, sustainability, poverty, terrorism, religious plurality, caste, water policies, and education.

## Rayson K. ALEX

### A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism

Lawrence Buell views the growth of ecocriticism in the West in two phases, "the first wave" and the "second wave" ("Ecocriticism" 138). Practitioners of ecocriticism's first wave focused on "romantic poetry and American nature writing" (Moellering 6) and analyzed literary texts with regard to their mere personalized/experiential content which probably began with the publication of Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* in 1991 and Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995 (see Garrard 360). The first wave includes humanist, anthropocentric, biocentric, and ecocentric ideologies. The second wave saw a shift of thrust from the rural to the urban and from nature to environment prompting the discipline to be sociocentric. Bioregional, ecopolitical, and postcolonial theories were a vital part of this wave. In his "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends," Buell offers analyses of the European, British, US-American, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian schools of ecocriticism to invite ecocritics' attention to the ecocritical scope in so-called "third world" countries. I posit that it is in this context that Indian ecocriticism's history should be analyzed. The two objectives of this article are to analyze critically the past and present areas of ecocritical/environmental engagements in Indian scholarship in the context of the large body of ecocritical scholarship in the West and to express concerns for the future of Indian ecocriticism. First, however, it is necessary to justify the soil metaphor used in the study at hand. Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran although they critique Buell's "wave" metaphor as compartmentalization—use the same framework to describe the future directions of ecocriticism in the West in his "The Third Wave of Ecocriticism." My use of the soil metaphor is because it describes the different layers of soil such as "rockbed," "regolith," "subsoil," and "topsoil" (see Zaffagnini, Becker, Kerkhoffs, Espreguera Mendes, van Dijk 155). The list of layers is in descending order. Rockbed is the base level soil and topsoil is the soil in the surface level of the earth. Nevertheless, the soil is a single unit, although comprising of different layers which have distinct characteristics. The soil allows water to permeate. Moreover, soil signifies permanence, base, life, and continuity. Thus instead of the metaphor of "wave," the soil metaphor suits my purpose better. However, the layers of soil should not be seen as tight compartments but rather as porous and dynamic.

Nirmal Selvamony introduced in 1980 a course entitled "Tamil Poetics" at Madras Christian College and this was the beginning of ecocriticism in India. Selvamony used translated Tamil texts as primary sources for the course and the course drew heavily from his extensive eight-year Ph.D. research entitled *Persona in Tolkappiyam*. He had also published, with Nirmaldasan, three booklets entitled *tinai 1*, *tinai 2*, and *tinai 3* which gave ecocriticism in India a strong momentum. Selvamony renamed the course "Ecoliterature" in 1996, following which the Department of English at Madras Christian College organized the 3rd World Conference and the 11th All India English Teachers' Annual Conference in 2004, the first conference in India addressing environmental issues in literature. The objectives of the conference were to strengthen the ecoliterature course, identify interested persons in the area, and initiate student community into the new discipline. Scott Slovic, editor of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* and who was the keynote speaker of the conference, initiated the idea of launching an Indian chapter of ASLE: Association for the Study of Literature and Environment India in an informal, small group, where Selvamony, Watson Solomon, Murali Sivaramakrishnan, myself, and others were present. This was the evolutionary phase of ecocriticism in India and I call this 1980-2004 phase of Indian ecocriticism the rockbed layer (the base layer).

The second phase 2004-2009, or the regolith of Indian ecocriticism, the propagatory period of ecocriticism led to the formation of well-organized groups named OSLE: Organization for Studies in Literature and Environment India in Chennai and its counterpart, ASLE India in Puducherry (now the new name for Pondicherry). A few months after the world conference, Selvamony convened a meeting of interested people in ecocriticism. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the launch of ecocriticism as a unified group, drawing an action plan to spread ecocriticism in India, and to encourage research. This would be achieved by organizing workshops and conferences; publishing newsletters, journals, and books; initiating the introduction of courses on ecocriticism at colleges and universities, and doing research projects. OSLE India became a registered body in 2005. Although organized work on ecocriticism began with the formation of OSLE India, Selvamony and others wrote on

ecocriticism, developed regional ecocritical concepts, and created ecopoetry from the 1980s onwards. But the systematic work undertaken by OSLE India gave a sudden push to ecocriticism. Within nine years, OSLE India had achieved much: seven national/international conferences; collaborations with colleges on over five seminars; seventeen workshops in schools and colleges; thirty-five study circles; two published book collections—one entitled *Essays in Ecocriticism* (2007) and the other *Culture and Media: Ecocritical Explorations* (2014)—and three volumes of the *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*; and twelve online issues of the *OSLE India Newsletter*. It also extended ecocriticism to media through its Ecomedia Team (a caucus group in OSLE India).

In the rockbed layer of Indian ecocriticism, although the term ecocriticism was not in currency, there were many Tamil scholars working on *tinai* as a poetic convention in Tamil, as well as in English, which was later identified as an ecocritical theory by Selvamony. *tinai* is a concept which includes the cultural and artistic aspects of a particular land. Tolkappiyar, in his work *Tolkappiyam* (1000-600 BC) first mentions the concept of *tinai*. *tinai* is not only a concept, but also the social order and poetic convention of the early Tamil people. The system still prevails in the tribal traditions of India (see Selvamony, "An Alternative" 215). *tinai* combines the natural and cultural features of specific landscapes found in Tamil Nadu. The landscapes are divided into five—namely, the montane (*kurinci*), the pastoral (*mullai*), the desertic (*paalai*), the riverine (*marutam*), and the littoral (*neytal*). The landscapes are named after native flowers which are the keystone species in the specific landscapes (see Selvamony, "An Alternative" 215-16). A.K Ramanujan's 1970 *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Tamil Anthology* and 1985 *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* and some other texts are examples of the vast *tinai* scholarship in India considering it as a poetical convention. There are a few other works which do not acknowledge the term *tinai*, but actually describe the historical and political structures of the *tinai* Sangam Age. The Sangam Age in Tamil history demarcates the major three groups of poets who wrote poetry, composed songs, and did extensive research on Tamil. The third group of poets wrote for over 400 years which began sometime between 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD (see Britto). It was in this context that Selvamony launched his course entitled "Tamil Poetics" at Madras Christian College in 1980. The course objectives included that the students study Sangam poetry (in translation) through careful analysis and understanding of the people, their lifestyle, occupation, socio-economic-political-theological structures, art forms, land/landscape, flora and fauna in the landscape, and the relationship with the land. The uniqueness of the course was that Selvamony saw *tinai* as not only a poetic convention, but also as a social order which is inclusive of all artistic conventions (see "An Alternative" 215). Continuing this argument in its broader sense, Selvamony wrote on the cultural, social, theological, musicological, and ecological aspects of the five *tinaikal* (landscapes). His original theory "oikopoetics," an extraction of *tinai* (integrative oikos [oikos means household]), is applicable to the contemporary world (nonintegrative oikos): "being the habitat of the people concerned, oikos [*tinai*] forms the matrix of all social institutions—economy, polity, family and communication. Art, especially poetry, is a variety of communication/communion shaped by the oikos of the society in question. Being the ground, matrix, and context of a work, oikos is the first principle of oikopoetics" (Selvamony, "Oikopoetics" 1).

Selvamony mentions that oikopoetics is but "the oikos of the society" ("Oikopoetics" 1). Like *tinai*, Oikopoetics is a sociocentric theory that belongs to the rockbed layer which is a part of the second wave of ecocriticism identified by Buell. However, the sociocentrism thrust by Buell in the second wave is not an idealized order of an ecological society; instead, it is an issue-based social engagement. In contrast to Selvamony's commitment to a future ecosocial order, Buell's sociocentrism is of a contemporary social treatment that does not really get to the root of the problem. However, being sociocentric, Selvamony's oikopoetics and *tinai* belong to Buell's second wave of ecocriticism. This is the first phase of Indian ecocriticism and so remains in the rockbed layer. In the regolith layer of ecocriticism in India (2004-2009), the organized and systematic team work opened avenues in the academy to research, discourse, paper presentations, publications, field trips, syllabi creation, and pedagogy. In nine years, OSLE India grew to over six hundred members from various parts of the country. It is true that the engagements of OSLE India were extraordinarily effective in bringing together people under a single roof, but what was the scholarly content of the phase? I seek to answer this question by analyzing the ecocritical discourse of the layer. I propose to survey two different kinds

of texts to arrive at a conclusive answer, namely the abstracts of the seven national and international conferences and the syllabi for ecocriticism across India.

The following section of the article surveys the abstract booklets of the conferences organized by Madras Christian College, Central University of Tamil Nadu, the Birla Institute of Technology and Science, and OSLE India. The conferences were organized in collaboration with a number of educational institutions and other bodies. Table 1 below presents an overview of the themes of the abstracts presented in the conferences excluding the abstracts of the non-Indian delegates.

Table 1: Papers presented at Ecocriticism conferences

year & theme	# of papers	nature & environment oriented	ecological & concept based	bio&ecocentric	sociocentric
2004 International Conference on Contemporary Literatures in English: Theory & Practice with focus on Environment & Literary Studies	36	27	9	25	11
2006 I International Conference of OSLE India	68	62	6	55	13
2007 II International Conference of OSLE India	75	67	8	60	15
2008 III International Conference of OSLE India	52	44	8	32	20
2010 The Name and Nature of Indian Ecocriticism	51	37	14	45	6
2012 Ecocritical Perspectives on Water	82	42	7	23	10
2014 Towards Ecocultural Ethics: Recent Trends and Future Directions, Birla Institute of Technology and Science	164	78	14	37	35
Total	528	357	66	277	110

The purpose of Table 1 is to categorize the papers thematically. The categorization of "nature-oriented"/"ecological concept-based" and "bio/ecocentric"/"sociocentric" papers are not on a logical basis and so do not distinguish clearly between the thematic categories in the Table. Of all the papers, 357 belong to the nature/environment-oriented category, which are anthropocentric. Selvamony maintains that the environmental approach is not useful as "environment not only puts the human subject it envelops in the center but also dichotomizes the relation between human and the environment." He condemns the term 'environment' as anthropocentric ("Introduction" xi). Only 12% of the total number of papers have ecological content or have employed ecological concepts to analyze literary and cultural texts. Of the large number of individuals working in the area of "environment and literature," 67% are on the area of nature writing, environmental writing, nature criticism, and environmental criticism. The Indian academia during the 1980s to the early 2000s promoted ecological research and was involved in regional understandings of ecology. There were some ecofeminist studies in the rockbed layer of ecocriticism and there was stress on the need for postcolonial ecocritical approaches. Overall, the organized movement of ecocriticism which began in 2004 witnessed a movement towards an ecocriticism that was decidedly Western. Scholars at the beginnings of ecocriticism in India studied the socio-political-cultural-religious structures which influenced the ecological structure of Indigenous communities. *tinai* and oikopoetics were theories which gave effective platforms for such a local-centric ecocriticism.

Regionalism in the regolith layer was indistinct with ecocriticism in India imitating Western ecocritical frameworks. Murali Sivaramakrishnan's 2008 *Nature and Human Nature* and Sivaramakrishnan's and Ujjwal Jana's 2011 *Ecological Criticism for Our Times: Literature, Nature and Critical Inquiry* are studies which center around the nature/environment category. *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism* (2014), edited by Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran, uses Karen L. Thornber's theory of "ecoambiguity" from her 2012 book, *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crisis and East Asian Literatures* as the framework of the book. With two Indian ecocritics as editors and articles by Indian authors, the volume is a political statement about social issues communities and the cultures in the south face. However, the term "ecoambiguity" is accepted uncritically failing to see that virtually everything can be discussed in terms of ambivalence and ambiguity. Simon C. Estok makes precisely this point in his problematization of the term "ecoambiguity," a term that in his reading is comparable to notions such as "homoambiguity" and "gynoambiguity" (for homophobia and misogyny respectively), which as Estok explains are suspect (see "Reading"). Ecocriticism in India in the regolith layer exists as an

amalgamation of rockbed and regolith layers. Although there is permeation between these layers, the characteristics of these layers are distinct and they exist in unity.

A discipline or theory acquires legitimacy when it is introduced as a course at institutions of higher learning. The optional ecoliterature/ecopoetics courses for postgraduates at Madras Christian College, Loyola College, Bishop Heber College, and Women's Christian College have similarities between their pedagogical objectives and content. The prescribed texts are largely Western introducing the concepts of deep ecology and bioregionalism. Regional concepts such as nativism, *tinai*, and oikopoetics are also included in the syllabi. The courses in these institutions and the ones in the Indian Institute of Technology Madras and Pondicherry University follow a classroom-oriented pedagogy, whereas CUTN and BITS Pilani and K.K. Birla Goa Campus have introduced a fieldwork-based pedagogy alongside classroom teaching. Most of the courses on ecocriticism in these institutions have a component of ethnographic fieldwork in their syllabi. It is a sociocentric approach where the students are exposed to different communities with different worldviews. This sociocentric ecocritical pedagogy is in the rockbed layer of ecocriticism in India. The scope and challenge of ecocriticism in Indian educational institutions are yet to address local ecological issues. Such a pedagogy should address local-centric rather than Western-centric issues. At CUTN, regionalism in Indian ecocritical pedagogy became more pronounced and I call this phase of Indian ecocriticism "subsoil." The three-semester ecocriticism course at CUTN adopted a field-based study structure. In the third semester, the course takes a departure by introducing twenty-five compulsory hours of fieldwork of ecology-based projects in broad areas including ecovideo-documentary, ecopoetry, ecoessay, and ecophotoessay. Students are exposed to an activity-based and constructivist pedagogy. Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" which is culture-based and language-based, becomes location and local-based in this context: situated knowledges are locatable (location-oriented) and are claims with responsibility (583). A candid conversation with my student stands testament to the effectiveness of the local-centric pedagogy. The conversation also evinces the responsibility that the student seems to have taken for himself/herself.

The one-semester optional course entitled "Ecocriticism" at BITS Pilani and K.K. Birla Goa Campus, adopts a local-centric pedagogy. Students identify a local ecological issue from Goa, perform research on it, problematize it, document it, and present it as a video documentary. Some of the students do the documentary to complete the required evaluative module, some students show their passion towards the module that they try hard to use innovative cinematic techniques, engage in five to ten days of field visits, and interview a number of people spending quality time and observing their activities and video-documenting them. The documentary project apart from the creation of a documentary introduces ethnographic research to the students and equips the students to mull over the ethics involved in the process of research. The activity broadens the definition and scope of ecology to oral narratives, cultural production such as rituals, myths and songs within the purview of ecology—placing humanities at the center of ecological discourse (see Slovic, "Felicitation" 2). One student (who wishes to be anonymous), after completing his project on mining, shared his experience and thoughts thus: "it was quite disturbing to listen to one of my informants that they are not comfortable, living in their own ancestral home because her agricultural lands are now barren; they are filled with mining silt. Her water-well is unusable as the ground water is polluted; her children are asthmatic and they are poor. When I sit in my father's flat, thinking of the unique experience that I had with the villagers in Colomb, what am I expected to think? Just think? Or do something? The question that took the front seat while doing fieldwork is, why is the government doing this to the people? But now the problem is within me. Don't they have the right to a peaceful and healthy home, as I have?"

Such thought-provoking feedback by a student gives immense joy to any instructor. However, the response of the student made me think about the implicit outcomes of such projects. Although the project turns out to be a documentary, the implicit effect of the work done is deep-seated. The student experienced a change in perspective (see Belyea 14) through the conflicts that he faced while doing the project. The first conflict is straightforward (referring to the first question that the student had) and the second seems to be more profound and he is analytical of it (referring to the second question that the student had). The second conflict becomes central to ecocriticism, as it addresses oikos. This umbrella framework that Indian ecocriticism offers through the concept of *tinai* includes all the specific issues ecocriticism would address, especially in the context of Western ecocriticism and other differ-

ences. The framework of home is not static or a primal concept, but a dynamic one which provides a platform for varied arguments and critiques. The strength of this framework is that however the definition of oikos changes, a home is a home—new or old, imagined or real, existent or non-existent, Western or Eastern, on water, land or in the air.

The principle behind this field-based pedagogy is the understanding that land-based/oikos-based social issues are primarily ecological. This should not be mistaken with the basic principle of social ecology. While social ecologists would argue that all ecological issues occur due to human (societal) interferences (see Bookchin), I suggest that social issues have ecological implications. The ecocriticism course at BITS Pilani and K.K. Birla Goa Campus initiates a physical engagement with issues students identify with. After evaluation the projects are uploaded on YouTube/Facebook by the instructor and students and the screening and discussion of the films are arranged at the institute by the instructor. The documentaries are then made available for public access. Two students' documentaries which are available online for free access, are *Colomb: The Land that Survived*

(<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zXkcBjSG5Y>>) and *Shrigao: Residents' Perspectives on Mining* (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdvXU1z0IaM>>). One comment to the YouTube video entitled *Colomb* explains that "Filomena Dias shows a major breathing problem. She struggles for breath in this video. This is an excellent awareness too" (Collaco

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zXkcBjSG5Y>>). In the video, Filomena Dias, from the village of Colomb, narrates about the status of her village after mining began there. The students' engagement with the community using video obviously has far-reaching effects. Collaco, who watched the video, comments that it is "an excellent awareness" (Collaco

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zXkcBjSG5Y>>). I call this "digital ecoactivist pedagogy" (DEP), a response to the dearth of activism in ecocriticism Estok describes in "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." I see DEP as a pedagogical strategy in which the student engages in a particular ecological issue in a region (understanding or studying a group of people, their socio-cultural-economic and ecological aspects in the place) using a digital medium. The scope of DEP is many times more than a classroom-based (or a traditional fieldwork-based) study, since the video document (a realistic product) remains online.

The expansion of the "digital ecoactivism" (using digital media in documenting the ecology/ecological issues in a geographical region) led to the initiation of a novel concept within ecocritical scholarship—the *tinai* Ecofilm Festival (TEFF)—at BITS Pilani and K.K. Birla Goa Campus. Since ecoactivism involves political and social engagement, digital ecoactivism calls for a participation in the struggle for an ecological change through the conduit of digital media. The festival acts as a catalyst to propagate digital ecoactivism. TEFF is the first film festival organized by an ecocritical forum in India and it aims to reach out to young ecoenthusiasts and ecofilmmakers by organizing film festivals at various institutions in the country. TEFF also offers a unique space to share, discuss, and learn from various ecological issues across the globe.

Ecocriticism in India now exists as a unit permeating the rockbed, regolith, and subsoil. Standing at the threshold of the second wave of ecocriticism, Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* argues that ecocriticism will grow in terms of "race, gender, sexuality, class and globalization" (129), in its "reinterpretation of thematic configurations as pastoral, eco-apocalypticism" (130), and as a field-based pedagogy, involved in art, academics, and activism (132). Similar to Buell's ecocritical concerns which are West-oriented, Indian ecocritics need to address issues specific to India. In his "Ecocriticism: Emerging Trends" Buell envisions a "collaborative project" (107) towards a transnational ecocriticism. Serenella Iovino in her "The Human Alien: Otherness, Humanism, and the Future of Ecocriticism" brings to the fore a similar concern by stressing the insurgence of "'a diversity of voices' contributing to the understanding of the human relationship to the planet" (53). Buell and Iovino anticipate comparative global ecocriticism that would globalize specific ecocultural issues of cultural communities. What should an Indian ecocritic engage in in the present Indian ecocritical context? I envision the topsoil layer in Indian ecocriticism should address socio-cultural issues that lack ecohumanities' engagements in India—ethnography, ethnicity, regionalism, nationalism, water and land issues, media and films, social order/systems, poverty, international politics, terrorism, religious plurality, the system of caste, natural resources policies, security and educational system. whether the topsoil Indian ecocriticism will address these issues in the near future or never in future is not very

important, but as the eighth principle of deep ecology reminds human beings of their responsibility, if at all humans identify this as their responsibility, frequent interactions between theory and praxis could be anticipated.

Ecocriticism in India is expanding far and wide as the following Table 2 shows:

Table 2: An overview of the Phases in Indian Ecocriticism

Phases	Timeline	Characteristics of the Phases
The Rockbed Layer	1980-2004	<i>tinai</i> -oriented ecocritical work; Focus on Tamil and English literary texts; Focus on indigeneity in ecocriticism
The Regolith Layer	2004-2009	Teamwork through OSLE India and ASLE India; Regular OSLE India meetings and study circles in which people attended from different parts of the country; Chennai-based but participation of members from East, West and North of India; Imitation of Western ecocriticism; Increased analysis of English, Australian, US-American and Canadian literary texts; Emergence of analysis of Sanskrit texts from an ecocritical perspective; Strengthening of Western influence; <i>tinai</i> attains global acceptance
The Subsoil Layer	2009-present	Focus on <i>tinai</i> , cinema and cultural texts; Production of ecocritical documentaries; Media documents in ecocritical pedagogy

In conclusion, although ecocriticism in India began in the south of India (Tamil Nadu), it has spread far and wide with the personal engagements of ecocritics in India and in an organized manner through OSLE India and ASLE India. Although some of the activities are not organized consistently, OSLE India organizes conferences, seminars, workshops, and the *tinai* Ecofilm Festival. Both organizations are involved in publishing books, encourage research, and engage in major and minor ecoliterary and ecocultural projects. Indian scholars use Western theoretical frameworks and Western literary texts in doing ecocriticism, they also employ regional concepts (Dravidian, Buddhist, and Sanskrit) in order to analyze Indian classical, modern, and postmodern literary texts and Indigenous narratives, films, documentaries, and cultural documents as texts to understand ecological implications of people and communities. Indian ecocritical scholarship, although influenced by Western scholarship, needs to keep its identity as Indian, thereby contributing to global ecocriticism. This can be better achieved with what I call an "econativistic" ("Econativism" 290), an ecoregional movement.

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