

many that some intellectuals superimpose on women, peasants, and tribals have very little to do with the more differentiated and contradictory worldviews of rural people. The consequences of attributing harmony concepts to rural people, given the widespread reach of global media, are many. Failures in implementing sustainable development projects based on such assumptions, the use and caricature of these notions by nationalists/ethnic/fundamentalist groups to prove the superiority of their cultures vis-à-vis those of the various "others" in their bid for power, and the misguided romanization of non-Western cultures by people in Western countries are a few examples. More important, the preoccupation of a global environmentalist discourse with harmony, stability, equilibrium, and lately sustainability has precluded the openness to listen to other discourses and thereby prevented an enlargement of the boundaries of the harmony discourse itself. While a scientific school of thought on chaos does exist, it has had negligible impact on environmentalist/ecological thought.

Above all, extrapolating only "harmony" from their thought is denying rural people in places like the Uva their *kaliyugaya*, their articulation of chaos in an ever-changing and ever-confusing world. Bennett (1993:262) has pointed out, in a critique of Haraway's (1985, 1988, 1989) work, that "the zeal to expose false harmonies and to denaturalize identifications also entails a risk—a risk of becoming prosaic, of forfeiting politically indispensable identifications and the ethical imagination inspired by wonder." The same can be said of the zeal to construct harmonies and to naturalize identifications. What of the poetics of the *kaliyugaya*? If the "Golden Age which blind superstition had placed behind [or ahead of] us, is in us" (Rousseau, quoted by Levi-Strauss 1977:48), so is the chaos and disintegration of the *kaliyugaya*.

## Comments

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In its emphasis on *kaliyugaya* as the secret to some Sri Lankan villagers' environmental worldviews, Wera-tunga's paper reminds me of Borges's story "The Ethnographer" for more than two years among Amerindians on the prairie. Having learnt the secret doctrine from them, however, he returns to inform his committee that he has resolved not to write the necessary dissertation: "Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it in a hundred different and even contradictory ways. . . . the secret is beautiful . . . and science, our science, seems mere frivolity to me now" (Borges 1998:335). The usual reasons that the ethnographer would refuse to write do not apply, but the reader is left with the awareness that there is a

their existing patterns of resource use in that it has a millenarian component. At the end of the cataclysmic events, a new age of plenty will dawn for human beings with the coming of the Maithri Buddha. It has been argued, although not by villagers in the Uva, that the *kaliyugaya* has a positive dimension to it, as a time when socially subordinate groups (such as lower castes/classes and women) gain ascendancy in a reversed social order and people are no longer restricted by strict moral codes (Sarkar 1997). Eventually all forms/modes of existence are predicted to become an undifferentiated whole before human life is re-created once again.

The point is that ultimately valorization of harmony, order, conflict, and disorder is based on one's worldview. Many functionalist ecologists/environmentalists consider nature and society as holistically integrated and cohesive. Many radical ecologists/environmentalists see nature as holistically integrated but society as ridden with social conflicts. Most Uva villagers and estate workers conceptualize nature as unpredictable and capricious (although under the control of deities) but society as ordered and cohesive. Some late-20th-century intellectuals view both nature and society as chaotic and unpredictable. Of course, there is also considerable variation between how one sees the world and how one desires it to be.

To return to the questions I posed at the beginning of this article, if harmony and nature are concept clusters for which intuitive meanings can be constructed, then it may be possible to argue that there is a universal notion of living in harmony with nature. However, what "harmony" and "nature" mean in different cultural contexts and in different discourses within cultures may differ so substantially that participants in a global environmentalist discourse may talk past each other. This is not the case at present because South Asian and other Third World environmentalists have a Westernized (and often scientific) education and interpret the environmental crisis in terms close to those of Western/global environmentalists. These widespread notions have more to do with the globalization of discourses (Jackson 1993: 665) than with cultural universals.

Negotiation is attempted at the global/local knowledge interface, but it is too early to predict how significant it will be. The young extension officer of a watershed management project in the Uva tells his "beneficiaries" that the reason for a two-year drought and consequently bad harvests and poverty in the area is the displeasure of the deities due to destruction of the land/forests to plant potatoes. By his own admission, some villagers agree with him while others laugh at him. In a deity offering ceremony held by a nongovernmental organization in the Uva the shaman went into trance and was possessed by an "environmental" deity. The deity admonished the villagers for destroying their environment and advised them to take care of it by practicing sustainable agriculture. This kind of environmentalist message, however, seems to be received with scepticism, according to an activist who participated in the ritual. Thus, taken as a whole, the notions of nature and har-

certain nobility in Murdoch's willingness to choose an ordinary life as a libertarian rather than tell the secret. Weeratunge, of course, chooses to tell the secret of the Uva villagers. In contrast to the focus on "harmony" by those who would contribute to global environmental discourses, *kallyugaya* is the villagers' "articulation of chaos in an ever-changing and ever-confusing world." Yet, as a secret, *kallyugaya* is simultaneously extremely rich and poor and even simultaneously Western and non-Western. In the context of environmental discourses, it is on a par with "capitalism" or "modernity" in its fluidity of meanings, breadth of vision, and similarity of potential interpretations. Its richness of general meanings is, however, comparable to its poverty in conveying anything *specifically non-Western* about Uva villagers. In a time when Mobil ads in the *New York Times* triumphantly trumpet the "creative destruction" of capitalism and observers of globalization cannot make up their minds about whether and how it simultaneously annihilates and reconstructs (a reified) local, the recourse to *kallyugaya* seems no different from the stress on chaos and order of many contemporary Western observers. Even were one to accept the terms "Western" and "global," one might ask how the venerable concept of *kallyugaya* remains untouched by more mundane Western preoccupations. Would it be wrong to suggest that the choice of *kallyugaya* from multiple concepts in a supposedly "non-Western" pantheon may itself be prompted by the desire to intervene in a primarily Western global environmental debate?

At the end of Weeratunge's paper I am left with a nagging question. It lends force to the native/indigenous/Hindu concept of *kallyugaya* as an alternative to assumptions about "harmony" only by ignoring tremendous evidence on the attention scholars have paid to difference and conflict, danger and hierarchy. "Global environmental discourse" remains an undefined and diffuse construct here; at the level of discursive generality that marks the paper, writings by political ecologists, common-property theorists, and systems ecologists would fall under this rubric. Surely in some of these writings there is enough resonance with the referents of *kallyugaya* that seem valuable to Weeratunge!

Given Weeratunge's concern with the poetics of *kallyugaya*, she is stuck on the horns of the dilemma so neatly avoided by Borges's ethnographer. In the very telling of it, in the painstaking describing of it, in the enumeration of its cruel contradictory elements, in the need to make it explicable, in the desire to intervene in a policy-dominated discourse occurs the disenchantment of *kallyugaya*. Not only is not-telling a different option but it might have been a nobler one as well.

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At a time when popular and academic environmentalisms abound with romantic images of rural Third World

women and peasants, Weeratunge's paper makes an important contribution in showing how the dominant Western environmental discourse unfolds in Third World countries like Sri Lanka. Weeratunge questions the universal appeal and applicability of concepts like "harmony" and "nature" as they circulate in the Sri Lankan environmentalist discourse and challenges the concept of "living in harmony with nature" as a relevant framework for thinking about environmental discourse and practice in the non-West. In the age of transnationalism, marked by an unprecedented flow of ideas, goods, and peoples, her paper draws our attention to the problematic ways in which local and global discourses are shaped at different levels of interaction, dissemination, and translation. With the Third World besieged by environmental and development projects conceived and implemented by international donors like the World Bank, it is not only funds and expertise but knowledge, representations, and imaginations of past and present that are powerfully imported. With global discourses of environmentalism gain international purchase, local or vernacular discourses are characterized in limited ways and often in primordialist terms that Weeratunge very subtly challenges. I particularly appreciate her focus on *kallyugaya* as a dominant discourse of disintegration and disorder in contemporary Sri Lanka, pointing to an alternative understanding of the human-environment relationship in the non-West. It resonates with my own fieldwork in the Kumaon Himalayas, internationally known for the Chipko movement, symbolizing nature and harmony, in which local women and the Forest Guard interpreted deforestation as a cycle of change. *Kallyugaya* as a contemporary discourse of disintegration and inevitability, although disheartening to some extent, incorporates the complexity which frames the discourse of nature.

Weeratunge shows that even though the words "nature" and "harmony" are not translatable to Sinhalese, they have entered the Sri Lankan environmentalist lexicon. While it is important to see how local discourses are produced, I find a focus on "nature" and "harmony" as the principal indexes of environmentalism in Sri Lanka and outside limiting. Nature and harmony may not find local etymological resonances, but if we are to capture local interpretations of nature we must examine the context in which the practices and discourses of nature take shape. For instance, to me the fine distinctions between harmony and compatibility or connectedness suggest different understandings of nature rather than an absence of balance or equilibrium. Although the relationship of harmony may or may not prevail in everyday discourse, we need to ask about other relationships of reciprocity. For example, in the case of India, does the Gandhian cultural idiom of ahimsa, non-violence towards humans and animals, present an alternative perspective on the human-environment relationship in which balance is built into the relationship of humans with nature? In other words, we need to pay attention to the vernacular traditions which encompass "nature"