

BOOK REVIEW

M V Nadkarni, *Parisaranīśatakam*, Chinmaya International Foundation Shodha Sansthan, Kerala

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Environmental Logic and Ethics in Poetic Sanskrit and English

Ecological economics has always prided itself on being not a sub-discipline of economics—the adjectival form notwithstanding—but a much broader field of enquiry into our environmental predicament. Prof M.V. Nadkarni, who founded the first academic department of ecological economics in India, has always exemplified this breadth of enquiry. His books have ranged from a study of farmer movements to the political economy of forests and, more recently, Gandhian ethics.

Nadkarni's latest book *Parisaranīśatakam* (or 'Hundred Verses on Environmental Ethics') continues this innovative tradition by composing 113 verses in both Sanskrit and English to propound the basic principles of environmental thought. Each Sanskrit verse is written in Devanagari and Roman script, then transliterated word for word into English. The meaning is then presented poetically in English verse, which is followed by a short commentary by the author on its theme.

The word *nīti* has two meanings—ethics and policy. Like Bhartrahari's *Nīśatakam* of c. 500 CE, Nadkarni's composition encompasses both meanings and more. It includes not only philosophical statements about the ethical responsibility of human beings towards the environment but also factual statements about how human actions are affecting nature and, thereby, human well-being and its distribution, and specific suggestions about actions that need to be taken.

The first eight verses propound Nadkarni's core philosophy: human beings are decidedly the most evolved of all species on earth; and have developed unprecedented powers to modify the environment; and, therefore, have the greatest responsibility towards its protection. At the same time, these verses highlight an existential constraint—that we have only one earth, and so we cannot afford to spoil it irreversibly. At the very end of the collection, he returns to this point, and highlights also our responsibility towards future generations.

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In verses 9–30, Nadkarni describes our environmental crisis—the loss of biodiversity; the industrial revolution that led to local air and water pollution as well as global warming; and the consequences of global warming in the form of melting icecaps, rising oceans, and chaotic rain patterns. As a true ecological economist, Nadkarni is quick to relate these biophysical changes to its human consequences—and, particularly, the uneven nature of these consequences. The poor suffer the most, as also women, while the rich enjoy luxury consumption (verses 31–35). Indeed, it is this overconsumption that is at the root of the environmental crisis—not the subsistence-level resource use by the poor.

Coming to solutions, Nadkarni emphasizes that technology itself cannot solve the problem, unless there is a sea change in attitudes and values. He highlights the difference between *shreya* (true happiness) and *preya* (pleasure), and suggests that focusing on *shreya* will benefit not only the environment but also the rich themselves. Similarly, the solution to poverty lies not in unbridled growth but in a series of environment-friendly and livelihood-oriented measures: organic farming; material use efficiency and recycling; water efficiency and treatment; small-scale industries, which are more fulfilling for workers than assembly lines; and scaled-down development projects based not on a simplistic benefit-cost calculus but on a genuine understanding, limiting and alleviation of the pain of the displaced.

Nadkarni ends by praying that humankind—currently denying its oneness with nature and bent on destruction—may get the good sense (*subuddhi*) to change its ways. This is not a religious invocation, but a spiritual one; indeed, he criticizes so-called religious celebrations—whether in obeisance to Durga or Ganesha—for the pollution they create and wonders how such worship can ever be successful. The environmental ethic, he says, transcends all differences of religion and nationality.

The content may not be new for scholars of the environment, although its balance between sustainability and equity and between economics and ethics is still valuable. The innovation lies in its form: pithy yet poetic. For instance (verse 93):

If great dangers exist, for forests endowed richly,
from any project planned, just give up that undoubtedly.

The main audience is clearly the wider public: those with Sanskrit skills can enjoy the Sanskrit versions while others can enjoy the English versions (and some, like me, might re-familiarize themselves with Sanskrit). To reach this audience more effectively, I would suggest that the book be published online also and in a different format: the Sanskrit verses in one column and the English verses in a parallel column, so that transliterations or notes do not distract from enjoying the flow of the poetry, and the reader can appreciate Nadkarni's ability to explicate in the ancient tongue a set of modern ideas.