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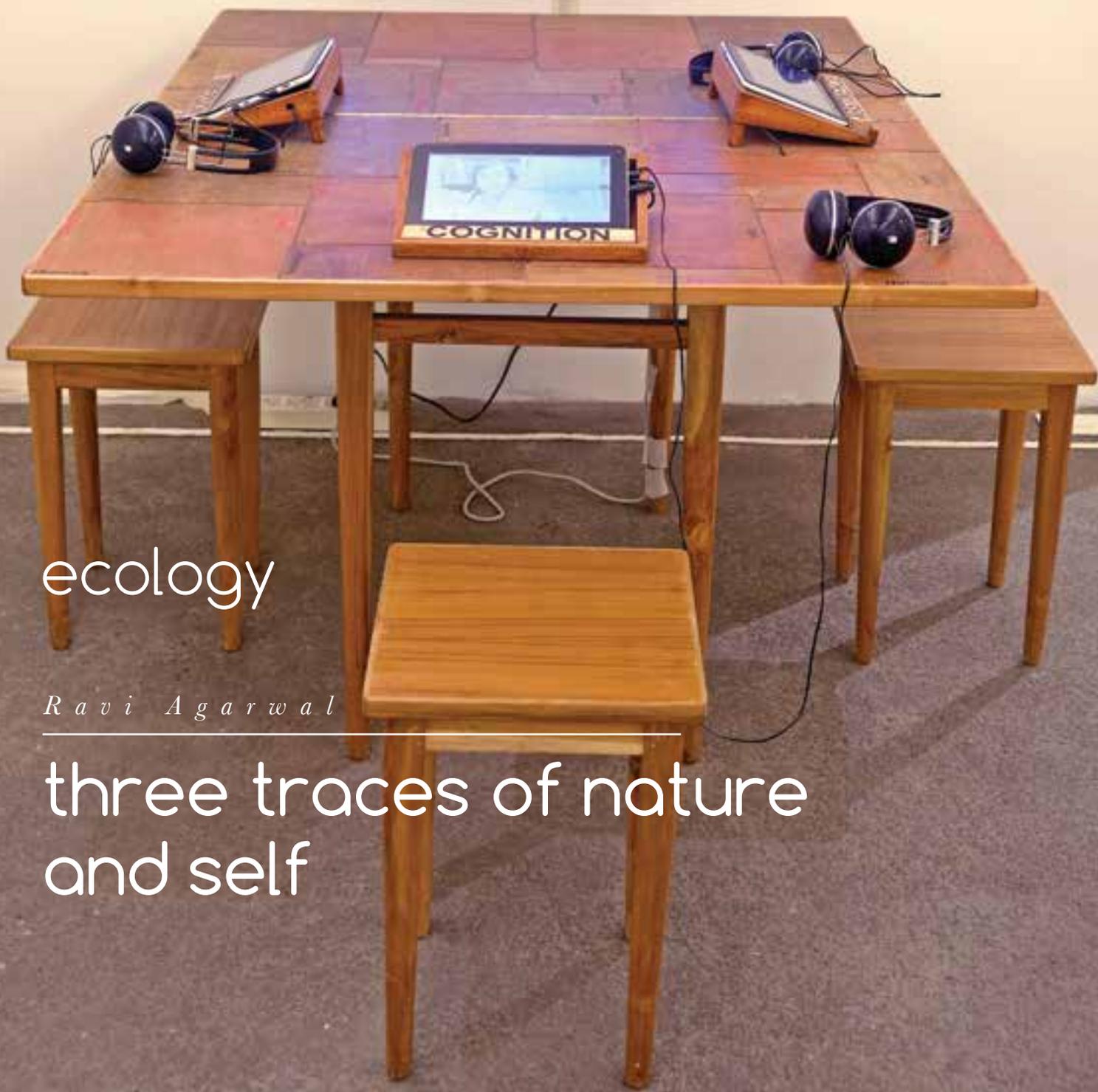


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Ravi Agarwal

three traces of nature
and self



Ravi Agarwal has an interdisciplinary practice as a photographer, artist, environmental activist, writer and curator. He works with photographs, video, installations and public art. His work has been shown widely including at the Kochi Biennale (2016), the Sharjah Biennale (2013), Indian Highway (2009), and Documenta XI (2002). He writes extensively for books, journals and magazines. He is also the founder of the Indian environmental NGO Toxics Link which has pioneered work on waste and chemicals. He was awarded the UN Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety (2008) and the Ashoka Fellowship (1997). He works and lives in New Delhi, and is an engineer by training.

The idea of nature is a complex one. In many ways, it can be known only as a holistic experience, yet in others it is known through an analysis of its components. The nature-self binary, has reduced both to singular objects, and mobilised them in a user-resource relationship. An outcome of modernity, this dominant relationship has suppressed other ways in which they exist. Also, the appropriation of nature as a resource has fed and strengthened power structures in society, to an extent that the planet itself is in crisis. Natural sciences have already marked this as the Anthropocene or the Sixth Extinction. The privatisation of wilderness, decimation of forests, taming of rivers, extinction of other species, and the destitution of those small farmers, artisans and fishers who have lived off nature is evident. However, the political response has been wanting. It has at best attempted to absorb nature as a resource into the neo-liberal market regime, as another commodity with monetary value, without acknowledging its other inherent values or challenging underlying unequal power structures.

To recover affective ways of knowing and relating with nature outside a forensic architecture of knowledge, is both a political as well as a cultural act. The idea of

the self itself has become embedded into capital, and recovering it requires rediscovering pathways by which we become human, and relate with the non-human. If new futures are to be proposed, then their existing footprints need to be re-traced.

Here are three such traces.

Trace I

Nature as an 'embodied-consciousness' self

[Extract from Ravi Agarwal, *A Feast of Sorts*, 4 channel video installation, 2014]

Beyond Claude Lévi-Strauss' culinary triangle, which poses the nature-culture divide as a continuum, is the practice of fasting, or voluntary denial of food. In the Sufi and other such traditions, food is thought of as functional, and at times denied as a self-imposed discipline to conquer desire and to re-form the relationship of the 'self' to one's body. Here the 'self' is thought of not only as personal identity but as part of a cosmic self. These are excerpts from a recorded conversation with a Sufi mendicant — Sikander Ali

"During (fasting) we do not even drink water... For *roza* (fasting) one has to keep oneself clean, pure, truthful, not fight... Food is also transformative. If used properly with the mind. It benefits the body and soul. And *babas* always survive on less — food,

drink, sleep... What is food? One says eat, the other says do not. Eat only as much as one's body needs and one is destined to by Allah. The less one eats, the more satisfied one is... Food is eaten since it keeps the body fine inside. Some live to eat, others eat to live... Who says eating gives strength? Strength comes from the mind. Eating does not change the body much. In fact, the less we eat, we gain, the more we become happy, move without problems, and have no want for anything. The 'body' is to help transform the 'self'. When we prepare food, and share it, we do it with the desire for something else. All our ancestors from the beginning, all of them, have respected each grain, because food is such a thing, which one cannot respect enough."

Trace II

Nature as 'linguistic-emotive' self

Nature is not only an external environment we enter, but also an inter-relationship, as a thing in itself. "Poetry connects us with nature, the human with nonhuman" (*A. K. Ramanujan*)

Sangam poetry, in old Tamil, was produced between 300 BC to 300 AD. Later it was classified into two categories — *Akam* (poems of interiority) and *Puram* (poems of exteriority). *Akam* evokes love in five natural

Previous page:
Ravi Agarwal, *A Feast of Sorts*, Installations with four HD videos / audio on monitors, table with text, four stools, 2014.

thinna (landscapes) viz. *kurinji* (mountains), *mullai* (forests), *marutam* (agricultural lands), *neithal* (sea) and *palai* (desert), where each landscape evokes different experiences of love (sexual union, yearning, sulking, pining, separation). About four hundred such poems have survived over time.

An example:

What she said

*My lover has not come back:
the jasmine has bloomed.*

*A goat-herd comes into town
with goats and milk*

*to take some rice to others
waiting outside,*

*palmyra rain-guards in their
hands,*

*herds of young ones in their
care:*

in his hair

*nothing but buds of tiny
jasmine.*

*(By Uraiyur Mutukotran,
"Kurunthokai 221", Mullai
Thinai: Sangam Tamil poems
translated by A.K. Ramanujan,
Poems of Love and War)*



Ravi Agarwal, *Sangam Engines*, series of five photographic prints, 16 x 24 inches (each), 2015.



Ravi Agarwal, *Sea of Mars*, Photographic print, 30 x 48 inches, 2015.

Trace III

Nature as the 'socio-economic' self

[Excerpt from Ravi Agarwal, *Ambient Seas*, *Artist's Diary*, 2015]

"His father was a fisherman. His grandfather too. He learnt to swim in the ocean, soon as he learnt to walk. Fishing was second nature to him, and the sea his first home. He could make catamarans, repair them, oil them to protect them from termites and borer insects, and sit on them legs astride and dangling in the water, paddling far out into the sea. He could read the waves, see their colour change, and know when the sea was not welcoming. He could predict a storm looking at the skies, and sense when a school of fish came close to the shore. Fishing was his livelihood, but it was also something he loved; the thrill of it. Each morning, an hour before sunrise, he would push his small boat over the waves, and jump into it as it crossed

into more calm currents a few metres on. Here the waves lapped, and seemed still, but the waters were deeper, and the currents stronger. Above all, he claimed he could swim even 10 kilometres in case he needed to. The sea was not a place of fear. It was home!"

A bigger boat, he would have liked, if he could afford to share one. It was probably the end of the fisherman's line with him. He ensured his son had not learnt to swim! While some of his neighbours prospered with investments in bigger engine driven boats, and also through those who invested in their business, fishing as a livelihood seemed to be a dying one. It would survive, but as a business, not a livelihood. For him fishing was not even a livelihood, it was life."

Such traces can be the basis for proposing new dialogues, to produce an inclusive planetary politics, which acknowledges both man and nature.

Image courtesy: the artist.