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SURFING INTO SAMĀDHI: REDISCOVERING THE ELEMENTS IN INDIA'S COASTAL VILLAGES

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Synopsis:

This is a three-part 90-minute session with two presenters. In the first 30-minute portion, Christopher Miller will present an abridged version of his thesis discussing the religious dimensions of the countercultural surf community in South India as they confront the ecological challenges in their coastal villages. Then, Fancy Fechser will present her documentary film depicting this surf culture and the current ecological and social projects that she and professional surfer Brad Gerlach are undertaking with them to confront these challenges, including their drive to bring more surfboards to the coastal villages as well as to assist them with organizing beach clean ups. Finally, we will close the session with a discussion regarding the current state of affairs and leave time for Q&A.

Part 1 - PAPER

Abstract

This paper presents an abridged version of my master's thesis titled "Surfing Into Samādhi: Rediscovering the Elements in India's Coastal Villages." First, it explores the foundational significance of the gross elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space) in Indian philosophy and spirituality. Next, it discusses India's troubled relationship with its natural environment, a phenomenon that I identify as "elemental defilement." Finally, I assert the distinct and unique ways that India's small but growing surf community holds the key for inter-caste "re-intimization" with the elemental world, ultimately establishing that this community has the potential to reconnect citizens to an experiential awareness of India's basic philosophical underpinnings as defined in Sāṃkhya philosophy and other specific yoga texts. To ground the conversation within an academic context, recent scholarship discussing surfing and spirituality, as well as religion and ecology, are cited throughout.

Surfing Into Samādhi: Rediscovering the Elements in India's Coastal Villages

In this paper, I will use the experiences, observations, and interviews that took place throughout my 2013 journey with India's surfing community as a prism through which I will: 1) explore the foundational significance of the five great elements (*pañcamahābhūtas*) in Indian thought and spiritual practice, 2) discuss how the current state of the natural environment in India indicates a loss of intimacy with these great elements, and 3) demonstrate the ways in which India's unenforced environmental policies and disjointed social structure are preventing the country from establishing a healthy relationship to the natural environment. I ultimately propose that the growing surf community in India is providing a platform for inter-caste "re-intimization" with the elements, a much-needed process given the widespread disregard for India's ecological systems. I'll begin my discussion by turning our attention to the foundational significance of the five great elements in India.

The Five Elements:
***Pr̥thivī* (earth), *Ap/Jal* (water), *Agni/Tejas* (fire), *Vāyu* (air), *Ākāśa* (space)**

The five great elements (*pañcamahābhūtas*) are the fundamental constituents that comprise our physical reality. Fundamentally speaking, everything we experience, whether it is a walk in nature, a drive down the street, or our own bodies, contains some proportion of these elements. In Indian philosophy, the five elements are ubiquitous and provide the foundations upon which the ontologies of many other philosophies are constructed. The first word of hymn one of the *R̥g Veda* is in fact *agni* (fire).¹ Listing the elements from subtle to gross, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* establishes that “From Brahman arises *ākāśa*, from *ākāśa* arises *vāyu*, from *vāyu* arises *tejas*, from *tejas* arises *ap*, and from *ap* arises *pr̥thivī*.”² Similarly, in the *Maitrī Upaniṣad*, it is written, “The three quarter Brahman has its roots above,... its branches are *ākāśa*, *vāyu*, *tejas*, *ap* and *pr̥thivī*.”³ In classical yoga philosophy, *Patañjali* makes reference to the great elements throughout the *Yoga Sūtra* while establishing the ontology of the *yoga darśana*, while *ayurveda* constructs a threefold “*vāta-pitta-kapha*” system of bodily *doṣas* in relation to the elements and their subtle qualities. Finally, the *Bhagavad Gītā* states that the five elements, in addition to our mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*) and ego (*ahaṃkāra*), constitute the Divine’s lower nature.⁴ These are but a few helpful examples, and many

¹ The first verse of the *R̥g Veda* is “*aghnimīle purohitam yajñasya devam ṛtvijam, hotāram ratnadhātāmam*,” which translates as, “I Laud Agni, the chosen Priest, God, minister of sacrifice, the hotar, lavishes of wealth (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rgveda/rv01001.htm>).”

² Chapple, Christopher & Mary Evelyn Tucker, editors. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print.), as cited 26.

³ Ibid, as cited 27.

⁴ Chapter 7, verses 4 and 5 read, “Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, understanding, and the sense of I: This is my *prakṛti* which is divided eight-fold. This is my lower *prakṛti*...” See de Nicolas, Antonio. *Avatāra: The Humanization of Philosophy Through the Bhagavad Gītā. New Edition*. (Lincoln, Nebraska: Authors Choice Press, 2003. Print.)

more might be provided to demonstrate the elements' significance in matters of understanding divinity, nature, and embodiment.

It will serve our discussion well to turn our attention to what many consider to be the first organized account of Indian elemental philosophy.⁵ In *Īśvarakṛṣṇa's Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, we find a systematic enumeration of reality in the form of twenty-five *tattvas* (components of existence) that includes at its foundation the five gross elements.⁶ Verse 22 introduces the gross elements (*pañcabhūtāni*) as five of these *tattvas*, which, as verse 38 informs us, emerge from the five subtle elements (*tanmātras*).⁷ The gross elements have existed from time eternal,⁸ and provide the building blocks that house the subtle body. Thus, the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* states, "Subtle [bodies], [bodies] born of father and mother together with gross elements are the threefold kinds of [bodies]. Of these the subtle [bodies] are constant; [bodies] born of father and mother are perishable (verse 39)."⁹

According to *Sāṃkhya*, the subtle body transmigrates through the subtle elements, *housed in the gross elements*, from lifetime to lifetime, because it is characterized by "conditions" or "dispositions" (*bhāvas*).¹⁰ Throughout this entire process *Sāṃkhya* describes interplay between the two *tattvas* known as *prakṛti* (a term used to encapsulate

⁵ Because *Sāṃkhya* philosophy is considered to be foundational for later forms of Hinduism, Yoga and Indian thought, I will use it here as an example that can be expanded to encapsulate the ontological underpinnings of many other traditions and systems of thought informed by it in India.

⁶ The twenty-five *tattvas*, which come in groups of five, are as follows [earth, water, fire, air, space], [nose, mouth, eyes, skin, ears], [sense of smell, sense of taste, sense of sight, sense of touch, sense of hearing], [anus, genitals, feet, hands, voice], [mind, ego, intellect, *prakṛti*, *puruṣa*].

⁷ Larson, Gerald James. *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979. Print.), 262-63, 267.

⁸ Ibid, 256. According to verse 3, "Primordial nature (*mūlaprakṛti*) is uncreated."

⁹ Ibid, 267-268, verse 39.

¹⁰ Ibid, 268, verse 40.

the emotional-mental-material matrix of the universe from gross to subtle, i.e. *tattvas* 1-24) and the witnessing consciousness known as *puruṣa* (*tattva* #25). The misidentification of these two fundamental *tattvas* has historically caused one suffering and transmigration from lifetime to lifetime, but through recounting (*tattva-abhyāsa*) the relationship between the gross manifestations of reality (the elements) and their subtle counterparts (the capacities from which they emerge) one cultivates the *bhāva* of discriminative knowledge and is able to differentiate between the two. This leads to a state known as *kevala* (also known as *kaivalya* in the classical yoga system).¹¹ Such a state allows the witnessing consciousness (*puruṣa*) to see the world of *prakṛti* just as it is in an unsullied state of awareness, devoid of attachment to the fluctuation of her *guṇas*, and empowered to observe the world from a place of clarified immediacy.¹²

Throughout this entire process, the five gross elements play an important role in that they are the starting point through which one discerns the true nature of reality. Rather than try to escape from them, one is to move directly in and through them in order to discern the relationship between the gross and the subtle. Beginning with the gross elements, by paying close attention to each *tattva* and the relationships between them, one comes to an understanding that their body is in fact comprised of each, first on the physical level, and eventually on a more metaphorical, subtle level. For example, careful attention to the earth element reveals one's own earthly physicality while also pointing toward one's more subtle inner cradle of security, sustenance and fearlessness. Concentration on water, the source of life on the planet, places one in contact with their

¹¹ Ibid, 274, verse 64.

¹² Though there is a longstanding debate as to whether or not the interrelated philosophies of *Sāṃkhya* and classical *Yoga* espouse a world-rejecting ontological dualism, I am taking the position in this thesis that the states of liberation described in both the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* systems do not result in world denial, but rather in a clarified participation in worldly affairs. For a more robust account of the various claims made in this debate, see the chapters in *Yoga and Ecology: Dharma for the Earth* written by Ian Whicher, Beverly Foulks, and Alfred Collins.

own physical fluidity as well as their subtle, yet potent creative capacities. Standing in the middle of the five elements, fire burns brightly to give one vision, both externally and internally. It is indicative of transformation and can give meaning to the purifying power of life's struggles. Observing the breath and the animating effects of moving air sweeps one into more subtle interior layers, while space points to a place of infinite expansiveness.

As we can see, in the *Sāṃkhya* system, the elements create the platform for human experience and are the tools for realizing the unconditionally liberated state of one's own pure consciousness, an experience cultivated through close analysis of one's interconnected emotional, mental, and physical experience with a practice known as *tattva-abhyāsa*. Later *Yoga* texts expand this notion and describe a similar undertaking known as "concentration on the elements" (*bhūta-dhāraṇā*).¹³ For example, in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* we find *dhāraṇās* that instruct one to ascend through the elements and the senses underlying them, contemplating them from the grossest to the most subtle:

The yogi should contemplate the seven objects,
starting with the earth.
He should contemplate the subtle earth;
when he deems the earth to be
his soul, he leaves behind its bonds.
Then he transcends the subtle taste in water,
the form in fire and the touch in wind.
As he moves into the subtle form of the mind,
he leaves behind engagement with the sky and sound.
He enters with his mind into the mind of all
created beings in a subtle condition.
From there he develops religious devotion;

¹³ *Tattva-abhyāsa* is found in *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* verse 64. The practice of *dhāraṇā* (concentration) is prescribed in *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra* as part of his eight-limbed system of *yoga* in Chapter 2, Verse 29, "yama niyama āsana prāṇāyāma pratyāhāra dhāraṇā dhīyana samādhiyo 'ṣṭāv aṅgāni" which means "Precepts, observances, postures, control of breath, inwardness, concentration, meditation, and samādhi are the eight limbs". Chapple, Christopher. *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom*. (New York: SUNY, 2008. Print.), 173. *Dhāraṇa* is the general method of focusing one's attention on a particular object of meditation, and in the following examples we will look at how it is used specifically with the elements. For illustrative purposes, we will here look at portions of a specific text that we translated in my graduate Sanskrit course under the guidance of Dr. Christopher Chapple, the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. In this text, we find careful attention is paid to the elements through various *dhāraṇās*, and this practice can thus be conceived as correlative with *Sāṃkhya's* concept of *tattva-abhyāsa*.

having traversed all seven
(earth/smell; water/taste; fire/form; wind/touch,
space/sound, mind/thought, intellect/devotion),
he moves to supreme bliss,
leaving behind all attachment.¹⁴

Similar practices are found in other texts, though this example will suffice for our purposes.¹⁵ As we can see in this passage, there is a direct engagement with each of the five gross elements as well as the corresponding senses, a practice that ultimately leads to “supreme bliss.” By working with each of the elements found in the natural world, one can begin this process of interior awakening, evoking the subtle qualities of each element within. Doing so gives one permission to interpret and recreate the world in which they live based on the affective, first person experiences stimulated from such practices. In the end, as a witnessing presence begins to reveal itself and shine light upon one's experience, one gains a renewed intimacy with the elemental world.

Elemental Defilement

Despite the fact that the elements are foundational in Indian ontology and yogic techniques for liberation, and though they indeed remain a part of the living spiritual traditions there today, India's current state of environmental affairs demonstrates a collective disregard for their fundamental importance. For example, though they are still used in the temple *pūjās* and *arathis*, outside of such instrumental ritual contexts their sanctity is almost completely disregarded. Thus, a collective cognitive dissonance exists amongst the general population, one which juxtaposes elemental reverence with the need to unsustainably consume in order to survive in a quickly “developing” country. The

¹⁴ Arindam Chakrabarti and Christopher Key Chapple, editors. *Engaged Emancipation: Mind, Morals, and Make-Believe in the Mokṣopāya*. (Forthcoming, SUNY Press), as cited 298, verses 15-23.

¹⁵ See, for example, Śubhacandra's *Jñānārṇava*.

outcome of this ironic situation is an observable “elemental defilement” that manifests itself in countless forms.

During our recent travels to India, we experienced several types of elemental defilement. While in the Delhi airport, the air was so thick with pollution that we could visibly perceive a cloud *inside* the high-ceilinged international terminal that was fed by a *dense* layer of smog from outside. Later, after getting into a cab at the Bhubaneswar airport to head toward the ecological sanctuary, my friend and I immediately took note of the endless trail of plastic garbage along the roadside and in the waterways over which we crossed. At one point, our driver quickly guzzled drinking water from a plastic drinking bag and tossed the plastic out the window when he was finished. The next day we observed that the sanctuary road was littered beyond recognition: it had been transformed into an eyesore by plastic bottles, styrofoam plates, and countless other types of non-biodegradable litter.

How did this happen? How could a culture that has erected such incredible elemental monuments and produced such extravagant philosophical and practical treatises regarding the foundational importance of the five great elements now have such a blatant disregard for the health and wellbeing of their earth, air and water? As I later began to undertake surfing expeditions throughout the Bay of Bengal, I began a process of inquiry with Indian residents from all over the country to try to get a sense of the situation.

I was fortunate to meet a diverse range of individuals, most notably India's small but growing surf community. I distinctly remember my first conversation with a nineteen-year-old student from Tamil Nadu to whom I had posed the seemingly obvious

question – “Why is there so much plastic litter here?” Given its pervasive presence, plastic seemed like the perfect issue to tackle since its litter defiled seemingly every element (at least the earth, water and air!). Her response was:

It is a matter of bad habit, you see. When I was five years old there was no plastic here and everyone ate off of banana leaves or leaf plates. We drank chai out of cups made from clay. All of these things could be tossed on the ground and reabsorbed by the earth. Now that people use plastic they don't understand that it is not biodegradable and keep their old habits of tossing their waste onto the ground.¹⁶

This seemed to make sense, and several other informants confirmed her explanation in their own accounts of their youth.

During my travels I also met with Murthy, the founder of Covelong Point surf school, in Kovalam, Tamil Nadu.¹⁷ In a conversation with a motley surfing crew consisting of Murthy, his surfing fisherman friends Venkat and “Appu,” and a guy named “Clouds” who was studying medicine, I was told that plastic constantly washes into their fishing village from the cities located up-river. They try to control it, but said that they could not keep up with the entire overflow.¹⁸ This definitely corroborated the information from our first informant. Most significantly, however, was what Venkat told me toward the end of our conversation: “After the monsoon, city people come to the sea and complain about all of the plastic.”¹⁹

After listening to all of the Indian surfers' stories, it became apparent to me that for the general Indian population, there is a clear disconnect with the elements and nature.

¹⁶ Śruti (Student) in discussion with the author, January 2013.

¹⁷ Note that there is a beach called “Kovalam” in Kerala as well. The surfers were quick to tell us that they lived in Kovalam in Tamil Nadu – not in Kerala.

¹⁸ Murthy, Venkat, Appu and Clouds (Fisherman, Fisherman, Fisherman, Doctor, respectively) in discussion with the author, January 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Thomas Berry often refers to this condition as “Nature Deficit Disorder,” a condition that creates an autistic relationship with the natural world.²⁰ From what I was hearing, old habits, a lack of education, and general desensitization to the elements seemed to be the main culprits for the current state of affairs.²¹ Ishita, India’s first pro female surfer, told us during dinner that “people just need the facts”.²²

Another contributing factor to India's elemental defilement is society's inability to cooperate due to its disjointed social structure. With regard to the ecological effects of this situation, Christopher Chapple writes:

The environmental movement in India has to respond to these competing constituencies. The urban masses want to enjoy modern material comforts. Rural villagers want access to arable land... In many regards, the environmental movement in India pits the living past against the modernized present...²³

India is in dire need of social cohesion and given its dysfunctional caste system and its general lack of ecological accountability, heartfelt communication between the various interested parties involved in these environmental challenges is long overdue.

Looking Forward: A Soul Surfing Revolution

Despite these challenges, a new tribe is rising all over India’s coastline, one that is becoming reacquainted with the elements in an intimate way. They are young and old, male and female, and are composed of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras.

²⁰ Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988. Print.), 17.

²¹ The fear of water, I would contend, is just one of the many pieces of evidence that indicate a severe disconnection with the elements and the natural world at large. We were informed at the festival that 70,000 people per year drown in India, where we also witnessed a general fear of the water, wherein several attendees at the surf festival said they did not want to surf because they did not know how to swim and were afraid of the ocean. Luckily surfers like Velu, one of many whom we met, act as lifeguards in time of need for many beachgoers. According to Velu and his friends, he has rescued sixty people from drowning! (Velu (Fisherman) in discussion with the author, January 2013)

²² Ishita and her boyfriend Tushar are the founders of the “Shaka Surf Club” in Karnataka, a surf school that “starts with education,” and where they “teach surfing with an ecological and social consciousness” (Ishita). (Ishita and Tushar (Founders of Shaka Surf Club, Karnataka) in discussion with the author, January 2013)

²³ Chapple, Christopher & Mary Evelyn Tucker, editors. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print.), xxxiv.

Breaking the social mores of inter-caste interaction, they stand as a force for, rather than against, nature and humanity. They abhor elemental defilement, and cringe at the site of ecological injustice. I am of course referring to India's growing surf community, a grass roots movement that is gaining momentum and national attention. As I initially proposed, in this section I intend to establish India's growing surf community as an effective platform for inter-caste "re-intimization" with the elements.

The surf community's general recognition of the interconnectedness of nature and the resulting communal sentiment that it is sacred and worthy of reverent care is a broad concept which scholar Bron Taylor refers to as *dark green religion*.²⁴ In a chapter titled "Surfing Spirituality," he provides insight into the transformative ways in which surfing, in particular, can instill this disposition in one's heart:

The ideas introduced in this chapter – that there is a mysterious magic in surfing that can only be apprehended directly through the experience; that surfing fosters self-realization; that commercialization of the practice is a defiling act but that even such acts cannot obviate its spiritual power; that surfing can lead to a life characterized by compassion towards other living beings – have been expressed repeatedly and increasingly within surfing subcultures. Indeed, a significant and increasing part of the evolving, global surfing world can be understood as a form of dark green religion, in which sensual experiences constitute its sacred center. These experiences, and the cultural enclaves in which people reflect upon them, foster understandings of nature as powerful, transformative, healing and sacred. Such perceptions, in turn, often lead to ethical action in which Mother Nature, and especially its manifestation as Mother Ocean, is considered sacred and worthy of reverent care. Many surfers also develop feelings of communion and kinship with the nonhuman animals they encounter during their practice. These experiences sometimes take on an animistic ethos and lead surfers to activism on behalf of marine ecosystems and particular species.²⁵

²⁴ Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. Print.), 104.

²⁵ Ibid.

Taylor goes on to provide several examples of the ways in which surfing can foster a special type of spiritual connectedness with the natural world, stating, “the sacredness of nature will naturally occur to surfing’s open-hearted practitioners.”²⁶

Taylor is also not naïve regarding the shadow side of the sport, quick to note that “surfers are also known for sexism, territoriality, and even violence, as practitioners battle to get the best wave or prevent newcomers from paddling out in places they consider special.”²⁷ Also, as he alluded to in his previous quote, surfing has been accused of promoting an exploitative and consumer-driven lifestyle that revolves around an artificially developed beach culture. Providing boards created from polymer resin and sporting polyester board shorts and bikinis, the surf industry has been conceived as just another contributor to our destructive global consumer culture.

Let us also not forget that surfing did not grow up in India, and, as such, one might perceive it to be a neo-colonial, western sport rather than an indigenous device for environmental rehabilitation. It is the ancient Hawaiian sport of kings, which with the help of the revival by Duke Kahanamoku and Irish surfer George Freeth, made its way through California, Mexico, Central America, Australia and Europe long before it reached Indian shores. But, given its roots in indigenous Polynesian culture, surfing can

²⁶ Ibid, 108. The depth of the ocean and its overwhelming power can trigger the human mind to ask some of life’s ultimate questions. Rabbi Nachum Shifren, also known as the surfing rabbi, reminisces on some of his moments of awakening while surfing in Hawaii when he writes “the surf itself was a great and always powerful teacher offering daily lessons in true humility; that we are tiny in the face of a power much greater than ourselves” (Surfing Rabbi, 42). Later in his autobiography, Shifren finds parallel sentiments in Psalm 107. “Those who go down to the sea...who perform tasks in mighty waters, they saw the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep (Surfing Rabbi, 159).” He continues to elaborate on his oceanic spiritual experiences and credits them for leading him on a righteous spiritual path when he writes:

The crashing surf, the power of the ocean swells, these were testimony to His sovereignty and proof of His power. What a great feeling to know I had been right on the scrimmage line all those years. So close, yet so far, eh Shifty? What you going to do about it? Pretty tough to be part of His wonders in the ocean and ignore what He is saying (Surfing Rabbi, 160).

²⁷ Ibid, 105.

certainly continue to make positive impacts in India if Indians take charge of developing the surf culture for themselves in a sustainable manner.

Likewise, despite the criticisms and potential pitfalls, there are aspects of the sport of surfing that can positively contribute to reversing the trend of elemental defilement in India. When approached sensitively as “soul surfing,” as some surfers might say, surfing is a sport that places participants in close intimacy with all of the elements. Surfers ride waves, which are wind energy transferred into water that, depending on bathymetry and the form of earth they are breaking over, provide a distinct type of stage upon which a surfer may dance in the sunlight and celebrate nature’s wonder. By participating in this process, one begins to notice more and more detail each step of the way. We perpetually monitor the incoming and outgoing tides with the moon cycle, check the direction of the wind, the time of the sunrise, and measure the water quality and temperature. We take note of the condition of the sandbars or the reef, always on the lookout for potential underwater hazards. Close attention to these details can lead one to “riding in the tube,” the peak experience of surfing in which time slows down almost to a halt and every minute detail shines forth.²⁸ In this process of close observation our sensitivity toward the

²⁸ Steve Kotler, author of *West of Jesus: Surfing, Science and the Origins of Belief*, eloquently describes his first moment of awakening:

The waves were in the head-high range, the tide heading low. I decided to catch one last wave and call it quits. My choice wasn’t anything special, a fast right, with maybe just enough shoulder to carry me. I took a few strokes to line up with the peak, a few more to catch the wave, and then everything got quiet, too quiet...the silence caught me unawares. I looked around, trying to figure out what was happening, and suddenly realized that it wasn’t just the sound that had disappeared; it was that my whole world was now moving past in freeze frame. Time had slowed, somehow, like someone had turned the temporal tap down. My brain and my body, my thoughts and reflexes, seemed wildly accelerated, but everything else had been reduced to a lollygagging crawl. Time was moving so slowly that I could see every inch of water, every surface nub, every shadowy nuance. It was then that I noticed my peripheral vision was extended, almost panoramic. I had the strange sensation of thinking that I was seeing out of the back of my head. And then the wave, still in slow motion, began to close out.

I watched the wall set up, the water suck off the bottom, the curl begin to pitch. There was nowhere to go and I was certain to fall. But I didn’t fall. Somehow I sucked my knees toward my chest and floated across the closeout, dropping off the far end and into the next section of wave. I made that section and then strung together a complicated series of maneuvers despite the fact that I had never done any of them before, nor had I any idea how to do them. All of this was just happening. It was clearly impossible (West of Jesus, 182-183).

natural environment is elevated, and therefore the intrusion by any foreign or destructive elements that might compromise our health, safety, and overall enjoyment and connectedness to nature's playground do not go unnoticed.

Finally, as I alluded to previously, surfing has created a platform for inter-caste dialogue. Encouraging the development of friendships among people from all walks of life, it addresses the challenges presented by India's current social structures, allowing for efficacious inter-caste communication to take place in ways never before possible.

In India's surf community, the unifying point for all was and remains the sport of surfing, one which places participants front and center with the elements where they realize that despite the artificial social restrictions imposed upon them by societal expectations, they are all members of the same planet. Elemental defilement, and specifically the problem of plastic pollution, belongs to everyone in India regardless of caste, creed or color.

Though not organized in the manner of an institution such as Surfrider quite yet, the Indian surf community is well on its way to becoming a unified national voice for the protection of the country's countless waterways and coastlines. Perhaps by aligning with the resources of an international organization like Surfrider, Indian surfing villages can empower themselves to let their voices be heard.²⁹ Or perhaps, like many other movements in India, an indigenous movement will grow out of the collective concern that I witnessed during my time spent there.

²⁹ The Surfrider foundation has already engaged some of the environmental challenges found in India, for example see their 2010 response to an artificial reef project their: <http://www.surfrider.org/jims-blog/entry/asr-response-to-india-reef>.

Conclusion

The gross elements, comprising five of the twenty-five constituents of reality, encompass a significant portion of India's foundational ontological system. They become the tools with which one comes to realize the state of liberation espoused by *Sāṃkhya* and many other philosophical traditions. They also provide a perpetual housing for the subtle body as it transmigrates from lifetime to lifetime. One author writes,

The gross body is made up of the five elements. It is also nourished by these very elements, by what we eat, drink, breathe and so on. It is impelled by the subtle body of the soul, which is constituted by the threefold energies of *prakṛti*. *Karma* is stored in the subtle body. When the gross body collapses, the soul, the subtle body, survives and is born again. This is reincarnation.³⁰

Thus, from the standpoint of Indian thought, when we defile the gross elements in this lifetime we are only rendering ourselves future lifetimes in which we will unavoidably have to deal with the consequences of such defilement. From a philosophical standpoint, then, we cannot escape the consequences of our present environmental degradation.

In conclusion, we must support the Indian surf community as it makes more efforts to organize itself to create direly needed environmental awareness. From an educational standpoint, surf education programs such as that found at the Shaka Surf Club need to be funded and promoted. In this way, more Indians can be reintroduced to the ocean and other waterways to help them overcome their fears of drowning, and, of course, place them intimately within the elements.

In addition to creating funding for these educational programs, we ought to also assist the Indian surf community if it decides to organize itself to lobby the government or other stakeholders on issues such as lack of environmental regulation and ecological

³⁰ Chapple, Christopher & Mary Evelyn Tucker, editors. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print.), 29.

shortsightedness. To be effective in India in this post-colonial era, this movement should be an indigenous one created by Indians themselves, though that does not mean that it should not garner international support. Thus, as a global tribe connected to one another through surfing, we are compelled to join hands with them to make their voices heard, despite some of the criticisms such an undertaking might receive from post-colonial theorists.

Elemental defilement affects everyone in India, regardless of caste or economic class or whether they live in a village or city. The surfing community is aware of plastic's infiltration because they are intimately involved with the elements and see it in their water and on their beaches everyday. Their inter-caste unity and growing community has the potential to have a positive impact on India's environmental consciousness given its ability to educate and place Indian citizens front and center with the gross elements. It would thus serve us well to support and encourage the flourishing of a sustainable Indian surf culture as new waves are waiting to be ridden and new friendships and environmental alliances are waiting to be forged.

Rather than defile our earth, water, fire, air and space, we all ought to use the gross elements intelligently in this lifetime. As I sought to demonstrate at the beginning of this paper, we can now see how in India the sport of surfing provides a platform for inter-caste "re-intimization" with the elements, a much-needed process given India's widespread disregard for the natural environment. By exposing more citizens from all walks of life to the sport, India can, at least in one small way, begin to reconnect itself to its ecological wonders and truly revive the significance of its basic philosophical underpinnings.

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Velu (Fisherman) in discussion with the author, January 2013. Interview.

Part 2 - FILM

While the word “surf” originated in India, the sport of surfing has only arrived there over the past ten years. In this 20-minute short film we’ll take audiences to the small fishing village of Mahabalipuram on the east coast of India where we’ll meet local surfers, visiting surfers, relatives of surfers and locals. We’ll see firsthand how surf culture is impacting the community. Brad Gerlach, a world-renowned surf instructor who has appeared in over 50 surf films and videos including *Step Into Liquid* (2003) and *Thicker Than Water* (2000) will partner with Mumu’s surf school in Mahabalipuram to coach Indian surfers in a two-day workshop using his innovative method, WaveKi.

Inspiring characters will illustrate how surfing breaks down caste barriers and transcends social constructs and replaces them with a common ground where surfers can meet eye-to-eye and build community. Despite surfing not having Indian origins, the film will show how it does share common values inherently found in India’s many philosophies and religions. Finally, the surfers in the training will partner with the Ocean Alliance Project and the children of the village to clean up trash on the beach. This will be the beginning of an ongoing program, overseen by Mumu, where children keep the beach clean in exchange for using donated surf equipment to foster the next generation of environmentally conscious surfers.