

Constructing and Deconstructing Nature

On the meaning of “nature” in the EU and India’s climate
pledges, through a postcolonial lens

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Abstract

Using a discourse theory and postcolonial approach, this thesis examines how nature is constructed in the EU and India's Nationally Determined Contributions to the Paris Agreement. Looking at how nature, a fundamental concept in global environmental politics, is articulated, this thesis adds to our understanding of climate politics in the context of colonialism and the North-South divide. Deconstructing discourses helps us understand a vital part of political action, but also the basic assumptions which shape environmental politics. Through logics of equivalence and difference, nature is in the NDCs constituted against the parties identities. The EU is articulated in the EU NDC as the active controller against controlled passive nature, continuing older, European, colonial discourses. India's NDC, explicitly positioning its discourse as different from "developing" countries, constructs nature as more spiritual and closer to (Indian) humans. This can be seen as a hegemonic intervention and a part of a decolonisation discourse. These discourses fail to be total. The Indian NDC, for instance, reproduces discourses similar to the commodified view of nature in the EU NDC: antagonism is highly present. Nature in the NDCs is a floating signifier: it is passive/active, separated/close, commodified/spiritual.

Keywords: Discourse theory, postcolonial theory, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), global climate politics.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Aims and Limits

Climate change is one of the great challenges of our time. Already, global warming caused by humans has had devastating effects on human and non-human life (IPCC, 2023, p.5). If global warming continues, more heatwaves, droughts, cyclones, and storms will follow, with catastrophic consequences (IPCC, 2023, p. 13). Collaboration between countries has not been easy; with clashes shaping which solutions can be reached (Allan et. al., 2021, p.926-928). Conflicts in global environmental politics can be regarded as conflicts of meaning - here the concept of “nature” is crucial (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.177).

The aim of this thesis is to better understand how meaning is discursively constructed by different actors in global environmental politics. More specifically, the aim is to understand how “nature” is constructed discursively in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of India and the European Union (EU). This thesis examines how they articulate the meaning of nature, a concept climate politics unavoidably touches upon (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.91). What is nature? Is nature controlled or chaotic, resource or danger? What is humans’ and specific actors’ relationship to nature? (Castree, 2014, p.9-15, Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.2-3) The discourses created, as well as their origins and implications, are examined through a postcolonial lens. This thesis deconstructs the discourses surrounding “nature” present in these texts in order to better understand global environmental politics.

Understanding discourses is important. There is power in creating meaning through discourse, as it impacts our knowledge about ourselves and our world (Winther & Jørgensen, 2000, p.45). This then decides which actions we see as possible (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.12, Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.176, Sultana, 2022, p. 6). Using discourse analysis, this thesis reveals how different actors promote certain meanings of nature in a political power struggle

(Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.177). This may help understand policy outcomes in global climate politics (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.177, 179-180). The goal is to provide a better understanding of the underlying meanings, assumptions and narratives that drive global climate politics. Through examining the construction of a basic concept in environmental politics, statements from important actors can be better understood, and perhaps criticised.

This thesis is limited to certain discourses. I focus on “nature” - as its meaning forms the basis of all understanding in global environmental politics (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.177). The meaning of nature is not fixed; “nature” can be wilderness to be tamed, a resource to be used, an equal, or an agent (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.94, Sutton, 2004, p. 13, 20, 77-78, Foltz, 2003, p. 9-10, Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.2). For practical reasons, this thesis is further limited to a certain type of document and a certain set of actors; I have not captured the full discursive field, or all the social practices which build the discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.94-95, 98, 100). As discussed below, the NDCs were chosen because of their political importance, while also giving the opportunity to study conflict between parties. To understand these discourses and conflicts in light of wider context such as the North-South divide I have applied a postcolonial perspective. Although my contribution will in the end be limited, I hope it can form a valuable basis for further research.

1.2 Research Question

The thesis will examine what nature means within two NDCs: what nature is, how knowledge about it can be reached, and what is the relationship between nature and humans. This meaning is constructed discursively through putting “nature” in relation to other concepts. It is not the word nature that is studied, but rather the concept which other words might also connote (Castree, 2014, p.18). The research question is:

How is nature constructed in the EU and India's Nationally Determined Contributions?

The research question will be answered through specifically a discourse theory and postcolonial perspective. The discourse theory perspective will help illuminate the system of meanings which construct different concepts and identities. Postcolonial theory will help connect the discourses to a wider context and focus the analysis in a meaningful way.

2 Setting the Scene

2.1 Background and key concepts

2.1.1 The Paris Agreement and NDCs

Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) countries have cooperated to combat climate change since 1992 (UNFCCC, art.3). Establishing a Conference of the Parties (COP) to meet annually and continuously review the implementation of the convention, the UNFCCC has formed the basis for later action such as the Kyoto Protocol, the Copenhagen Accord and the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, art.7.2 and art. 7.4, Allan et al, 2021, p. 925, Jernäs, 2023 p.4). A key feature of the Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, is the NDCs (Paris Agreement, Art.3., Allan et al., 2023, p.917). All countries are to regularly submit an NDC describing how they will contribute to the overall goal of limiting global warming (Paris Agreement, Art.1.a., 4.2, 4.8-9).

Different parties take on different roles in global environmental politics. The EU has generally taken a leading, active, role in climate negotiations; reflected in its role in negotiating the Paris Agreement and being one of the first to submit an NDC (Alloisio et al., 2020, p.518, Allan et al., 2021, p.927). In domestic policy documents the EU has also been found to position itself as an active agent against climate change (Molek-Kozakowska, 2023, p. 7-8). Typically, India has been an important player amongst global South countries, and has been more active in climate negotiations since 2007 (Joshi, 2013, p.135, Mohan & Wehnert, 2019, p.275). Indian delegates often underline the North-South divide; highlighting the historical responsibility of Northern countries, as well as the marginalisation of India (Joshi, 2013, p.137-138, 143).

2.1.2 The North-South Divide

One conflict impacting international climate negotiations lies between the developed global North and the developing global South (Joshi, 2013, p. 128, Gonzalez, 2015, p. 408). It is a conflict concerning whether historical responsibility or current capabilities creates a duty to act on climate change: historical responsibility or current capabilities (Joshi, 2013, p.142). The global North has argued action is needed swiftly (Gonzalez, 2015, p.109). As global South countries become stronger economies and emit more as they grow, they should, in the Northern view, also start mitigating emissions (Joshi, 2013, p. 133). The global South calls attention to the right to development, as well as the unfair division of resources between the global North and the global South due to colonialism (Gonzalez, 2015, p.409, 411-412). With inequalities remaining today, the global North has better resources to deal with climate change and bears responsibility for the majority of emissions (Joshi, 2013, p.131, Gonzalez, 2015, p. 418, Sultana, 2022, p.4). Although the end goal of combating climate change might be the same, the goal takes two different forms: the global North hopes to improve the environment through collective action, the global South hopes to achieve equality and alleviate poverty (Gonzalez, 2015, p.109).

The global North and the global South are not monoliths, and the terms are not unproblematic (Joshi, 2013, p. 129, Gonzalez, 2015, p.410). In this thesis, the terms “the global North” or “the global South” are generally used, with full recognition of their imperfection. Joshi argues that the North-South divide is a fluid concept constantly rearticulated (2013, p.130). Similarly, in this thesis the global North and the global South will be viewed as discursive constructions. Therefore other terms might also be used when brought up by text or theory, such as “developed countries”, “Western” referring to the global North, or “developing countries” referring to the global South.

2.1.3 “Nature”

Looking at nature from a social constructivist angle, its meaning is deeply intertwined with cultural values and understandings (Sutton, 2004, p.56, Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.1). In other words, how we interpret nature can be seen as a product of discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.94). What nature is and its value can also be linked to different ways of producing knowledge (Burke & Heynen, 2014, p.9). In Western thought, the meaning of nature is typically based on its separation from culture (Johnson and Murton, 2007, p.1-2, Alves &

Vidal, 2024, p.5). In this anthropocentric view, culture also dominates nature - nature becoming a commodity for humans to utilise (Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.1,5). This division between nature and culture has been questioned (Haraway, 1990, p.151-153, Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.178). Indigenous peoples' views and knowledge have been brought to attention, offering a more holistic view on nature and bridging the divide between nature and humans (Johnson & Murton, 2007, p.124-126, Whyte, 2017, p.157-158). In Indigenous understandings of nature spiritual meanings are often important, but also moral, affectionate, and "kin-based" relationships (Whyte, 2017, p.157, Mamawesween Niigaaniin & MacNeill, 2022, p.4).

2.2 Literature Overview

Through discourse analysis, researchers and writers have shown how nature is a "contested" concept as well as how our perception of nature impacts policy adopted (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.178-179). Discourses inform our basic understanding of an issue, which impacts our actions. Which environmental actions we choose to take are impacted by nature discourses (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.178, Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.2). Our understanding of ideal nature might, for instance, impact how we perceive risks (Evernden, 1992, p.4).

Although NDCs are rarely understood through a discourse analytical perspective, there are some examples (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.2, 5). Jernnäs explores the usage of NDCs as an instrument of governance, finding that techno-managerial and antagonistic rationalities shape how parties discuss NDC functions (Jernnäs, 2023, p. 3, 16-17). Mills-Novoa and Liverman's analysis of 29 NDCs focuses on finding the main discourses and silences (2019, p. 10, 12). Countries from the global South generally push a discourse focused on historical responsibility, highlighting their own vulnerability. Meanwhile countries from the global North do not discuss responsibility or vulnerability (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.6-7). At the same time, parties consistently propose renewable energy and land usage as good solutions (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.6). One silence in NDCs has been studied by Carmona et al., looking at how (and if) Indigenous people are discussed (2023, p.139). Although references to Indigenous Peoples have increased, NDCs fail to discuss Indigenous jurisdiction over land, meaningful participation and recognition of Indigenous knowledge, as well as the consequences of colonialism (Carmona et.al., 2023, p. 149-151).

I add to the overall understanding of environmental discourse through filling the gap in examining NDCs, while also deepening the examination of discourses (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.5). Based on an anti essentialist stance, terms used in discourse theory to break down the discourse allow a more thorough deconstruction (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p. 91, 94, De Cleen et.al., 2021, p.27). At the same time, discourse theory focuses on understanding the ways the discourse interacts with power, making it something different than a linguistic analysis (De Cleen et al. 2021, p.25-27). A discourse theory approach makes it possible to find assumptions, values and conflicts in the NDCs; achieving many of the benefits of discourse analysis Hajer and Versteeg highlight (2005, p.176-178). This thesis also combines discourse theory and postcolonial perspectives. Discourse-analytical perspectives might miss crucial aspects if not complemented by other theoretical approaches. Mills-Novoa and Liverman, for instance, do not notice the absence of Indigenous Peoples' self-determination when discussing silences in the NDCs (2019, p.10). Adding a postcolonial perspective allows me to consciously challenge the discourse I might be living in, and thus reach otherwise hidden aspects. However, postcolonial studies such as Carmona et al. (2023) leave room for a deeper analysis of how meaning is created, which a discourse theory approach can provide.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory

This thesis uses Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. It is based on social constructivist and poststructuralist premises. Our surroundings and identities do not innately contain an essential meaning - instead we give them meaning through social processes (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.xi, 55, 97, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.11f). Meaning is always contingent and changing, but we try to fixate it temporarily in *discourses* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.91, 98-99). Through putting signs in relation to each other we *articulate* meaning and construct discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.91-92, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.32). All social practices are articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.93-95, 100). Signs are related to each other through *logics of equivalence* and *logics of difference* (Mukhtar-Landgren & Svärd, 2022, p. 146-147). Logics of equivalence link together different signs, putting them on the "inside". Logics of difference instead push signs to the outside (Mukhtar-Landgren & Svärd, 2022, p.147, 158). The inside and outside thus construct each other in a binary, although this binary is never permanent or total (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.97, Mukhtar-Landgren & Svärd, 2022, p.158).

As mentioned, there is power in this construction of meaning - when one meaning is fixated that excludes other possibilities of meaning, which in turn impacts possible actions and subject positions (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p. 12, 45, 48, 53). *Hegemonic interventions* are especially powerful; fixating meaning across discourses, undoing the *antagonism*, the tension that the openness of meaning brings (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.111, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.55). Although hegemonies are never permanent, power is not something that can be escaped; we need the social construction of meaning in order to function and understand our world (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.45).

I have looked at how "nature" as a *floating signifier* is given potentially different meanings through logics of equivalence/difference. Nature can, as a basic example, be given meaning

through a positioning as equal to wilderness and chaos, with culture and civilisation on the outside. A floating signifier is an “open” sign that can never fully be fixed by the discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [2014], p.99, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.35). Nature, being a concept whose meaning has changed both historically and between cultures, can be seen as such a floating signifier. “Nature” could also in some discourses be a *nodal point*; a sign in the centre of the discourse which gives meaning to other signs (Laclau & Mouffe 2014 [1985], p.99, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.33).

Although it has its downsides, discourse theory clearly operationalises how meaning is constructed, which is one reason for using this theory. Its anti-essentialist premise also makes it a good fit when wishing to deconstruct basic assumptions in a field of politics. Discourse theory is, however, more of an approach than a clear method (De Cleen et al, 2021, p.29). Nevertheless, the terms used by Laclau and Mouffe can still be used; something underlined in other literature (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.57, Van der Meulen & Mukhtar-Langren, 2021, p. 497, Mukhtar-Landgren & Svärd, 2022, p.158, 161). The connection to the more abstract level of power and politics also makes it possible to connect to greater issues than just this specific case (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p27f). Of course, it requires some methodological attention; which will be discussed in the following chapter.

3.2 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is highly relevant to this thesis. It provides a meaningful focus and addition to the analysis of discourses, through connecting construction of nature to the wider North-South divide and other broader contexts. Postcolonial theory is highly compatible with discourse theory. Both work from a social constructivist premise with a highly anti-essentialist stance, and both are interested in looking at discourses (Seth, 2013, p.4, Go, 2016, p.39 f).

Postcolonial theory is based on the thought that colonialism is important; colonialism being seen as a key constituting force in relation to identities and knowledge (Seth, 2013, p.2, Go, 2016, p. 19, 64). The production of knowledge is not a neutral process (Burke & Heynen, 2014, p.8-9). Knowledge about something is key in governing over it, making knowledge

central in a colonial power dynamic (Said, 2016 [1978], p.103, Go, 2016, p.64-65). Postcolonial theory has also looked at colonial discourse, examining how the coloniser constructs the colonised and itself (Kelly, 2001, p.9, Go, 2016, p.24-26). Said, for example, goes into detail on how the West produces a certain discourse about the “Orient”, which in turn helps define the West (Said, 2016 [1978], p.64-66, Go, 2016, p.42f). In this dichotomy, the West has been constructed as better than, stronger than, and dominating the Orient (Said, 2016 [1978], p.71).

Looking at “nature”, postcolonial theory can reveal several interesting angles. Enlightenment philosophy “othered” nature in European thought and made it a binary opposite to culture, in contrast to the more holistic perspectives found in Indigenous cultures (Johnson & Murton, 2007, p.123, 125, Pattberg, 2007, p.2,6, Gonzalez, 2015, p.411-412, Horáková, 2017, p.1). This nature-culture divide can be linked to colonialism (Alves & Vidal, 2024, p. 5,7). In the divides between coloniser/colonised and between nature/culture; culture was defined as the European “civilised” culture, while indigenous “savages” were placed within nature (Johnson & Murton, 2007, p.121, Mamaweswen Niigaaniin & MacNeill, 2022, p.3). Assumed was the control of the “cultured” over both the colonised and nature (Johnson & Murton, 2007, p.121-123, Gonzalez, 2015, p.411, Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.5).

The meaning of nature can be both a product of, and reproduce or enable, colonial power dynamics. Perceptions of nature based on colonial exploitative premises might justify changing colonised land, disturbing indigenous practices (Dobbie, 2022, p.2, Össbo, 2023, p.114-115). Indeed, in Indigenous thought climate change is often perceived as a continuation of the ecological devastation brought on by colonisation (Whyte, 2017, p.154- 157). A commodified view on nature can be linked to colonial power dynamics, where the colonised areas are resources to be exploited for the benefit of the colonising force (Dobbie, 2022, p.5-10). All people’s knowledge of, and relation to, nature is moreover not treated equally (Burke & Heynen, 2014 p.9-11, Go, 2016, p.69, Sultana, 2022, p.6). Although it is not a simple dichotomy, Indigenous knowledge of nature has both historically and presently been hidden in favour of Western science and perspectives (Johnson & Murton, 2007, p.123, Chakraborty & Sherpa, 2021, p.5,7, Sultana, 2022, p.6, Mamaweswen Niigaaniin & MacNeill, 2022, p.2-3).

3.3 Positioning

As I am not above the discourse, this thesis is not neutral and cannot reach an objective truth (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p. 28). Discourse theory, like other discourse analysis, works from an anti-essentialist ontology, holding that reality is socially constructed (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.176, De Cleen et.al., 2021, 24-25). Physical reality exists, but we only ever understand this through discursive dimension. Moreover, the material also shapes discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.94). This has certain epistemological consequences: we cannot reach truth, which makes understanding how meaning and “truth” is constructed an important pursuit (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.176). This also means that I, as a researcher, am not presenting *the* truth. My research is, too, an articulation trying to fixate certain meanings in a certain way (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.100, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.43). By focusing on nature, I have presupposed it to be a concept that is meaningful and identifiable. I am selecting certain words as representing nature, and characterising nature as a concept with potentially shifting meaning. I am constructing “nature” too. Although this lack of objectivity might be problematic if working from a more positivist angle, through the perspectives I am working from, objective “truth” cannot be the end goal (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 176). Instead, I wish to understand, from a certain perspective, how discourses are constructed (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.36). Although I am not neutral, I approach the subject from a clearly defined, scientifically fruitful, perspective and in a theoretically consistent way (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p. 29).

Reflexivity and recognising one’s own position is important when working with deconstructing meaning (Said, 2016 [1978], p.94). In a postcolonial context, I am very aware that I am coming from a Western or Northern position, which of course impacts my view on nature and the countries studied. Where I live in the global North, climate change is not yet felt acutely through disasters, and we have the resources to adapt. This allows me to have a detached and, at least on the surface, neutral approach to the topic I am researching. As postcolonial scholars point out, the way we produce knowledge is not neutral, and education and science are indeed often based on Western thought and norms (Sultana, 2022, p.8, see also Chakraborty & Sherpa, 2021, p.2,6, 10). I am working in a Western academic environment, which means I will be to a large extent adhering to and reproducing these norms.

4 Method & Material

4.1 Applying Discourse Theory

As mentioned before, Laclau and Muffe give little guidance on the practical work. I have based my method in part on Winther Jørgensen and Philip's work, as well as taking inspiration from articles using discourse theory (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.57 f, Van Der Meulen & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2021). I have regarded "nature" as a floating signifier, and have examined how the logics of equivalence and the logics of difference "fill" the concept. I have then analysed the construction of "nature" from a postcolonial perspective.

I began my research by reading each text separately and identifying instances in the NDC where "nature" is mentioned. I was here not just looking at the specific word "nature", instead I looked at correlated terms and concepts as well (Castree, 2014, p.18). These were phrases like "climate" or "environment", but also more direct references to natural phenomena or specific landscapes. These different terms have, of course, slightly different meanings, yet they still belong under the same "umbrella" of nature (Castree, 2014, p.18).

The next step was to do an initial mapping of the concepts nature was linked to through a close reading of the text; looking at which concepts, actions and actors different "nature" terms were related to. I looked at adjectives used, concepts appearing in the same sentences and paragraphs, which concepts were mentioned in relation to nature and more explicit linkings. In order to systematise the analysis I sorted the words in different categories, based on Kellert's categories of "biophilic values" (see table below). The categories describe human values in relation to nature (Dobbie, 2022, p. 3). The categories related to what I was interested in: what we humans "put into" nature. Despite coming from a slightly different theoretical perspective, the categories helped provide a clearer view of what otherwise would have been a chaotic assemblage of words.

<i>Value</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Affection	Strong emotional attachment and love for the natural world.
Attraction	Aesthetic appeal of nature, from superficial sense of the pretty to profound realisation of beauty.
Aversion	Antipathy toward and, sometimes fearful avoidance of, nature.
Control	Tendency to master, dominate, and subjugate nature.
Exploitation	Desire to utilise and materially exploit the natural world as a source of materials and resources.
Intellect/Reason	Desire to know and intellectually comprehend the world, from basic facts to more complex understanding
Symbolism	Symbolic representation of nature through image, language, and design.
Spirituality	Pursuit of meaning and purpose through connection to the world beyond ourselves.

(Table from: Dobbie, 2022, p.3 [slightly modified])

Examining how the different words and concepts were related to each other, I tried to find logics of equivalence and difference present in the text. Actors were noted separately, and also linked to the respective concepts. I finished the mapping by looking at, in a similar process, the concepts nature was constituted against. Having a quite comprehensive initial mapping of the discourse in each NDC, I continued with repeated close readings trying to find the nature discourses within the texts, through their shifting logics of equivalence and difference. I also looked for antagonisms within the text, keeping the openness of meaning in mind. Finally, when both NDCs had been analysed in this way, I looked at patterns and antagonisms across the different texts.

I analysed the result from a postcolonial perspective, centering colonialism in understanding the discourses. I did this through asking two analytical questions; wanting to understand both how the discourses are impacted by colonial power relations and how they themselves reproduce or challenge these relations. I asked these questions on all levels: from the construction of individual terms and links to certain actors, to all the NDCs together.

-How might this construction of nature be the product of colonial relations?

-How might this construction of nature further colonial relations? How may it counter them?

Through these two analytical questions and through looking slightly beyond the NDCs, I aimed to give an answer to the overall research question.

4.2 Material

4.2.1 NDCs

As mentioned, NDCs were established by the Paris Agreement (Paris Agreement, Art.3, 4.2). They describe how a country intends to contribute to the overall goal of limiting global warming (Paris Agreement, Art.2.1, 4.1). The parties are relatively free to decide the form of the NDCs, which has led to variation in NDC design (Allan et al., 2021, p.918, Jernnäs, 2023, p.4). Some guidance is given by the Paris Agreement: Developed countries should take *“the lead by undertaking economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets”*, whereas developing countries should *“continue enhancing their mitigation effort”* (Paris Agreement, Art. 4.4). The use of NDCs thus allows for differentiating between parties (Jernnäs, 2023, p.14). The Paris Agreement further establishes that parties should submit *“information necessary for clarity, transparency and understanding”* (Paris Agreement, Art.4.8). According to the NDC rulebook established in 2018, countries should include information such as time frames, methodological approach, quantifiable reference points, as well as information on the planning process (Pauw & Klein, 2020 p.407, UNFCCC Secretariat, 2022, p.24, Jernnäs, 2023, p.5). Countries should also explain how their contribution is “fair and ambitious” and how they contribute to the goal of limiting climate change (Pauw & Klein, 2020, p.407, UNFCCC Secretariat, 2022, p.24).

I have chosen to look at NDCs due to their political and discursive importance (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.5). They are at once a product of national politics, and a document positioning the country in the discursive field surrounding climate change (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.11). Therefore, analysing NDCs may help reveal the assumptions and ideas forming the base of climate politics (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.179-180, Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.2, 5). It would have been interesting to map the whole discursive field, including its material components (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.94). Reports and decisions made at COP-meetings could, for instance, be seen as hegemonic interventions (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.55). However, given how discourse theory focuses on

antagonism and contingency, it is more fruitful to highlight this through looking at different and conflicting texts (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.36f, 55, De Cleen et al., 2021, p.26).

4.2.2 The NDCs studied

Given the focus on postcolonial aspects of climate politics, it was relevant to pick parties representing both the global South and the global North. As the countries within the global South and the global North take up many different positions, these two parties are not representative of the whole discourse (Joshi, 2013, p.132-133). However, generalising in hope of reaching some sort of “truth” beyond the discourse studied would be impossible in my approach (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.21, 28-29, Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p.176). Looking at the EU and India nevertheless gave the opportunity to study an important part of the discursive field. The EU and India have played important roles in climate politics; setting goals and articulating conflicts (Joshi, 2013, p. 134-135, Mohan & Wehnert, 2019, p.275, Allan et al., 2021, p.926-927).

The EU NDC studied in this paper is an updated NDC submitted by Spain on behalf of all EU member states. It sets a target of a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas-emissions (GHG-emissions) in comparison to 1990 levels by 2030 (European Union, 2023, p.10). Apart from some more specific targets, India’s NDC also sets a goal of “*following a cleaner path than “the one followed hitherto by others at corresponding level of economic development.”*” (Government of India, 2015, p.29). The Indian NDC studied in this paper was submitted in 2015, as an Intended NDC, and became the countries’ NDC when the Paris Agreement was ratified (Pauw & Klein, 2020, p.407, Government of India 2021, p.1). An update was submitted in 2022, but it was nothing more than an amendment of the phrasing of a couple of the goals (Government of India, 2015, p.29, Government of India, 2021, p.2-3). I have therefore chosen to look at the older NDC.

5 Analysis

5.1 EU

5.1.1 Controlled nature

In the EU's NDC nature is mainly present as a subject to the EU's actions. Nature is seldom outright discussed, being mentioned mainly through the term climate. In the initial mapping, most words linked to nature fell under the "control" category (Dobbie, 2022, p.3). "*The European Council endorsed a new and more ambitious EU climate target for 2030 [...] of "a net domestic reduction of at least 55% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990"* (European Union, 2023, p.2). In this quote the climate is made equivalent to a target. In similar ways throughout the text, the climate is linked to different objectives such as climate neutrality (European Union, 2023, p.1, 4, 6). As seen in the quote above, these targets are in turn linked through a logic of equivalence to a reduction of greenhouse gases (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.53). The climate and greenhouse gases become objects of control and regulation.

Throughout the text a logic of equivalence constructs the EU as active, primarily in a legislative and economic dimension (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.53). In the quote above, the EU "endorses" a climate target, and at other places in the text the EU also "adopts" strategies to lower GHG emissions, or "revises" and "updates" legislation (European Union, 2023, p.1-2,5). The term "climate-neutrality", used throughout the text, also presupposes humans acting against the environment and then ceasing to do so (European Union, 2023, p.2, 7). Action taken by the EU is made equivalent to regulation and legislation, mainly regulating the economic sphere through market based tools. The Emission Trading System is highlighted, as well as how it will be used to regulate areas such as the transport sector (European Union, 2023, p.4). Action is further put in close relation to the economy by economic consequences of action being highlighted. "*In order to contribute to the transition towards a climate-neutral economy in a fair way [...] the EU established a Social Climate*

Fund to support vulnerable households, micro-enterprises and transport users in coping with the price impacts of the new emissions trading system.” (European Union, 2023, p.7). Here, climate-neutrality is made something specifically the economy can achieve, implying the economy is a main agent emitting GHG-gases harming the climate. Nature becomes a passive object affected by the economy.

The NDC also constructs the EU’s action as ambitious. This is done specifically in relation to other countries; *“On a per capita basis, EU emissions are also among the lowest of any major high-income economy and lower than several emerging economies”* (European Union, 2023, p.22). Although not as overt as what is seen in the Indian NDC (see below), this can also be seen as a Northern discourse on the North-South divide, constructing emerging economies as polluters needing to take responsibility and not as countries in development (Joshi, 2013, p.133). A good relationship to nature is also implicitly made to be cutting emissions. Interestingly, EU action (“climate-action”) is also linked to certain values such as human rights (European Union, 2023, p. 8, 13). Through making its action equivalent, the EU itself is made equivalent with these values.

Nature in this NDC becomes passive, controlled, and in part a commodity. Meaning is created relationally - and nature is constructed differentially against the EU (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.92). When discourse is constructing the EU as the active controller nature becomes the passive controlled, creating two highly separated “reverses” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.116). The link between the two is through legislation and the economy - that is what the EU’s action is focused on. The economy and law might act as a nodal point, giving the two elements their respective roles: one controls legislation and the economy, the other is affected by it (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.99). What is omitted is not only other possible relations to nature, such as spiritual ones, but also nature’s possible agency (Foltz, 2003, p.22-23, Dobbie, 2022, p.3, Alves & Vidal, 2024, p. 4).

This construction is consistent throughout the NDC; “Land” is, for example, only mentioned in the context of land use (see European Union, 2023, p. 12). The human usage of land is put in a chain of equivalence with land, making land a commodity (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1986], p.117). Similarly, categories of different landscapes and types of nature are discussed in the context of measuring removal of GHG-emissions; *“Emissions and removals occurring on reported categories of forest land, cropland, grassland, wetlands, settlements, other*

land...” (European Union, 2023, p.19). Nature is not only linked with a function benefiting humans, but nature is also constructed as quantifiable and measurable; something that can be categorised. Forests are constructed in a similar way, linked to management and managed forest, concepts also relating to controlling nature (European Union, 2023, p.18).

There are however cracks in the totality created by the discourse. The term “environment” at times is linked to human rights and sustainable development. *“The EU welcomes the recognition [...] that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a human right and will actively engage in discussions advancing this right and promote inclusion and non-discrimination.”* (European Union, 2023, p. 14). Nature is still something benefiting humans, but the link is a less economic relationship. Furthermore, nature is less quantifiable. “Clean, healthy and sustainable” is not linked to any specific metrics, as climate neutrality is. As Laclau and Mouffe often point out, a discourse can never be fully fixed; and meaning can never be entirely interior or exterior (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.97). Although keeping up a division between nature and humans, with humans at the top, the new link here shows meanings in the discursive field which could potentially destabilise the discourse (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.34).

5.1.2 Colonial discourses

The discourse in the EU NDC has similarities to older European colonial discourses; nature and humanity are separated, with humans in control of nature (Pattberg, 2007, p.2, Gonzalez, p.411, 2015, Vidal & Alves, 2024, p.5). In the EU NDC humans are able to control and change nature. The reason for wanting to achieve climate-neutrality, the impending climate crisis, is not discussed. Similar to older European discourses, nature’s agency is thus ignored (Alves & Vidal, 2024, p. 4). In contrast, the EU is made powerful. This may be a trace of older discourse forming European identity. European colonists constructed a similar relation to the colonised: they became the powerful controller, the other the weaker controlled (Said, 1978, p.71). The colonised or nature acts as the weaker counterpart Europe can constitute itself again (Said, 1978, p. 64, 66). Future climate catastrophes might shift the discourse again, as the (European) human ability to control comes into question (Alves & Vidal, 2023, p.4). However, as Laclau and Mouffe points out, physical phenomena is one thing, how we

interpret these phenomena is another (2014, p.94). There is no guarantee that this relationship to nature will be reinterpreted.

Just like all other discourses, the EU discourse suppresses other meanings, which might mean the suppression of Indigenous perspectives, continuing colonial patterns. In making the link between nature and humans primarily an economic one other possible ties to nature, such as spiritual or affectionate ones, are ignored (Dobbie, 2022, p.3). This impacts how land is used: with a commodified (colonial) view of nature, it might be sensible to build a park of wind farms to mitigate climate change, which could be inconceivable viewing the landscape from suppressed affectionate perspectives. The result could be further colonisation in areas such as Sápmi (Össbo, 2023, p.114, 129-130). This shows the discourses' material aspects and consequences.

In the text, nature is constructed as quantifiable and measurable, which furthers human power over nature and risks suppressing other kinds of knowledge. Through claiming to have knowledge about a thing, that thing can also be controlled (see Said, 1978, p.103). Through quantifying, measuring, and putting nature into categories, nature is drawn into a European system of knowledge and worldview, which positions itself as objective (Johnson & Murton, 2007, p.122). In the NDC, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has the authority on gaining knowledge about nature (see European Union, 2023, p.18-19). The IPCC's knowledge is also used to validate the EU's approach, highlighting the IPCC's authority in the discourse. *"The IPCC 6th Assessment Report also confirms that a sustained commitment to climate action, like the EU's, has been effective in the regions where it has been attempted."* (European Union, 2023, p.22). The IPCC has been noted for representing a largely Northern/Western view on knowledge, meaning they might miss important aspects of how climate change affects people's lives (see Chakraborty & Sherpa, 2021, p.9-10). A certain type of knowledge is thus implicitly constructed as good knowledge. The nature-perceptions and knowledge potentially marginalised through this discourse could be indigenous peoples' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.97, Sultana, 2020, p.8-9).

5.2 India

5.2.1 An attempted dichotomy

In India's NDC, nature is constructed as something abstract and spiritual with a deep connection to the Indian nation; *"Human beings here [in India] have regarded fauna and flora as part of their family. This is part of our heritage and manifest in our lifestyle and traditional practices. We represent a culture that calls our planet Mother Earth."* (Government of India, 2016, p.1). Using terms connoting an affectionate (or even familial) relationship, India and nature are positioned close to each other through a logic of equivalence. This relationship has spiritual aspects, here shown through the usage of the term "Mother Earth". The depth of the connection is emphasised, through highlighting it as part of Indian "heritage", "lifestyle", and "culture". Constructing this spiritual relationship as something inherent to Indian identity can be seen as what Laclau and Mouffe would call a hegemonic intervention or relation (2014 [1985], p.xiii, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.55). Differences (or antagonism) in culture and heritage within the large Indian nation is erased, and instead one, total, culture is put forward. For instance, a quote from Hindu Vedic scripture is placed at the start of the NDC (Government of India, 2015, p.1).

A logic of equivalence emerges in the NDC, making India synonymous with spiritual nature, nature trusteeship, and ambitious climate action (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p. 96, 117). Human duty to "protect" nature is emphasised (Government of India, 2015, p.33-34). This is also constructed as an especially Indian virtue. Gandhi, described as the "father" of India, is quoted arguing for this "trusteeship" (Government of India, 2015, p.1). The Indian constitution is quoted, connecting this form of stewardship specifically to the Indian citizen - and by extension Indian businesses (Government of India, 2015, p.18). The hegemonic intervention continues, emphasising how all in the Indian nation (should) relate to nature. Indian climate action is also made especially good throughout the text. Notably, it is stated that: *"India's contribution to the problem of climate change is limited but its actions are fair and ambitious."* (Government of India, 2015, p.33).

At the same time, a logic of difference is at work, contrasting India with developed countries' relationship to nature. It is understood that development by others "in the past" has harmed

the environment (India, 2015, p.1). One goal presented in the NDC is to “*adopt a climate friendly and a cleaner path than the one followed hitherto by others at corresponding level of economic development*” (Government of India, 2015, p.29). Between developed and developing countries today, there is said to be a “disparity” in thinking (Government of India, 2015, p.2). Developed countries’ response is described as “tepid” and “inadequate”, in contrast to India’s (Government of India, 2015, p.2). The logic of difference, moreover, constructs developing and developed countries’ responsibilities as different (Government of India, 2015, p.2). Developed countries have a historical responsibility to mitigate climate change, whereas developing countries are responsible for ensuring development. Development is described as an inherent human desire and a “legitimate aspiration”, further separating the developing and developed countries (Government of India, 2015, p.1). The result is a dichotomy in the discourse of the Indian NDC. India is articulating itself as an actor with certain (good) characteristics and (more legitimate) interests in contrast to other actors, a difference based specifically on the Indian relationship to nature. A logic of equivalence links India, spiritual nature, and protective and ambitious action together - while a logic of difference contrasts this with developing countries, exploitation, historical responsibility, and lack of ambition (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.116-117).

5.2.2 Instabilities

Nature is in the Indian NDC at times constructed in ways which contradicts the discourse proclaiming the Indian nature-friendly disposition. This shows the inherent instability of discourses and the partial failure of the hegemonic intervention (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.97). Constructing nature as in need of human protection presupposes the separation between human and nature, as well as positioning humans as more powerful than nature; nature becoming a fragile thing in contrast to its protectors. Furthermore, nature is at times constructed as an economic resource in the Indian NDC, using words connoting a more exploitative relationship (Government of India, 2015, p.20). The NDC states that: “*It is possible for people to live in harmony with nature by harnessing its potential for the benefit of mankind without undue exploitation leading to irretrievable damage and consequences that block the progress of others.*” (Government of India, 2015, p.2). Although a harmonious relationship with nature is highlighted, nature is still something whose potential should be “harnessed”, hinting at a view of nature as a commodity.

There is a tension between nature on one hand being articulated as “Mother Earth” and on the other hand being articulated as an economic issue, or a vehicle for development. Economic growth and addressing climate change is clearly linked, hinting to nature being important in relation to the economic sphere; *“The current development paradigm reiterates the focus on sustainable growth and aims to exploit the co-benefits of addressing climate change along with promoting economic growth.”* (Government of India, 2015, p.7). Nature is moreover linked in similar ways as in the EU NDC to economy and energy, through the policy proposals brought up (Government of India, 2015, p.9-10). Energy efficiency in industry is highlighted as an important policy to mitigate climate change, as is expanding transport infrastructure (Government of India, 2015, p.12, 15). The relationship between human and nature is not, however, as purely economic as in the EU NDC: changing human relationships and attitudes to nature are also mentioned (Government of India, 2015, p.33).

In contrast to the EU NDC’s nature discourse, in the Indian discourse nature has more agency and poses a threat to humans. The consequences of climate change are highlighted, and nature is put in a chain of equivalence with dangers such as droughts, weather-related disasters, and vector-borne diseases (Government of India, 2015, p.20, 22). A separation between humans and nature is implied. In this separation nature is dangerous, while the Indian NDC constructs humans, and especially India, as vulnerable (Government of India, 2015, p.5). When discussing this vulnerability, nature is once again constructed as a commodity for humans; *“The adverse impacts of climate change on the development prospects of the country are amplified enormously by the existence of widespread poverty and dependence of a large proportion of the population on climate sensitive sectors for livelihood”* (Government of India, 2015, p.19). Climate change is not harming “Mother Earth”, rather it is harming humans’ “development prospects”. A similar pattern is followed when discussing the vulnerability of coastal areas; *“... islands are highly susceptible to frequent and more intense tropical cyclones [...] which will have adverse impact on economy of these islands and health of their inhabitants”*. (Government of India, 2015, p.23)

Nature is, in the Indian NDC, conceived as something that can be measured and classified; although other forms of knowledge are given space too. Biodiversity and tree coverage is discussed in numbers and percentages (Government of India, 2015, p.24). It is also noted that *“the detailed glacier inventory of Indian Himalayas indicates presence of 9579 glaciers in the*

Himalayas.” (Government of India, 2015, p.25). The language used here is far removed from the words relating to spiritual and affectionate connections seen previously (Dobbie, 2022, p.3). At the same time traditional knowledge is mentioned in the text, specifically in relation to the Himalayan ecosystem (Government of India, 2015, p.25).

The discourse of the Indian NDC is closer to the discourse of the EU NDC than it constructs itself to be. The openness of meaning that Laclau and Mouffe discussed is on full display here, sometimes in contradictory ways (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.79, 97). Nature is familial and fragile, but at the same time a danger to humans and human needs. Nature is measurable and quantifiable, while simultaneously being the object of traditional knowledge. India’s relationship to nature is very different to developed countries’ exploitative attitudes, yet at the same time nature is something that can be used for Indian development. The antagonism throughout the text makes it impossible for India to construct a total self in relation to nature (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.108, p.111-112).

Looking at this antagonism through a postcolonial lens, it shows the prevalence of the colonial European nature discourse. The discourse in the NDC is moreover an attempt at constituting what India is after colonisation. This construction takes the shape of a hegemonic intervention targeting India internally; but India is also defined against the former coloniser (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.116, 122-123). There is a division between coloniser-colonised, but it is the colonised upholding the division. Values have been swapped; being a developing country now is connected to more positive elements. Interestingly, it is in relation to nature that this identity is constructed.

Constructing a nation through a type of essentialistic claim about the nation’s inhabitants, in this case about their relationship to nature, is not uncommon for countries in the process of decolonisation (Seth, 2, 24-25). Hegemonically articulating the nation through logics of equivalence becomes highly important when sovereignty discourse makes the nation-state the most important political unit (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.xiii, 91, Seth, 2013, p.2, 24-25). In Seth’s words, the different peoples of the Indian subcontinent had “*to start imagining themselves as Indians*” (2013, p.25). This happened partially through a Hindu nationalist discourse which was a product of Orientalist enumeration during colonisation (Shani, 2021, p.267-270). This discourse continues today as seen through the hegemonic intervention in the NDC, where Hindu Vedic script is quoted (Government of India, 2015,

p.1, Shani, 2021, pp.270-271). Affirming “traditional knowledge” can, in light of this, be seen as an epistemological aspect of decolonisation and also a way of constituting an Indian (Hindu) identity (Seth, 2013, p.2, Sultana, 2022, p.8-9).

6 Discussion

6.1 Findings

Through using discourse theory, my analysis identified different discourses constructing the meaning of “nature”. Through different logics of equivalence nature is positioned in different ways in relation to humans and other important concepts - as passive/active, separated/close, or economic/spiritual. In the EU NDC nature is positioned as a passive controlled, in relation to an active controller, the EU. Action is made equivalent to legislation that in different ways regulates the economy and makes it reduce GHG-emissions (European Union, 2023, p.4-5). Climate, and by proxy nature, becomes mainly an economic subject. Similar discourses have been found in other EU policies (Molek-Kozakowska, 2023, p.7). In contrast, India’s NDC makes India itself equivalent to a construction of nature as Mother Nature - this can be seen as a hegemonic intervention (Government of India, 2015, p.1). At the same time, developed countries are made equivalent to exploitation and passivity (India, 2015, p.2). Nature in India’s NDC also becomes more active, against which India is positioned as vulnerable (Government of India, 2015, p.19). This vulnerability discourse has been found in other developing countries (Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019, p.6-7).

Discourse theory has helped illuminate these texts as articulations and the antagonisms present within them. The NDCs are not just climate pledges - the EU and India are articulating their own positions through them. I have shown how this happens through articulating nature. Using Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology this wider system of meaning has been found; but as is emphasised by discourse theory, this system is not a fixed one (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.97). Keeping this openness in mind has helped identify several tensions. There is tension between the two NDCs: on one hand, the EU constructs itself as active and in control of nature and, on the other hand, India constructs the developing countries as passive and with a destructive relationship to nature (Government of India, 2015, p.2, 29, European Union, 2023, p.22). These articulations connect to the North-South divide, and these parties’ role in it. The EU affirms its position as a leader, whereas India continues to

affirm a Southern discourse of historical responsibility (Gonzalez, 2015, p.409, Allen et al., 2023, p.927). Articulating nature thus links to wider political purposes.

Yet there are also tensions within the NDCs. As mentioned, India positions itself as the opposite to developed countries, a position which is destabilised by other discourses present in the text. For example, much of the policy described is also focused on electricity, investment and infrastructure, creating a similar economic link between humans and nature as in the EU NDC. Similar patterns have also been noted by Mills-Novoa and Liverman (2019, p.6). Throughout the NDCs there are thus antagonisms present, hindering the total constitution of nature, or of these actor's identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.111).

By applying a postcolonial perspective, my analysis has shown how these discourses connect to a wider context - they are not created in a vacuum. The discourse of nature as something separate from humans, that can be controlled and used economically, has parallels to colonial nature discourse (Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.4-5). This nature discourse is present in both texts, but perhaps more clearly so in the EU NDC. The EU construction of itself as in control also has colonial parallels. India's construction of itself, and its relation to nature, can be seen as an attempt at decolonisation and simultaneously an example of Hindu nationalist discourse (Seth, 2013, p.2, 24-25, Shani, 2021, p.265). That the attempted separation from global North nature discourse is not total is perhaps a reflection of colonial discourses still being strong (Sultana, 2020, p.8-9).

Understanding how colonialism affects the nature discourses may also help understand the North-South divide. On one hand, the EU continues a colonial discourse of nature; where economic, legislative action appears the logical step forward. The formerly colonised India, on the other hand, adopts a decolonisation discourse where it understands itself as having a spiritual relationship to nature which differs strongly from the coloniser. These discourses translate into the different goals which the global North and the global South have in global environmental politics (Gonzales, 2015, p.409). The North-South divide can then not be seen purely as a conflict of interests, rather it is a product of shifting meanings, with some colonial origins. A key point is that understanding these differences as a North-South divide is also a result of the discourse. Notably, India's NDC clearly articulates a divide between developed and developing countries' relationship to nature.

The postcolonial perspective has also illuminated what and who is not present. Indigenous and traditional knowledge is not mentioned in the EU NDC. Traditional knowledge is briefly mentioned in India's NDC, though not elaborated on (Government of India, 2015, p.25). Overall, in the NDCs studied, nature is constructed as something understood through (Western) science. Numbers, measurements, and the IPCC are often given space (European Union, 2023, p.18, 21-22, Government of India, 2015, p.24-25). This kind of knowledge has been linked to a commodified view of nature, aligning with the colonial nature discourse (Burke & Heynen, 2014, p.9). Colonialism, despite clearly impacting the discourse, is never discussed as explicitly as in some Indigenous understandings of climate change (Whyte, 2017, p.154-157).

The absence of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge highlighted by others can thus be said to remain, and risks leading to further exploitation (Sultana, 2022, p.8-9, Carmona et. al. 2023, p.149-150, Össbo, 2023, p.115-116). As the climate crisis moves onwards, the combination of a colonial nature discourse and the absence of alternative voices risk justifying actions which harm certain groups (Össbo, 2023, p.118, 129-130). Indigenous and traditional meanings of nature and knowledge are of course present in the field of discursivity, and risk destabilising the discourses established in these NDCs (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.98, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.34). Already, India's discussion of Mother Earth, and mention of traditional knowledge, can be seen as a challenge to older colonial nature discourses.

6.2 Further discussion

Looking at the nature constructions in these NDCs, it raises the question of policy consequences and the power of discourses. Viewing humans as in control of nature risks ignoring the danger nature might pose, while hindering meaningful help to those vulnerable. Within a more commodified and economic view of nature, policy focused on renewable energy or emission trading schemes makes sense, though this perspective perhaps ignores deeper questions about whether there is something fundamentally flawed in how we treat nature (Alves & Vidal, 2024, p.2-3). India does discuss this, suggesting the global North must change its perspective in favour of a Southern perspective (Government of India, 2015, p.2). This articulation also hides some possibilities. What, then, might be different (hidden)

perspectives on nature within the global South, or India itself? This question becomes very relevant in the light of rising Hindu nationalism and discrimination towards Muslims in India (Shani, 2021, p.264-265, 270).

Discourses suppress other meanings, that is part of their power (Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.45). Through deconstructing the discourses, we can begin to tease out what has not been said. As global climate politics continues, in a world more and more affected by climate change, the discourses analysed in this thesis will continue to impact action. We can never step out of discourses, but we can create new relations, or replicate old discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.xvii-xviii, Winther Jørgensen & Philips, 2000, p.43). Through seeing what discourses are actually present, we can ask ourselves whether these are meanings of nature we believe to be useful.

Some aspects have not been touched upon in my analysis; I have only looked at a small part of the discursive field. These NDCs are part of a wider field of conflicting meanings that other NDCs, statements made at global and national levels, and non-state actors are also part of (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.100). Conventions, like the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, play an important role. Likewise later decisions, such as the Katowice agreement on the NDCs, are also crucial (Pauw & Klein, 2020, p. 407-408). The EU NDC might to a larger extent be impacted by discourses present in these texts, given that it was created after the later decisions were made.

Furthermore, material components are part of the discourse and the discursive field (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.94-95). Government and governance structures deciding how the NDCs were created is one aspect of this; Mohan and Wehnert notes that climate diplomacy in India is controlled “*by a tight knit group mainly led by the foreign ministry*” (2019, p.280-281). It is also worth noting the difference between the two parties discussed; India is a country, the EU is a supranational body. This means they have been given different roles by the discourse. It might be easier for India as a nation-state to articulate what it means to be Indian, whereas the EU is expected to take on more of a legislative role - not articulating a specific identity or culture. In Laclau and Mouffe’s view, such delegations of power are also articulations, and constituted by discourses (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 [1985], p.100).

7 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine how nature is constructed in India and the EU's NDCs from a discourse theory and postcolonial perspective. Discourse theory terminology has helped reveal the structure of the discourses, where nature is part of constituting the parties' identities. At the same time the postcolonial perspective has helped to tie this to a wider context and look for other meanings in the discursive field. Reproducing older colonial discourse, nature is in the EU NDC a passive subject to EU control, mainly relevant to the economic sphere. Such a discourse can also be found in the Indian NDC, but there a more spiritual meaning of nature is created and linked to India as part of a (Hindu nationalist) decolonisation discourse.

An anthropocentric human-nature separation can be seen in both texts. India's NDC, however, challenges this; furthering the North-South divide by positioning India against developing countries' nature discourse. Discourse theory has also highlighted the failure of these discourses to be total. Nature is for instance generally constructed as known through scientific expertise and measurement, but traditional ways of knowledge are briefly brought up in the Indian NDC. Not one construction of nature prevails; meanings are at tension both between and within NDCs. This thesis has deepened the understanding of global climate politics through examining how colonialism and the construction of nature interact. The combination of discourse theory and postcolonial thought has provided a useful ground for a thorough deconstruction of an important concept in environmental politics.

This has also raised a range of questions about the silences in these texts, something future research could look into, as well as examining other parts of the discursive field. This might mean expanding "outwards"; looking at more NDCs, and perhaps the Paris Agreement itself. It could also mean looking "inwards"; exploring nature discourses within India and the EU. In both cases, expanding to looking at the material dimension could be incredibly fruitful. There is also room for normative analysis. Although much can be said about the structure versus agency within discourse theory, when nothing is ever fully fixed that leaves room for us to

construct the meaning of the world around us. This asks us to consider; what nature do we want?

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