

SACRED NATURE

A Hindu Approach to Environment

Sanjyot D. Pai Vernekar[♦]

1. Introduction

The attitudes and values that shape people's concept of nature come basically from the religious views and ethical practices. Religions have not only determined the way we perceive the world but also set roles that individuals play in nature. Every religious tradition, while upholding the supremacy of human being, has condemned the needless exploitation of living as well as non-living beings. There has to be a comprehensive re-evaluation of the human-earth relationship for human beings to continue as a viable species on this increasingly degraded planet.

The Vedas, the *Bhagvad Gītā*, the Gandhian ideals, and contemporary issues all show how Hinduism views the environment and how it deals with the ecological problems. The Hindu perspective on the environment is pertinent because the ancient seers gave due importance to the environmental issues as well as anticipated some of the problems we are facing today. Hinduism has emphasized human dependence on nature and the planet. Hindu religious doctrines provide us with certain normative criteria regarding our attitude towards nature.

2. Vedic Tradition and Environment

The Vedas, the basic text of Hinduism, have valued nature and its intrinsic capacity. They express concern for nature by providing a metaphysical union between the human and the non-human beings, thereby establishing a strong relationship between nature and us. The Indic environmental ethos, according to L. M. Singhvi, declares: "all aspects and phenomena of nature belong together and are bound in a physical as well as metaphysical relationship, and views life as a gift of togetherness and of mutual accommodation and assistance in a universe teeming with interdependent constituents."¹ Vedas explain the unity of creation by pointing out that everything is interconnected to everything else. In the web of being,

[♦]**Dr. Sanjyot D. Pai Vernekar** is a Reader in the Department of Philosophy, Goa University, Goa, India.

¹L. M. Singhvi, "The East Is Green" <http://www.unep.org/ourplanet/imgversn/82/singhvi.html>.

everything has an interest and a purpose to fulfil. Thus, everything is worthy of a moral consideration. The Vedic texts emphasize that we all owe a responsibility to the environment not only for ourselves but also for the sake of those around us. According to L. M. Singhvi, “the soul of the Vedic tradition is peace and harmony, *dharma* and *rta*, restraint and responsibility, based on *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *karunā* (compassion). These ideas and precepts are the elements of the Vedic heritage which have the capacity and potential to catalyse and enliven a deeper feeling of reverence for Life and Nature.”²

The Vedic seers acknowledge that the material causes of this creation happen to be the *Pañca Mahābhūtās* (Five Great Elements). They are earth or *Prthvī*, air or *Vāyu*, space or *Ākāśa*, water or *Āpah* and light/fire or *Agni*. These five elements are cosmic elements which create, nurture, and sustain all forms of life; after death or decay, they absorb what was created earlier. Thus, these elements play a significant role as far as the preservation and sustenance of the environment is concerned. These *Mahābhūtās* are deified in the Vedic as well as *Purānic* literature. These elements are omnipresent and all pervasive, together they constitute *Brahman*.

Prthvī is considered as a divinity in the *Rgveda*. She is a mother and upholder of all. *Prthvī* is also identified with the Goddess *Aditi*, a mother and protector of the holy cosmic law. The relationship between earth and humans is depicted in *Prthvī Sūkta* of *Atharva Veda*. The earth is seen as the provider of space for the entire family. The Vedic seers regard the earth as a “sacred space” for the consecrated endeavours and aspirations of humankind and for the practice of restraint and responsibility.

In the Vedas, *Vāyu* (air) is viewed as the bond and the thread which keeps the universe together. *Vāyu* is also linked to *Prāna* (the life-sustaining breath). Nothing can survive in the absence of *Prāna*. *Ākāśa* (space) is not a material or physical element. It is from *Ākāśa* that all beings (their souls) come and it is where they return after their death. *Ākāśa* is the final refuge of all beings. *Āpah* (water) is the reservoir of all curative medicines and nectar. Water is the mother of all beings and the foundation (*pratisthā*) of all in the universe. *Agni* (light/fire) creates life on earth. In the later Vedic description, *Agni* is known as the sun and light. In the form of the sun, *Agni* is regarded as the soul and also as the ruler and preserver of the world. John M. Koller writes: “The *Brāhmanna* and

²L. M. Singhvi, “The Summit on Religions and Conservations,” Atami, Japan, 7 April, 1995.

Āranyaka texts of the earlier Vedic period clearly view human existence as an integral part of nature, classifying human beings as domesticated animals.”³ They, however, are special insofar as they engage in abstract reflective thought and intentional action. All living beings are sacred because they are parts of God and should be treated with respect and compassion.

3. Hinduism and Nature Worship

Hinduism also lays emphasis on nature worship. For example, Hindus have long revered the tree. The tree is viewed as a powerful symbol of abundance. Rivers also are an integral part of Hindu religious practice. There are various Vedic hymns in the praise of Sarasvati (a river now dry). The river Ganga which flows through the northern parts of India, is referred to as a goddess originating from the head of Śiva, who the Lord of the Himalaya Mountains, giving sustenance to million of Indians. Thus, rivers play a very important role in Hindu rituals.

The *Upanisads* narrate that after creating the universe, the creator entered into each and every object in order to help maintain an interrelationship. One of the animals worshipped by the Hindus is cow. The principle of cow protection symbolizes human responsibility to the sub-human world. It also strengthens the reverence for all forms of life. Hinduism stresses the sanctity of life. Only God has sovereignty over all creatures. Thus, human beings have no dominion over their own lives as well as non-human life. Consequently, “humanity cannot act as a viceroy of God to oversee the planet nor assign degrees of relative worth to other species.”⁴ The divine being is the one underlying power of unity. There is no form of life that is inferior. All lives play their fixed roles. In this context, M. Vannucci writes as follows: “everything is sacred by virtue of its own nature because energy pervades everything; thus, the lofty tree is worshipped as well as the humble grass on which we sit and the one that helps ignite the fire: all and each one play their role in the cosmic symphony.”⁵

³John M. Koller, “Humankind and Nature in Indian Philosophy” in E. Deutsch and R. Bontekoe, *A Companion to World Philosophies*, New York: Blackwell, 1997, 280.

⁴O. P. Dwivedi, “Classical India” in Dale Jamieson, ed., *A Companion To Environmental Philosophy*, New York: Blackwell, 2001, 44.

⁵M. Vannucci, *Ecological Readings in the Veda: Matter-Energy-Life*, New Delhi: DK Printworld, 1994, 113.

4. Intimate Relationship of Humans Beings and Other Living Beings

All kinds of life – plants, insects, birds, and animals – contribute towards the maintenance of the ecological balance. However, we human beings are nullifying the benefits of the contributions made by other species of life. The ecological balance is disturbed by human greed for material enjoyment and craze for power. The other forms of life, namely, plants, animals, birds, etc., are thoughtlessly killed. The plants and forests are destroyed indiscriminately to fulfil human selfishness.

Every entity and organism is a part of one large extended family. This view is based on the fundamental concept of *Vasudhaiva Kudumbakam*.⁶ The environment is our home and all its members belong to one family. Purushottama Billimoria writes: “The Vedas speak of the uncanny unity of creation and, more significantly, the mysterious interconnectedness or co-dependence of everything to everything else.”⁷

Unlike the Semitic religions, Hindu eschatology highlights the intimate relationship of human beings with other living beings like animals, birds, insects, plants, etc., which is evident in the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation. Hinduism maintains that there is a soul in all living beings. The soul (of any living being, including animals, humans, and plants) reincarnates, depending on one’s karma. Karma (literally, action) is the sum of one’s actions and the force that determines one’s next reincarnation. The cycle of death and rebirth governed by karma is referred to as *samsara*. Hinduism holds that soul goes on repeatedly being born and dead. One is reborn on account of desire, namely, the desire to be born because he or she wants to enjoy worldly pleasures. This is possible only through a body. However, when all desires vanish, the person will not be reborn anymore. When the cycle of birth and rebirth comes to an end, the person is said to have attained *moksa* or liberation. The karma determines the form of life that one would assume while taking rebirth, for example,

⁶“*Vasudhaiva Kudumbakam*” is a part of the apophthegm (*subhāsita*): “*Ayam nijah paroveti ganānā laghucetasām / Udāracaritānām tu Vasudhaiva Kudumbakam*” (“To consider someone as mine and someone as other is narrow-mindedness. The broad-minded would consider the whole *Vasudhā* [earth] as one family.”) This apophthegm establishes the fact that our ancient sages visualized the necessity of the unity of organic/inorganic life as a whole. This unity alone can ensure the survival as well as the welfare of the humanity. See, *Samskratabhāsābodhinī-Prathamā* (Kannada version), Śrngagirīh: Srī Surasaraswatī Sabhā, 1983, 12.

⁷Billimoria, “Environmental Ethics of Indian Religious Traditions,” 4.

whether one will be reborn as a human being, a plant, an animal, etc. Karma also determines the length of life (*āyu*) and the experiences that must accompany it (*bhoga*).

5. Central Concepts of Ethics and Environment

The concept of dharma is pertinent in environmental discussions. K. K. Klostermaier points out that “Dharma presupposes a social order in which all functions and duties are assigned to separate classes, whose smooth interaction guarantees the wellbeing of society as a whole and, beyond this, maintains the harmony of the whole universe.”⁸ The Sanskrit root ‘*dhr*’ means to sustain, uphold and support. Human beings have a responsibility, indeed a duty, to help sustain this world.

Ahimsā is another central concept of Hindu ethics. It is viewed as a principle of ‘non-injury’. *Ahimsā* was used by many modern thinkers as a tool to solve several ethical issues. *Ahimsā* is very significant in Jainism as well. In Jainism, hurting any being would result in the thickening of one’s karma which would hinder the path to liberation. As pointed out by C. K. Chapple, the worldview of Jainas may be termed as ‘bio-cosmology’. The Jaina vows of *Ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacarya* (sexual restraint) and *aparigraha* (non-possession) can be reinterpreted in an ecological sense as fostering an attitude of respect for all life forms.⁹

Hinduism maintains that God’s creation is sacred. Human beings do not have the right to destroy what they cannot create. One is forbidden from taking the life and/or causing injury to any sentient being (except in the context of Vedic sacrifice where it is prescribed and sanctioned). In the Assisi Declaration, issued by a gathering of world religious leaders, in 1986, the Hindu statement reads as follows: “the human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present, is not seen as something apart from earth and its many forms. People did not spring fully formed to dominate lesser life, but evolved out of these forms and are integrally linked with them.”¹⁰ Nature being sacred and the divine expressed through all its forms, it is essential to have reverence for life and practice *Ahimsā*.

⁸ K. K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, Albany: State University of New York, 1989, 48-49.

⁹C. K. Chapple, “Hinduism, Jainism and Ecology,” *Earth Ethics* 10, 1 (1998), 19.

¹⁰“Issues in Contemporary Faith: Religion and Ethics” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/gcsebiteize>.

6. Vedānta Tradition and Environment

The Advaita Vedānta philosophy does play a significant role as far as our relation with the environment is considered. The Advaita Vedānta speaks of the world as *māyā*, that is, the reality of the world and all things and relations within them is taken to be as illusory. The only reality is *Brahman*. L. E. Nelson argues that if the world is considered as *māyā*, then, there is no motive for maintaining or respecting it.¹¹ On the other hand, E. Deutsche holds that Vedānta philosophy implies that all life is one, that, in essence, everything is reality and as such would merit moral consideration. Vedānta enables us to institute a proper ecological ethics.¹² Vedānta offers the notion of “continuity of man and all physical nature.” In order to realize a proper relation with nature, we have to feel a deep kinship with nature and all life forms. This would result in a reverence for all living beings. The other concept in the Vedānta philosophy is “the doctrine of creation.” There is a natural unfolding of spirit in the world and, accordingly, it sees everything in nature as of intrinsic spiritual worth. The fundamental unity of everything as well as of spiritual kinship with everything rules out the possibility of gross exploitation of nature in any form.

Rāmānuja, the one who propounded Visistadvaita, views the world as a part of God and totally dependent on him, and considers it a mistake to identify the self with the body and the natural processes. Inequality belongs to *Prakṛti*. The living beings do not share one self but the selves of beings are similar. Madhva, another philosopher who subscribed to dvaita theory, believed in a personal God (*parameśvara*). God controls everything. What is significant of these thinkers is that they accord the real identity of the self and its relationships as conducive to a genuine environmental ethics.

7. Views of Contemporary Thinkers on Environment

The contemporary thinkers, like Mahatma Gandhi and Radhakrishnan, have held that Hinduism supports deep ecology to a great extent. Gandhi’s theory of non-violence has a great influence on social and political life. Gandhi stressed the need for an ethic of non-injury in our treatment of

¹¹Lance E. Nelson, “Reverence for Nature or the Irrelevance of Nature? Advaita Vedanta and Ecological Concern,” *Journal of Dharma* 16, 3 (July-September 1991), 285.

¹²Eliot Deutsch, “Vedanta and Ecology,” *Indian Philosophical Annual* 6 (1970), 79-88.

animals as well as in our behaviour towards other human beings. He realized that the principle of non-violence can bring about renunciation of the feeling of enmity. He defines *Ahiṁsā* in a positive manner as ‘love’. This love or non-violence is to be practised by the individual not only for his/her individual peace and liberation but to be followed as a rule of conduct for the whole society if it is to live consistently in human dignity. Gandhi made non-violence an obligatory principle for all. He turned *Ahimsā* into a dynamic force, informed by truth (*satya*). The Chipko environment movement, which describes an unrelenting embracing of trees to prevent environmental destruction by human intervention, is greatly influenced by Gandhian environmental awareness programmes and is led by Gandhian Sarvodayā workers on the principle of non-violent resistance. In this context, Arne Naess writes: “Gandhi recognized a basic common right to live and blossom to self-realization applicable to any being having interests or needs. Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, non-violence and what is sometimes called biospherical egalitarianism.”¹³

According to Radhakrishnan, “though in the process of attaining the vision of self we had to retreat from outward things and separate the self from the world, when the vision is attained the world is drawn into the self. On the ethical plane, this means that there should grow a detachment from the world and when it is attained, a return to it through love, suffering and sacrifice for it. The sense of a separate finite self with its hopes and fears, its likes and dislikes is destroyed.”¹⁴ From the above view of Radhakrishnan, we conclude that, according to the philosophies of oneness, the path, though it goes first inwards, leads out again to everything. The *Karmamārga* enables the *Karmoyogi* to be in touch with all creatures. This path enables us to see the greater self everywhere, in living and non-living beings as well as in nature as a whole.

8. Conclusion

In the west, the attitude towards nature was greatly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to Lynn White, Christianity separated humans from nature, thereby creating a dualism. This, in turn, encourages

¹³Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 26.

¹⁴S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, Bombay: George Allen & Unwin (India) Pvt. Ltd., 1971, 204.

exploitation and domination of nature for the benefit of human beings. However, unlike in the western tradition, the concept of environmental protection existed in Hinduism right from the time of the Vedas. Hinduism perceived God's presence in every aspect of nature. The natural forces were all manifestations of Brahman. Thus, Hindus felt it necessary to live in harmony with the creation, including the earth, rivers, forests, air, trees, etc. Various aspects of nature, like trees and rivers, are revered and worshipped by the Hindus and are considered as sacred.

In the process of modernization and commercialisation, Hindus have forgotten these traditional views about the environment; instead, they too have acquired an exploitative attitude towards nature. Our forests are destroyed and rivers are polluted, resulting in total environmental degradation. The religious values that acted as sanctions against environmental destruction are almost sidelined.

The traditional values that encouraged respect and regard for nature and all the living and non-living beings enabled them to consider everything to be God's creation. That is why David Frawley laments:

Unfortunately, Hindus have forgotten this Vedic view of the earth and don't protect their natural environment. They have not added a (traditional) Hindu point of view to the ecology movement which is perhaps the main idealistic movement in the world today... Part of the challenge of modern Hinduism is to reclaim its connection to the earth.¹⁵

The environmental crises that we face today are not merely crises of science and technology but crises of human values; more importantly, they are crises of the human spirit. Hinduism offers a set of values and norms regarding our relationship with nature. The Hindu culture of eco-spirituality can enable us to control greed, exploitation, abuse, mistreatment, and defilement of nature. The western concept of environmental stewardship can be a mechanism to strengthen the respect for nature and provide new ways of valuing and caring. Drawing upon the Vedic and *Purāṇiic* readings, environmental stewardship can become a new universal consciousness which may usher in new values, thereby enabling the creation of an environmentally caring world.

¹⁵David Frawley, *How I Became a Hindu: My Discovery of Vedic Dharma, Voice of India*, 2000.