

# HINDUISM AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

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## **1. Introduction**

The environmental ethics is the discipline that studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its living and non-living things. Among different theories of ecology one states that nature has to be protected, including prevention of global warming, for the sake of man. Because man lives in nature and nature has to be protected, sound and air pollution cured, just to make man live happily, man himself claims that he is the highest form of creation and so nature can be considered an instrument for his happiness.

The Western traditions consider man as the centre of the moral universe. They think that the world exists for the benefit of human beings. Nature has no intrinsic value and there is nothing wrong in the destruction of plants and animals, if it will not do any harm to human beings. Aristotle holds that the nature has made all things specifically for the good of man and, therefore, he gives only instrumental value to non-human things of the nature. He says: "Plants exist for the sake of animals and brute beasts for the sake of man – domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones for good and other accessories of life such as clothing and various tools. Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all animals for the sake of man."<sup>1</sup> Another interpretation of ecology is to regard nature as having supreme value. Nature is to be protected for its own sake; it has nothing to do with human beings.

## **2. Environmental Problems and Deep Ecology**

There is nothing wrong in saying that in spite of modern technological and scientific development man considers his land, tradition, culture, and religion as precious and tries to defend all these. It is also true that environment and its problems are the most talked about subject, but little understood in our country. From the very beginning, human life and the environment are

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 267.

interdependent and interrelated to each other. Human beings always depended on their ecosystem for food, fuel, fertilizers, etc. Environment has got a direct impact on the social life of mankind. Today environment degradation has become one of the most serious global problems.

Terrestrial pollution, the pollution of fresh water, atmospheric pollution, the green house effect, etc., are some of the general environmental issues that catch the attention of environmentalists. The growth of human population threatens the viability of planetary life support system. The uncontrolled use of biocides do great harm to human health and it also paves the way for the emergence of biocide resistant varieties of pests. The cruelties inflicted upon non-human animals in course of scientific study are really heart breaking. As a protest against all these problems, there arise the environment movements.

One can call them as deep ecologists who want to preserve the integrity of the biospheres for its own sake without noticing the possible benefits of human beings. They realize that an anthropocentric attitude has a bad effect on eco-philosophy and, therefore, they are not in agreement with the slogan, "nature exists for the convenience of man." For providing the due place to environmental ethics and eco-philosophy, one should abandon anthropocentrism. Human domination of nature destroys the beauty and autonomy of the natural world. Ethics of deep ecology considers species, ecological systems, nature as a whole as the object of value rather than sentient beings. All things in this world have an equal right to exist and blossom and they have their own intrinsic worth. So, the deep ecology movement approves biospheric egalitarianism. Arne Naess (a distinction between shallow and deep environmental movements was introduced by him) believes that the deep satisfaction that we gain from close relationship with other forms of life in nature contributes significantly to the quality of life.

Shallow ecological thinking was limited to the traditional moral frame work; those who thought in this way were anxious to avoid pollution to our water supply so that we could have safe water to drink and they sought to preserve wilderness so that people could continue to enjoy walking through it. Deep ecologists, on the other hand, wanted to preserve the integrity of biosphere for its own sake, irrespective of the possible benefits to humans that might flow from so doing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 280.

So in the field of environmental ethics the difference between instrumental value and intrinsic value has been of respectable importance. In instrumental value, we consider the value of things as means, means to some other ends. Any way, it is morally wrong for human beings to pollute and destroy the natural environment and an uncontrolled consumption of the natural resources leads to destruction.

### **3. Tree Worship and Its Significance in Hinduism**

In this context, it is worth noticing that the ancient Indians accepted and integrated the above said ecological ideas. They believed that man and nature constitute an organic unity; for them nature is as much important as man. Man without nature is an abstraction in the same way as nature without man is an abstraction. In India, religion and environment protection go together. India has a long tradition of prudent use and wise conservation of all resources that are useful to people.

From the very beginning of mankind trees came to be considered as revered and absolutely necessary for mankind. Later, the idea of God and worship originated in the human mind. The ancient Indians looked at trees as the choicest gift of God to man. The religious minded people of India worshiped God in different forms, as father, mother, guru, idols, stones, trees, etc. Trees are considered to be symbols of different gods or deities. Trees and plants are considered as living creatures endowed with personality. Presently, scientists have proved that if trees are grown properly and managed properly they can provide a sustainable basis for the bulk of the energy.

It is true that environment protection originated in India in a magico-ritualistic context. The ancient Indians have realized that survival and prosperity of one with the exclusion of the others is not practical. Hinduism considers each and every phenomena of the earth such as trees, rivers, mountains, etc., as sacred (deep ecology) and believes that these phenomena are protected by their own presiding gods or goddesses. So, any direct harm done to the material world is really an ill treatment towards gods. There are people who criticize and condemn tree worship as primitive in their race to become modern in the Western sense. It may be true that tree cult is a lower form of religion, though the worship of tree has its utility and usefulness. This was observed long ago by the Risis who had profound love and regard for plants and trees. Tree worship has existed all over the world and all human races passed through this stage of worship. Realistic reverence of

trees is widespread and tree worship is common all over India. Various trees, plants, and groves are worshipped by Indians belonging to different class, caste, and group. Among the worshipped trees and plants some have got primary importance, as they have considered as tree of life by the Vedic Aryans.

The place of trees in the life of great spiritual leaders of India is worth noticing. Lord Buddha attained *nirvana* under a banyan tree. The *Upanisds* preached us to believe in the unity of all life. God is one and He can be approached from as many forms as man can conceive; God is immanent in this universe and one can find Him in water, fire, and also in trees and herbs. All trees and plants are sacred and they possess the gifts of immortality, health, and general prosperity. Vedic people generally believed that every being of this world is in reality an embodied manifestation of the eternal reality. Ultimately, all the apparent differences will vanish. We perceive the differences because we are ignorant about the identity of all beings. This principle is the basis of all Vedic beliefs and myths connected with plants and trees. Worship, sacraments, and mystic charm are combined with it.

Hindus have identified different sacred trees with both the higher and local deities. The most popular God of the Hindus, Sri Krisna identified himself with the Bo-tree in *Bhagavad Gita*; the Bo-tree is explained as the dwelling place of Brahma, Visnu, and Mahesvara – the Hindu trinity. Again, it is believed that Tulsi is the symbol of Visnu, Kadam the symbol of Krisna, Bel the symbol of Siva. There are many other trees which are sacred symbols of Gods. Further, the point every Hindu should remember is that they should worship tree as God but not God as tree. When some one worships a tree and protects it, it is really a worship of God and tree is a symbol; unfortunately, many Hindus forget this and they are not aware of this truth at all.

In India, trees are planted by the side of temples, streets, in funeral places, and also around house lands. In these places people carefully plant and protect various kinds of trees. There are various attitudes of men towards trees and plants, that is, the fear of the ghosts, spirits, devas, danavas, etc. Trees which are planted in holy places are considered as sacred trees, and village people will not allow to fell such trees due to their belief that if they do so the deities or ghosts residing in those trees would be displeased, that they might be punished by the god or spirit for not protecting them and would make their life unhappy. Village people have some mystic ideas and beliefs about spirits and ghosts who reside in certain shady trees; in general,

people have fear for such trees. Many Indians even today believe that it is unlucky to fell even common trees without first offering some tribute or offering (such as lighting a lamp, etc.). "The tree is praised as a beautiful creation and life-giver and the wood cutter begs pardon of the tree for the sin he is committing. The tree is also prayed not to hurt the sky by its upper part when it falls down, not to hurt the mid-space by its middle part and not to hurt the earth when it lies down."<sup>3</sup> Not only in India but also in many other lands around the world it is considered a dangerous thing to cut down a tree which is the residence of a God or a tree spirit.

Trees are worshipped for a great many purposes, according to changing ideas and problems. The Hindu ancestors considered it as their duty to protect trees because of their social utility. To protect trees from the hand of wood cutters was not an easy task; so, to protect them they attached some kind of religious holiness and it is through this route trees became object of worship. The Purāṇas warn people against the destruction of useful trees. Our ancestors are much aware of the usefulness of trees, groves, plants, and herbs. Indian religion, culture, and people, to a great extent, stood for environment protection. Hinduism preached us that man has to adjust himself with time, with nature, environment, and at times with supernatural potentialities.

The ancient people of India not only worshipped tree, they have also realized the medical value of many of the trees and plants. They have protected various trees and plants not only because of their sacredness but also because they are needed for their own well-being. They protect them, worshipped them and used them as cosmetics and medicine. Traditional herbal medicines are made out of trees and plants and the use of these medicines and cosmetics is something suitable to our ecological system. An ethno-botanist says: "Laboratory studies on biological remains in archaeological sites have revealed ... occurrence of certain plants in those times, extend of knowledge of plants, morphology among those people and occasionally other associations, such as plants used in worship, in gifts, in gardens and plants used as incense, cosmetics and medicines etc."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>B. Bhatt, *Ahimsa in the Early Religious Traditions of India*, Rome: CIIS, 1994, 19.

<sup>4</sup>S. K. Jain, "The Role of a Botanist in Folklore Research," *Folklore* 20, 4, (April 1979), 964.

Hinduism tried to expose to its followers the value of herbal treatment. For treatment the ancient Hindus solely depended on herbs and natural environment. But knowledge of herbal treatment was limited to selected people and they learnt herbal treatment from tradition and wanted to keep it as a secret; because of this secret nature many medicinal trees and plants are subjected to decay. Our ancestors depended on household remedies and folk medicines. In *Atharvaveda*, one can see descriptions of various trees and plants that have medicinal value. Ayurveda is one among the *upavedas* and it is based on the *Rgveda*. Modern physicians are taking serious interest in traditional herbal medicines. The botanists of India have realized the importance of the use of herbal treatment and they repeatedly express that this kind of treatment is totally in agreement with our ecosystem.

Large sections of our people still depend on household remedies and folk medicines. Household remedies are often tested and effective prescriptions are based on simple inexpensive and usually easily available plants and plant products. Much of this information remains as personal knowledge and is passed on word of mouth from person to person or generation to generation. For various reasons, much of this knowledge is now getting lost. It is advisable and urgent that this knowledge is recorded and brought together for proper study and wider application. And this search is intended to screen the information and locate such new knowledge for scientific scrutiny.<sup>5</sup>

During the British rule in India, herbal and traditional treatments faced destruction; but today most of the state governments of India give encouragement to herbal treatment. Even though tree worship is the lowest form of worship, and has undergone a lot of change in the modern times, it could retain popular support even today in spite of the technological change and modern scientific development of the world. For, it will promote the protection of our natural wealth.

#### **4. Sacred Groves: The Land of Genetic and Plant Diversity**

Now a days, people are more aware of the environmental ethics, the result of environmental pollution, the necessity of preserving forests, etc. They, however, are least bothered about protecting the treasures of this land. There has been an ecological balance in the world. The unbridled development of industries leads to an exploitative use of nature, which gives rise to a rapid

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<sup>5</sup>Jain, "The Role of a Botanist in Folklore Research."

fall in resources. Basically, this results in the complete destruction of natural resources. Indiscriminate cutting down of trees is a matter of grave environmental concern. The protection of patches of forests as sacred groves is based on the conservation ethos of ancient people all over India. The sacred groves had an important part to play in the life of the rural people. Indians dedicated these sacred groves to gods and goddesses; they, therefore, protected trees and forests with great care. The forests have been really life for tribals and other forest communities.

The sacred groves are different in size from a few trees to dense forest covering vast areas of land. The protection of these sacred groves is not a matter of blind faith. For the protection of our earth, the protection of these groves are important because they are land of genetic and plant diversity, which have disappeared from the land outside the sacred groves. In these groves one can find many endemic and endangered plant species. "Ecosystem generate and support life, keep selection pressure high, enrich situated fitness and allow congruent kind to evolve in their places with sufficient containment. The ecologist finds that ecosystems are objectively satisfactory communities in the sense that organismic needs are sufficiently met for species to survive and flourish."<sup>6</sup>

Mother Earth gives man enough to satisfy his daily needs, but without noticing this man exploits his environment in a harsh manner. The ancient generations protected the groves as places of worship. The necessity of protecting the environment is the implied intension of this belief. Even today, the religious beliefs to some extent help the protection of the sacred groves. Some of the ancient groves still exist on the land of ancestral homes and in some temples of Kerala. Some sacred groves still exist in various parts of India, due to the influence of Hinduism.

The sacred groves have religious, cultural, and environmental aspects. In ancient India these sacred groves were the meeting place of the people at some special occasions, and those meetings project the integration of community. The rapid growth of population, increasing needs, modernization, etc., are the causes that lead to the destruction of sacred groves. Modernization and urbanization make great change in social values and religious beliefs and the result is the decline of sacred groves. Their destruction may create an ecological imbalance.

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<sup>6</sup>John H. Pie, ed., *An Introduction to Applied Ethics*, New Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 2002, 112-113.

By protecting the sacred groves man is protecting not only the ecosystem but also he is protecting himself. In many places paddy fields are situated close to the sacred groves. Scientists, especially in Kerala, point out that there exist an interdependent relationship between paddy cultivation and sacred groves. The sacred groves work as water reservoirs and they can give adequate irrigation and fertility to the soil. Most of the sacred groves are treasure houses of fresh water. By protecting them, the water scarcity, one of the major problems facing mankind today, can be solved to some extent. By destroying the sacred groves we are not only intensifying the problem of water scarcity, but also forgetting the ecosystem.

## **5. Conclusion**

A close relationship with nature gives human beings satisfaction and it contributes significantly to our life quality. By identifying with nature one can enlarge the boundaries of the self. Each one deserves his/her own self respect. To respect and to care for oneself is also to respect and to care for the objects around, with which he identifies himself. For attaining self-respect and self-realization one should respect and realize everything around him. Human understanding of the environment, with respect to green house effect, acid rain, etc., has made him realize that the environment, though it appears very large, cannot be sustained. The environmental protection must be taken into account in developmental programs, and then only the progress of mankind and preservation of ecology will be guaranteed. For the very existence of this earth the mutual support of all living and nonliving things is very important. An awareness of environmental ethics has to be created among various groups of people through education and mass awareness programmes. Religions shall promote the idea of tree worship not for the sake of religion alone but for the sake of man because religious thinkers realized that human survival depends on plant growth. It is really interesting to note that today love and regard for the forests, trees, plants, and plant products are gradually increasing; but it is a fact that more encouragement and attention are due in this area of life.