

Review

Environmental ethics in the Hindu Vedas and Puranas in India

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The Indian religious traditions are intertwined with equally disparate cultural, social, linguistic, philosophical and ethical systems that have developed over a vast history, compounded with movement of peoples, foreign interventions, and internal transformations in structures and identities experienced over time. How does one then begin to talk about environmental values and concerns in the Indian religious traditions? Although, these can be randomly and selectively discussed, this study aims at tracing the contours of certain highlights and tensions in the traditional approaches to the question of the environment. Of special significance, the study will look at Brahmanical-Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist traditions, in their ancient to classical modalities, concluding with some contemporary responses to the supposed impact, or lack thereof, of traditional perspectives to ecological problems facing a rapidly modernizing South Asian nation-state, from Gandhi to Bhopal and after.

Key words: Indian religious, cultural, social, Linguistic, philosophical and ethical systems.

INTRODUCTION

India is a cradle of various religious sects like Hinduism living in complete socio-cultural harmony. Reverence for nature and its creations is the unifying ethical principle in almost all religions of India. They have all kept nature above man. Our ancient people learnt to live with five elements of nature, the "earth", "water", "air", "light" and "cosmos" and actually worshipped them in reality and symbolically. We get lots of information about the relationships between man and nature and the human behaviors and indebtedness towards nature from the writing in the ancient Indian treaties and literatures, the Vedas and the Upanishads are all religions prevailing in India.

HINDUISM

The messages of environmental conservation contained in the Vedic and Puranic literatures, in the Upanishads, Arthashastra, Charak Samhita, Ramayana and Mahabharata are all based on Hindu religious philosophy. "Non-violence" that is, non-injury to both the living as well the non-living creations of nature such as plants, animals, air, water, land (earth), hill and forest is the core of Hindu religious philosophy which extended up to Jainism and

Buddhism. All social and cultural activities in Hinduism have some environmental overtones. Hindus have extended their relationship from social and natural environment treating rivers as their mother goddess, forest as gods, totemic animals as brethren and prey species as mortalities. Traditional Hindus believe that trees can bring peace, prosperity and consolation to mankind, worship of god a green tree is considered to be a sin and sacrilege which can spell disaster for the family and even for the entire village community a traditional Hindu father is specially guided by the moral restrictions of destroying a green tree (Bhandarkar, 1965).

It is believed that even the cutting of branches could make his son invalid. Hindu homes worship peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) off widowhood; they worship of god Coconut tree (*Cocos nucifera*) is believed to be a symbol of fecundity and so Hindu women who nurse the desire to get a son worship coconut trees and eat coconut fruits as a 'divine gift' (Das Gupta, 2003). The primitive Hindu societies of India represented by the tribal's (aborigines) living in mountains and forests have significantly contributed a protection and preservation of several virgin forest patches in rich in biodiversity (David, 1980). They are called "sacred groves" (Forest of God) and are left untouched by the local people. All interferences into it are

a taboo, it is usually dedicated to a deity or mother goddess who is supposed to protect and preside over it and the intruders will be punished. Such sacred groves are found all over India particularly in the Western Ghats and north-eastern Himalayan regions and have become part of the "Biosphere Reserves" of India containing some of the rare and endangered species of plants and animals. They are repository of some valuable "germless" which would be needed by the posterity for sustaining agricultures in future.

THE VEDAS (2500 TO 1500 B.C.)

The Vedas are ancient Indian compilations of the Aryan period ranging between 2500 to 1500 B.C. Rig-Veda especially mentions about environment on several occasions. A verse from the Rig-Veda states that "the sky is like father, the earth like mother and the space as their son. The universe consisting of the three is like a family and any kind of damage done to any one of the three throws the universe out of balance" (David, 1980). Vedic culture and Vedic scriptures reveal a clear concept about the earth's ecosystems and the necessity for maintaining their balance. Another verse from Rig-Veda says "Thousands and Hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life, then take up systematic planting of trees" (Dwivedi and Tiwari, 1987). These verses carry a message to desist from inflicting any injury to the earth and embark upon constant a forestation for survival or else the ecological balance of the earth would be jeopardized. Rig-Veda has dwelt upon various components of the ecosystem and their importance. "Rivers occasion widespread destruction if their coasts are damaged or destroyed and therefore trees standing on the coasts should not be cut off or uprooted". Modern civilization is experiencing the wrath of flood due to erosion of river embankments everywhere and only tree plantations along river banks cannot prevent erosion.

The Athravana Veda also mentions about the importance of air, water and green plants essential for human existence. Although there was as such no concept of the word "Pollution" (Dwivedi, 1990) those days but it was referred in terms of "poisoning" of environment. The A.V. 18.17 (Atharvana Veda) recalls that three things cover the universe the air, water and the plants and they are essential for all lives on earth to exist. "Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants)" (A.V. 8.7.10); "Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (pollution)" (A.V. 8.2.25). Some herbs purify the air. The fragrance of guru (*Commiphora mukul*) purifies the air and cure diseases (A.V. 19.38.1).

Atharvaveda has also warned not to dirty and add toxic substances into water bodies as it may lead to spread of diseases "he who dirties or spoils ponds, lakes, rivers, etc., or cause smell near residential areas is liable to chastisement (Joshi and Namita, 2009). This is very

relevant in the context of pollution of rivers and lakes and the resulting ecological diseases which the modern civilization is experiencing. Great significance is being attached to the peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with respect to environment. The National Botanical Survey of India (NBRI) Lucknow, has identified about 150 trees and herbs including peepal which are pollution fighters. They are able to intercept several toxic gases and dusts and also infuse the atmosphere with plenty of oxygen (Rabindra, 1985).

The Yajurveda too mentions about plants and animals, the ill effects of cutting of trees; and the poisoning of the atmosphere; but it also discusses about energy relations of the global ecosystem. "No persons should kill animals helpful to all" (Y.V. 13.37). "O King you should never kill animals like bullocks useful in agriculture or like cows which gives us milk and all other helpful animals and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals" (Y.V. 13.49). The oceans are treasure of wealth protect them" (Y.V. 38.22); "Do not poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees (Y.V. 6.33); "Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere" (Y.V. 5.43). About the flow of energy in the global ecosystem the Yajur Veda says "the whole universe is full of energy in which the sun is at the centre and the ultimate source of energy for all living organisms on earth. The net energy flows from the point of production to the point of consumption through the plants, animals, human beings, the air, water and land, and is completely under the control of Almighty. While energy flow and balance is maintained in the universe yet some imbalance this causes several natural disturbances like untimely rain, heavy rain, drought and flood, warm winter and cool summer. "The earth provides surface for vegetation which controls the heat buildup.

The herbs and plants having union with sun rays provide congenial atmosphere for the life to survive (A.V. 5.28.5). Now 'global warming' is an established phenomenon. The carbon dioxide build up in the atmosphere (due to burning of fossil fuels) and the global deforestation are major factors of global warming (Sinha, 1991). The green plants (forest) through the process of photosynthesis (utilizing the sun's energy) works as a 'natural sink' absorbing all the carbon dioxide and help in reducing the warming effect. Green plants give out plenty of oxygen during photosynthesis and also directly absorb the solar heat radiation of the atmosphere to give out water vapor in the process of transpiration. The combined effects of the two processes make the environment cool and congenial for survival of all life.

THE UPANISHADS (1500 TO 600 B.C.)

The Upanishads ranging between 1500 to 600 B.C. appeared in the later Vedic age. They were the final stage in the development of Vedic literatures consisting of answers to some philosophical questions. The

Upanishads sages perceived the existence of God in trees and other plants and those they were gifted to man as a companion for mutual survival. "The God who exists in the universe, lives in air, water, in fire and also in trees and herbs, men should have reverence for them". Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (3.9.28) equate trees with human beings as follows: Just like a tree, the prince of the forest, so the man is, in truth (Trivedi, 2004). In the Taittiriya Upanishad (5.101) certain norms were prescribed for human beings to keep the environment clean. "One should not cause urine and stool in water, should not spit in water; and should not take bath without clothes". The Iso-Upanishad has revealed the secrets of existence of life on earth and the importance of every organism for mutual survival. "The universe along with its creatures belongs to the Lord. No creation is superior to any other.

Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach into the rights and privileges of other species. These verses from the Iso-Upanishads uttered thousands of years ago is true and have become even more relevant today as the modern human civilization armed by the technological weapon, made arrogant of his scientific knowledge and compelled by the ever increasing greed for material achievement is systematically encroaching into the living rights of all other life forms on earth by using, misusing, exploiting and over-exploiting the finite and scarce natural resources of earth. The concept of 'sustainable development' which the modern environmentalists are harping upon to use the natural resources judiciously for a more stable development and without impairing with the abilities of the future generations to use those resources, and without interfering into their living rights was perhaps inspired by these verses of the Iso-Upanishad.

THE PURANAS (4TH CENTURY A.D.)

The puranic literature belonging to 4th century A.D. also contains messages related to the conservation of environment. In Narasimhapuram killing of birds for eating was prohibited. "O, wicked men if you kill a bird then you are bathing in a river, pilgrimage, worship and yagnas are all useless". "God Keshava is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other creatures or animals" (Vishnu Puran). The puranas also recalls the virtues of plants and trees and stressed on the need to tree plantations. "The inhabitants of a house which has sacred basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) are fortunate" (Padam Puran 59.7). "The yama (messenger of death) do not enter a house where sacred basil is worshipped every day" (Skanda Puran 21.66). The Varah Purans (172.39) says that "One who plants a peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), one neem (*Azadirachta indica*), one Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), two pomegranates (*Punica granatum*), two orange (*Citrus reticulata*), five mango trees (*Mangifera indica*) and ten flowering plants or creepers

shall never go the hell". The practice of "Vanmahotsava" (Tree Plantation Ceremony) is over 1500 years old in India. The Matsya Puran tells about it. Agnipuran says that the plantation of trees and creations of gardens leads to eradication of sin. In Padma Puran (56.40-41) the cutting of a green tree is an offence punishable in hell.

CONCLUSION

Hinduism has always been an environmentally sensitive philosophy. No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. Theirs was not a superstitious primitive theology. They perceived that all material manifestations are a shadow of the spiritual. The Bhagavad Gita advises us not to try to change the environment, improve it, or wrestle with it. If it seems hostile at times tolerate it. Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hinduism.

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