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From Cosmos to Commodity ... and Back. A critique of Hindu environmental rhetoric in educational programs

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Abstract

Many of the specifically Hindu elements in India's environmental lobby, including educational programs, represent continuity with the past. We find that various well-intended but naive considerations about India's supposed ecological awareness in ancient scriptures are now being reproduced in order to prove how nature-friendly the ancestors were. Mining the religious heritage with the objective to find inspiration for dealing with contemporary issues invariably results in an uncritical, selective reproduction of a wealth of beautiful imagery.

In this paper I voice three methodological reservations about this fashionable mining of texts and traditions for the sake of environmental education. Any scripture-based religious argument in favour of ecology may well be countered by text passages, customs, and attitudes from the same heritage justifying exactly the opposite. In that sense, there is a conflict, a conflict that appears to be characteristic of religion itself. Religion is not only highly ambivalent, more often than not it is polyvalent, and its tenets appear to be bewilderingly multidirectional.

Introduction

Since more than a decade I have been investigating ideas and rituals around sacred trees in India.¹ In the course of that research, I repeatedly came upon two ways of dealing with India's alleged ecological heritage: its fashionable glorification by perusing ancient scriptures and reading ecological wisdom into them, and a cautioning attitude of showing how ambiguous religious traditions often are.

In this paper I voice three methodological reservations about this fashionable mining of texts and traditions for the sake of a contemporary issue. Some of the points I make are completely my own, but many have been made by others before. I merely point out a number of arguments to illustrate that using traditional religious scriptures and mobilising religious sensitivities in order to create incentives for environmentally conscious behaviour may backfire. Any scripture-based religious argument in favour of ecology may well be countered by text passages, customs, and attitudes from the same heritage justifying exactly the opposite. In that sense there is a conflict, a conflict that appears to be characteristic of religion itself. Religion is not only ambivalent, more often than not it is polyvalent, and its tenets appear to be bewilderingly multidirectional.

¹ See, among other publications, Nugteren 2005.

Many of the specifically Hindu elements in India's environmental lobby represent continuity with the past. We find that various well-intended but naive considerations about India's supposed ecological awareness in ancient scriptures are now being reproduced in order to prove how nature-friendly the ancestors were. Mining the religious heritage with the objective to find inspiration for dealing with contemporary issues may result in a wealth of beautiful imagery, but its merit can hardly be claimed to be fully congruent with historical facts or unreservedly applicable to today's everyday reality. My first methodological reservation is focused on this non-contextual appropriation of traditional texts, the fashionable mining of religious scriptures for today's environmental concerns.

In contemporary India, religious narratives, religious symbolism, and religious role models are often referred to as potential resources for raising people's consciousness about environmental issues. Scientific facts and figures on the material value of, for instance, tree cover, become mixed with persisting practices, myths, popular devotional narratives, Puranic doomsday scenarios, and religious sensitivities concerning trees. It is found that such a connection brings about an incentive where plain environmental campaigns could not effectively reach the conscience and the hearts of the people in order to adequately alter their behaviour. Religious imagery is successfully appealed to, and groups of people otherwise not interested are mobilised by linking today's ecological insights to role models in traditional narratives. However, the mixing of science, history, and religion may seriously backfire once this religious tradition, on closer scrutiny, is proven to be ambiguous on this point, as most religious traditions are, on almost every point. This is my second methodological reservation.

My third caveat concerns the use of religious imagery in a secular, multi-religious society. As the late Anil Agarwal, founder of the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, noted, there are constraints that civil society faces in using religion to promote causes and concerns in a secular society. Moreover, if the public interest in conservation is made too dependent on religious sentiments and mythical associations, instead of on common sense and a general awareness of responsibility for maintaining a precarious balance, then who could predict what would happen to ecological activism once the religiously inspired concern would dwindle for one reason or another?

The appropriation of ancient religious texts for the sake of contemporary environmental concerns

In many books, articles, conference papers, newspaper reports, and activist pamphlets, there is a tendency to examine ancient texts with contemporary environmental concerns in mind. One of the early examples of this is a book called *Proceedings of the National Seminar on Environmental Awareness Reflected in Sanskrit Literature*, held 17-20 March 1990, edited by V.N. Jha, and

published by the Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit, University of Poona 1991. In his editorial, Jha remarks on his hope that “it will also prove how relevant this ancient literature is to our modern society.” A total of forty Sanskrit scholars survey their respective fields for implicit or explicit signs of ecological or environmental awareness. The book literally brims with positive references. Most of the authors make a direct connection between the data found in their respective texts, and contemporary needs. They mine Sanskrit textual traditions for relevant inspiration in today’s search for effective tools, tactics, and strategies.

As a method, this approach has its pitfalls, since ancient texts are searched with the postulated intention to find passages referring to a respectful, cautious, and spiritually charged interaction with the natural environment, in times and situations so different from India’s present. This presupposed positive message, repeated not only in serious Sanskrit studies but especially in the popular domain of so-called green thinking, has lately been questioned by some critical authors. Paul Pederson, who calls this ‘the religious environmental paradigm’, cautions that

“Values as they are expressed in, for example, scriptural statements about the sacredness of trees, water, mountains, cows, and so on, will not tell us what people really do to their environment.” (Pederson 1995:265).

And:

“The search for the ecological correctness of distant ancestors makes them too similar to us. It produces historical distortion, misunderstanding, anachronism. It is a projection of modern conceptualisations and concerns onto the screen of tradition.” (Pederson 1995:267).

One of the ironies of my own investigation of rituals around sacred trees in India is that a majority of the Vedic text passages in which the beauty and bounty of trees were praised were written in the context of sacrifice. This presents us with the two ‘worlds’ of Rigvedic metaphor: that of natural beauty, on the one hand, and sacrificial violence, on the other. Vedic natural beauty is praised as pastoral and mystic, whereas the sacrifice is described as violent and bloody (see also Patton 2000). The effusive praise with which a specific tree was addressed was often part of a negotiation between a tree-cutter and a tree. One of the justifications with which a selected tree was cajoled into giving up its life had to do with the more prestigious destination as fuel for the sacrificial fire, as a sacred pole or stake, as a ritual instrument, or as a wooden image of the deity. This implies that the alleged respect for nature expressed there was instrumental, and, to say the least, ambivalent.

Appreciation of the beauty of trees, parks, woodlands, and forests, is found throughout Indian literature. It is rare, however, that the delights of natural beauty are sung with no other motive behind it, as mere expressions of joy, although on closer scrutiny such passages are found as well. Jan Gonda on this:

“One should not expect the Vedic poets to have composed hymns simply from delight in nature for its own sake – still they are deeply rooted in their natural setting and have almost always some religious purpose in mind so that their senses work at full stretch and they choose their words carefully.” (Gonda 1975).

In general, the appreciation of beauty appears to be closely connected with the appreciation of bounty. Moreover, natural beauty was often elaborated upon as a literary prop, subservient to the main story line, as a setting against which the characters in the narrative were outlined. Nature thus served as a backdrop against which the human drama was played out.

The centrality of the human drama is, again, very much what we find in the contemporary environmental lobby. The position that appears to hold the best cards there is that of conservationism, i.e., care and caution in dealing with natural resources for the sake of ourselves and of future generations of human beings. In India this takes the form of utilitarian conservationism rather than protectionist conservationism. This is what is protested against as anthropocentrism by Deep Ecology thinkers. But only a few can afford the luxury of such a radical version of ecology, as environmentalism in India is first and foremost a matter of sheer survival, and of short-term human needs.

Human interests in trees also prevail in texts such as *Dharmashastra*, *Arthashastra*, and *Vrikshayurveda*. Apart from managing the forests, it was proclaimed part of the royal Dharma to clear forests for agriculture and habitation, but the *Mahabharata* passage about the burning of the Khandava Forest by the royal cousins Krishna and Arjuna may embarrass contemporary readers, not so much because of their conscious act of deforestation for the sake of establishing the royal city of Indraprastha (also called Khandavaprastha), but because of their wanton way of laughing about all the creatures dying in agony.²

The appropriation of religious imagery for the sake of contemporary environmental concerns

In some groups, popular religious narratives prove to be far more effective than botanical statistics. Those underprivileged groups who fight for short-term survival often need an additional incentive, and to them religion may offer such a meta-perspective. The embarrassing contradictions between an ideal India of

² David Gosling (2001:11-16) also draws attention to this.

bountiful nature, refined culture, and lofty spiritual traditions on the one hand, and the harsh realities of today on the other, are experienced by many. Traditionally given ecologically sensitive ideas in religions are not always translated into actual environmental practices, be they in the past, or in the present. Vasudha Narayanan on this:

“But if Eastern traditions, including Hinduism, are so eco-friendly, why do the countries in which these religions have been practised, have such a lamentable record of ecological disasters and rampant industrialism?” (Narayan 2001:197-198).

One of the answers given to this question is the realisation that everyday behaviour in India often is not based on mystically perceived unity or equality of all living beings, but rather on the multiple differences and hierarchies based on gender, caste, age, economic class, and so on. Lance Nelson, in the introduction to his book *Purifying the body of God*, phrases similar caveats concerning potentially positive correlations between India’s ascetic outlook and an ecologically positive ethic; between the theory of *karma* and moral responsibility for the natural universe; between human morality in the cycle of *yugas* and environmental decline; between orthodox Vedanta and a reverential attitude toward nature; and between mythic-ritual sacralisation or divinisation of geography and ecologically supportive behaviour. (Nelson 1998). From the multitude of such ambivalences, I will select a few aspects close to my own research.

In Nelson’s book, Ann Grodzins Gold (1998:165-195) points out various references to the present *Kaliyuga* as the cause of environmental degradation.³ It is assumed one of the characteristics of the degenerate *Kaliyuga* that many individuals neglect the divinely ordained prescriptions for their stage of life and status in society. It is evident that the designation *Kaliyuga* in popular parlance has become a common denominator for bad times. The diagnosis “No trees, therefore no rain” was fluidly exchanged with “No *Dharma*, therefore no rain.”

In the context of environmentalism it is Kapila Vatsyayan who made explicit use of doomsday scenarios found in epics and *Puranas* to show how moral and environmental degradation was foretold ages ago. Apparently without inhibition she speaks of

“desecration of the bowels of the earth through excessive quarrying”, “Prthivi, the eternal mother, has been desecrated”, “the rape of tree and river goddesses”, “destruction of the gods of the woods, the Van-devata”, “dangerous play with the mythical centre – Sumeru, the world axis, the Himalayas”, “the pollution of the holy space – the air, Vayu”,

³ *Kaliyuga* denotes our present ‘dark’ (and deteriorating) age.

“asuric chimneys of black tamasic forces”, and “we have polluted holy sound, the primeval Nada”. (Vatsyayan 1992:157-180.)

Joanna Williams (1992:145-155), in her rendering of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, is more cautious, and remarks, “It is tempting to read all of this as a parable for present worldwide ecological crises.” Yet this is exactly what is done by many. One of the most direct connections between cosmogonic myth and contemporary environmental calamities is made in relation to the *Kalakuta* poison, the venom that was produced in the churning process, and obligingly swallowed by Shiva. Together with the god Shiva offering his long ascetic’s tresses to break the thunderous descent of Ganga’s waters through the forested slopes of the Himalaya, this is often cited as the god’s merciful intervention in a moment of cosmogonic crisis. Such a connection between mythological imagery and today’s poisoning of the environment is, again, ambivalent. On the one side, people are stimulated to emulate Shiva, as, indeed, did the priests of Badrinath in their tree-planting ceremonies (Bernbaum, 1999). On the other, however, religion may be a factor of serious obstruction, such as in relying on the god’s intervention instead of acting out for oneself, or in blaming *Kaliyuga* for today’s state of degeneration. Applying the imagery of the doomsday scenarios of the *Kaliyuga* to contemporary environmental deterioration may prove the predictive quality and relevance of epic texts to today’s believer, but such apt descriptions also evoke a kind of fatalist indifference and may act as a license for environmentally inconsiderate behaviour. In much the same way can the belief in the purifying quality of the Ganga evoke deep respect in the pilgrim, but at the same time may this same belief cause the Varanasi *pandas* (‘pilgrim priests’) to maintain that, however polluted the sacred river appears to be, her purifying qualities are always greater still (see also Alley, 1998:312ff).

A safeguard against over-exploitation could, theoretically, be found in radically applied *ahimsa* (‘non-harmfulness’). We have instances where individuals or groups position themselves in such a way that no (or as little as possible) harm be done to any life-form, out of respect for the law of *karma*. This is seen in the ascetic’s life, for instance when there are clear regulations about what to wear, what to eat, and where to sleep. It is encountered in *vratas* (‘vows’) and other temporary restrictions. In this kind of conscious abstinence regarding the taking of life for one’s own needs, human being still stands centre stage. It is out of anxiety for the consequences of one’s actions more than out of an alleged democracy of all creatures, that such regulations are adhered to. It is the human drama which determines a *dharma*-inspired non-harming attitude more than a deeply felt communion with all life, although tenderness for, and affinity with, all manifestations of life may well be side effects.

Ideas of *samsara* (‘existential suffering’), *maya* (‘delusion’), *advaita* (‘non-duality’) and *samtosha* (‘contentment’) may also work both ways. In a culture still largely determined by such notions, the worldly (*laukika*) gain of

engaging in improving one's living conditions was hardly considered to have a value of its own. This situation still prevails in many Hindu families today. The ideal of contentment (*samtosha*) may keep individuals and groups from actively engaging themselves against material deprivation caused by environmental degradation. Hinduism may thus be a source of complacency. In the same way, it could be said that in many cases Vedanta so emphasises transcendence that the value of the world as such tends to be negated. With the rapid emergence of an Indian middle class community this complacent attitude is changing into divergent directions.

One of the strongest motivations for a potentially positive role of Indian religions in dealing with the environmental crisis is India's geo-piety. The patchwork of sacred places and sacred geographies all over India, connected by pilgrims' paths, is often pointed out as an ancient pattern of respect for geographically defined divinity. In the reactions to pollution and degradation of the environment, the awareness of India's sacred geography may have given rise to enthusiastic perusings of ancient texts and traditions, but the religious imagery is effective only in combination with common sense attitudes of facts and figures, systems approaches, and scientifically explained correlations. But where such objective coaching into more environmentally conscious behaviour may meet with reluctance, suspicion, or straightforward resistance, additional appeal to religious sentiments is often able to mobilise large groups of people. The more tangibly connected with a sacred site such an appeal is, the better it appears to evoke the spirit to do something about it. One of the best-known connections between sacred landscape, sacred trees, and the divine, is the mythical link between Shiva's long thick tresses and the forests of the Himalayas. Other cases in which sacred geography plays a role in reforestation projects are Braj, the wider circle around Mathura and Brindaban; the *Vrikshaprasada* and *Vana-abhivridha* Endowment Schemes in Tirumala-Tirupati; and the Chipko Andolan movement. At the same time, however, the shadow side of sacred geography clearly manifests itself. The non-sacred places on India's map may thus legitimately function either as dumps or as areas open to ruthless exploitation.

The use of religious imagery in a secular society

When environmental activism is linked with traditional religious notions, for instance by involving temples, priests, and *sadhus* ('ascetics'), by the use of religious idiom and imagery, and by imaginatively applying and transforming traditional practices such as dances, songs, readings of the *Bhagavadgita*, and *rakhi*-tying⁴, such an intertwining appears to solidify the environmental message and to mobilise people otherwise not interested. Acknowledgement of

⁴ Tying of a protective thread around a threatened tree.

material dependence is traditionally interwoven with religious narratives, and in many cases references to this revive a sense of belonging and responsibility.

Nevertheless, since India is not only a secular but also a multi-religious society, the predominance of Hindu rhetoric may have its pitfalls for other communities. In the context of the hype around sacred groves (as pockets of biodiversity and as illustrations of the persistence of the sacred), it has been reported that some sacred groves have become appropriated by other than the original (mostly tribal) groups. Some have become commercial cultural spaces. Some have become monopolised and turned into institutions of Hinduism. Conservation for its own sake, is gaining importance too. It is even said that conservation, in some places, has turned into a new religion. There are sacred trees in the countryside on whose platforms ancient monoliths jostle for space not only with Hindu calendar art and New Age kitsch, but also with Wildlife Protection photographs of tigers (with the uncanny slogan “*His eye sees every precious thing*”).⁵ In Table 1, an overview is presented of ambivalent elements of religious inspiration in the ‘greening’ of tradition.

Conclusion

India’s cultural core could be defined as the features of the society most related to subsistence activities, economic arrangements, and a number of political, religious and social patterns. From an anthropological point of view, especially in the sense of Roy Rappaport’s ecological anthropology, culture may be seen as a function of the ecosystem. Religious traditions, especially when expressed in ritual behaviour, should be viewed both in their manifest and in their latent functions. When we voice our reservations about the all-too-easy, a-historical, and non-contextual way in which ancient religious texts and traditions are being mined for the sake of contemporary preoccupations, we should also allow a certain degree of layeredness and multifunctionality in those texts and traditions. They do not exclusively belong to the past, to the museum, or to the scholar. Diachronic openness leaves room for continuing processes of adaptation and selective reading by the faithful.

Whatever pitfalls there may be in the present Nature Romanticism, and whatever methodological reservations may be voiced against mobilising religious sensitivities and associating the traditionally sacred with a contemporary canon for protection, scholars can’t stop those processes. But they can, and should, be cautious about yet another popular form of ‘orientalism’. Beware of green orientalism these days.

⁵ At www.cseindia.org/dte-supplement/forest20031231/religion.htm (accessed on 11 March 2009).

Table 1. Ambivalence of religious inspiration in the ‘greening’ of tradition

Traditional religion	Today’s environment
Values	Actions, behaviour
Distant ancestors	Modern conceptualisations
Natural beauty	Vedic sacrificial violence
Sacred tree being praised	Sacred tree ending up as sacrificial object
Killing trees for the sacrificial domain	The promise of ‘immortality’
Honeyed verses to the tree	Man’s need for it and its produce
Natural beauty	Nature as backdrop for the human drama
Equality of all life-forms	Utilitarian conservationism for human ends
Theory of karma	Irresponsible and inconsiderate short-term behaviour
Shiva offering his matted hair to brake the thunderous descent of Ganga	Shiva the destroyer
Krishna in pastoral Braj	Krishna destroying the Khandava Forest
Women’s <i>vratas</i> (commitments) for husband and children	Fertility, overpopulation
<i>Kaliyuga</i> (the (present) ‘dark’ age)	Fatalism, doomsday scenarios
Geo-piety, sacred geography	Non-sacred space as dump or for ruthless overexploitation
Kalakuta poison swallowed by Shiva	Reliance on divine intervention
Purifying quality of Mother Ganga	Forgiving Mother who cleans up the mess
<i>Samsara</i> (existential suffering), <i>lila</i> (play), <i>maya</i> (delusion), <i>advaita</i> (non-duality)	Irrelevance of nature
Yogic <i>samtosha</i> (contentment)	Complacency, indifference
Vedanta transcendence	World-negation
<i>Dharmo rakshati rakshayatah</i> (‘Dharma protects those who protect it’)	<i>Vriksho rakshati rakshayatah</i> (‘the tree protects those who protect it’)
Sacred groves: persistence of the sacred	<i>Sacred groves: biodiversity</i>
Tribal ways	Complaint: “everything is <i>pariyavaran</i> (‘environment’) these days!”
Earth Goddess: respect	Shri, Lakshmi: wealth, prosperity

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