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Human responsibility and the Environment: A Hindu Perspective*

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THE WORLD COMMISSION on Environment and Development acknowledged that to reconcile human affairs with natural laws 'our cultural and spiritual heritages can reinforce our economic interests and survival imperatives'.¹ But until very recently, the role of our cultural and spiritual heritages in environmental protection and sustainable development was ignored by international bodies, national governments, policy planners, and even environmentalists. Many fear that bringing religion into the environmental movement will threaten objectivity, scientific investigation, professionalism, or democratic values. But none of these need be displaced in order to include the spiritual dimension in environmental protection. That dimension, if introduced in the process of environmental policy planning, administration, education, and law, could help create a self-consciously moral society which would put conservation and respect for God's creation first, and relegate individualism, materialism, and our modern desire to dominate nature in a subordinate place. Thus my plea for a definite role of religion in conservation and environmental protection.

From the perspective of many world religions, the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust, immoral,

and unethical. For example, in the ancient past Hindus and Buddhists were careful to observe moral teachings regarding the treatment of nature. In their cultures, not only the common person but also rulers and kings followed those ethical guidelines and tried to create an example for others. But now in the twentieth century, the materialistic orientation of the West has equally affected the cultures of the East. India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan have witnessed wanton exploitation of the environment by their own peoples, despite the strictures and injunctions inherent in their religions and cultures. Thus no culture has remained immune from human irreverence towards nature. How can we change the attitude of human beings towards nature? Are religions the answer?

I believe that religion can evoke a kind of awareness in persons that is different from scientific or technological reasoning. Religion helps make human beings aware that there are limits to their control over the animate and inanimate world and that their arrogance and manipulative power over nature can backfire. Religion instills the recognition that human life cannot be measured by material possessions and that the ends of life go beyond conspicuous consumption.

* This article has been drawn from the author's contribution in *Ethics of Environment and Development*, J. Ronald Engel and Joan G. Engel (eds.), London: Belhaven Press, 1990, pp.201-212.

World religions, each in their own way, offer a unique set of moral values and rules to guide human beings in their relationship with the environment. Religions also provide sanctions and offer stiffer penalties, such as fear of hell, for those who do not treat God's creation with respect. Although it is true that in the recent past religions have not been in the forefront of protecting the environment from human greed and exploitation, many are now willing to take up the challenge and help protect and conserve the environment. But their offer of help will remain purely rhetorical unless secular institutions, national governments, and international organisations are willing to acknowledge the role of religion in environmental study and education. And I believe that environmental education will remain incomplete until it includes cultural values and religious imperatives. For this we require an oecumenical approach. While there are metaphysical, ethical, anthropological and social disagreements among world religions, a synthesis of the key concepts and precepts from each of them pertaining to conservation could become a foundation for a global environmental ethic. The world needs such an ethic.

Religion and Environmental Debate

In 1967 the historian Lynn White Jr wrote an article in *Science* on the historical roots of the ecological crisis.² According to White, what people do to their environment depends on how they see themselves in relation to nature. White asserted that the exploitative view that has generated much of the environmental crisis, particularly in Europe and North America, is a result of the teachings of late mediaeval Latin Christianity, which conceived humankind as superior to the rest of God's creation and everything else as created for human use and enjoyment. He suggested that the only way to address the ecological crisis was to reject the view that nature has no reason to exist except to serve humanity. White's proposition impelled scientists, theologians, and environmentalists to debate

the bases of his argument that religion could be blamed for the ecological crisis.

In the course of this debate, examples from other cultures were cited to support the view that, even in countries where there is religious respect for nature, exploitation of the environment has been ruthless. Countries where Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Shintoism have been practiced were cited to support the criticism of Thomas Derr,³ among others, that 'We are simply being glib when we take at face value the advertisement for the ecological harmony of non-western cultures'.

Derr's assertion with respect to the role of the Hindu religion in the ecological crisis is challenged here. We need to understand how a Hindu's attitude to nature has been shaped by his religion's view of the cosmos and creation. Such an exposition is necessary to explain the traditional values and beliefs of Hindus and hence what role Hindu religion once played with respect to human treatment of the environment. At the same time we need to know how it is that this religion, which taught harmony with and respect for nature, and which influenced other religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, has been in recent times unable to sustain a caring attitude towards nature. What are the features of the Hindu religion which strengthen human respect for God's creation, and how were these features repressed by the modern view of the natural environment and its resources?⁴

The Sanctity of Life in Hinduism

The principle of the sanctity of life is clearly ingrained in the Hindu religion. Only God has absolute sovereignty over all creatures; thus human beings have no dominion over their own lives or non-human life. Consequently, humanity cannot act as a viceroy of God over the planet nor assign degrees of relative worth to other species. The idea of the Divine Being as the one underlying power of unity is beautifully expressed in the *Yajurveda*:

The loving sage beholds that Being,
 hidden in mystery,
 wherein the universe comes to have one
 home;
 Therein unites and therefrom emanates
 the whole;
 The Omnipresent One pervades souls
 and matter like warp
 and weft in created beings
 (Yajurveda 2.8).⁵

The sacredness of God's creation means no damage may be inflicted on other species without adequate justification. Therefore, all lives, human and non-human, are of equal value and all have the same right to existence. According to the Atharvaveda, the earth is not for human beings alone, but for other creatures as well:

Born of Thee, on Thee move mortal
 creatures;
 Thou barest them – the biped and the
 quadruped;
 Thine, O earth, are the five races of
 men, for whom
 Surya (Sun), as he rises spreads with
 his rays
 the light that is immortal
 (Atharvaveda 12.1-15).⁶

Srsti: God's Creation

The Hindu concept of creation can be presented in four categories. First the Vedic theory, which is followed by further elaboration in Vedanta and Sankhya philosophies; the second is Upanishadic theory; the third is known as Puranic theory; and the fourth is enunciated in the great Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Although the Puranic theory differs from the other three, a single thought flows between them. This unifying theory is well stated in the Rigveda:

The Vedas and the universal laws of nature which control the universe and govern the cycles of creation and dissolution were made manifest by the All knowing One. By his great power were produced the clouds and the vapors. After the production of the vapors, there

intervened a period of darkness after which the Great Lord and Controller of the universe arranged the motions which produce days, nights and other durations of time. The Great One then produced the sun, the moon, the earth and all other regions as He did in previous cycles of creation
 (Rigveda 10:190.1-3).

All the Hindu scriptures attest to the belief that the creation, maintenance, and annihilation of the cosmos is completely dependent on the Supreme will. In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna: 'Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both its origin and dissolution' (*Gita* 7.6). And the Lord says: 'The whole cosmic order is under me. By my will it is manifested again and again and by my will, it is annihilated at the end' (*Gita* 7.6).⁷ And the Lord says again: 'The whole cosmic order is under me. By my will it is manifested again and again and by my will, it is annihilated at the end' (*Gita* 9.8). Thus, for ancient Hindus, both God and *Prakriti* (nature) was to be one and the same. While the *Prajapati* (as mentioned in Rigveda) is the creator of sky, earth, oceans and all other species, he is also their protector and eventual destroyer. He is the only Lord of creation. Human beings have no special privilege or authority over other creatures; on the other hand, they have more obligations and duties.

Duties to Animals and Birds

The most important aspect of Hindu theology pertaining to the treatment of animal life is the belief that the Supreme Being was himself incarnated in the form of various species. The Lord says

This form is the source and indestructible seed of multifarious incarnations within the universe, and from the particle and portion of this form, different living entities, like demigods, animals,

human beings and others, are created
(*Srimad-Bhagavata* Book 1,
Discourses III: 5).⁸

Among the various incarnations of God (numbering from ten to twenty-four depending upon the source of the text), He first incarnated Himself in the form of a fish, then a tortoise, a boar, and dwarf. His fifth incarnation was as a man-lion. As Rama he was closely associated with monkeys, and as Krishna he was always surrounded by cows. Thus, other species are accorded reverence.

Further, the Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth where a person may come back as an animal or a bird gives these species not only respect, but also reverence. This provides a solid foundation for the doctrine of *ahimsa* – non-violence against animals and human beings alike. Hindus have a deep faith in the doctrine of non-violence. Almost all the Hindu scriptures place strong emphasis on the notion that God's grace can be received by not killing his creatures or harming his creation: 'God, Kesava, is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other non-speaking creatures or animals' (*Visnupurrana* 3,8,15). To not eat meat in Hinduism is considered both an appropriate conduct and a duty. Yajnavalkya Smriti warns of hell-fire (*Ghora Naraka*) to those who are the killers of domesticated and protected animals: 'The wicked person who kills animals which are protected has to live in hell-fire for the days equal to the number of hairs on the body of that animal' (*Yajnavalkyasmriti, Acaradhyayah*, v. 180). By the end of the Vedic and Upanishadic period, Buddhism and Jainism came into existence and the protection of animals, birds and vegetation was further strengthened by the various kings practicing these religions. These religions, which arose in part as a protest against the orthodoxy and rituals of Hindu religion, continued their precepts for environmental protection. The Buddhist emperor Ashoka (273-236 BCE), promoted through public proclamations the planting and preservation of flora and fauna. Pillar

Edicts, located at various public places, expressed his concerns about the welfare of creatures, plants and trees and prescribed various punishments for the killing of animals, including ants, squirrels and rats.

Flora in Hindu Religion

As early as in the time of *Regveda*, tree worship was quite popular and universal. The tree symbolised the various attributes of God to the *Regvedic* seers. *Regveda* regarded plants as having divine powers, with one entire hymn devoted to their praise, chiefly with reference to their healing properties. (*Regveda* 10.97). During the period of the great epics and Puranas, the Hindu respect for flora expanded further. Trees were considered as being animate and feeling happiness and sorrow. It is still popularly believed that every tree has a *Vriksha-devata*, or 'tree deity', who is worshipped with prayers and offerings of water, flowers, sweets, and encircled by sacred threads. Also, for Hindus, the planting of a tree is still a religious duty.

The Hindu worship of trees and plants has been based partly on utility, but mostly on religious duty and mythology. Hindu ancestors considered it their duty to save trees: and in order to do that they attached to every tree a religious sanctity.

Pradushana: Pollution and its Prevention in Hindu Scriptures

Hindu scriptures revealed a clear conception of the ecosystem. On this basis a discipline of environmental ethics developed with formulated codes of conduct (*dharma*) and defined humanity's relationship to nature. An important part of that conduct is maintaining proper sanitation. In the past this was considered to be the duty of everyone and any default was a punishable offence. Hindu society did not even consider it proper to throw dirt on a public path.

Hindus considered cremation of dead bodies and maintaining the sanitation of the

human habitat as essential acts. When in about 200 BCE Caraka wrote about *Vikrti* (pollution) and disease, he mentioned air pollution specifically as a cause of many diseases (Caraka Samhita, Vimanastanam III 6:1).⁹

Water is considered by Hindus as a powerful medium of purification and also as a source of energy. Sometimes, just by the sprinkling of pure water in religious ceremonies, it is believed purity is achieved. That is why, in *Regveda*, prayer is offered to the deity of water: 'The waters in the sky, the waters of rivers, and water in the well whose source is the ocean, may all these sacred waters protect me' (*Regveda* 7.49.2). The healing property and medicinal value of water has been universally accepted, provided it is pure and free from all pollution. Persons engaging in unsocial activities and in acts polluting the environment were cursed: 'A person, who is engaged in killing creatures, polluting wells, and ponds and tanks, and destroying gardens, certainly goes to hell' (*Padmapurana, Bhoomikhananda* 96:7-8).

Effectiveness of Hinduism in Conservation

The effectiveness of any religion in protecting the environment depends upon how much faith its believers have in its precepts and injunctions. It also depends upon how those precepts are transmitted and adapted in every-day social interactions. In the case of the Hindu religion, which is practiced as *dharma* – way of life – many of its precepts became ingrained in the daily life and social institutions of the people. Three specific examples are given below to illustrate this point.

The caste system and sustainable development

The Hindu religion is known for its elaborate caste system which divides individuals among four main castes and several hundred sub-castes. Over the centuries, the system degenerated into a very rigid, hereditarily

determined, hierarchical and oppressive social structure, particularly for the untouchables and lower castes. But the amazing phenomenon is that it lasted for so many millennia even with the centuries of domination by Islamic and Christian cultures.

One explanation by the ecologist Madhav Gadgil and the anthropologist Kailash Malhortra is that the caste system, as continued until the early decades of the twentieth century, was actually based on an ancient concept of sustainable development which disciplined the society by partitioning the use of natural resources according to specific occupations (or castes), and 'created' the right social milieu in which sustainable patterns of resource use were encouraged to emerge.¹⁰ A system of 'resource partitioning' emerged whereby the primary users of natural resources did not worry about encroachment from other castes. At the same time, these users also knew that if they depleted the natural resources in their own space, they would not survive economically or physically because no one would allow them to move on to other occupations. Religious injunctions also created the psychological environment whereby each caste or sub-caste respected the occupational boundaries of others. In a sense, the Hindu caste system can be seen as a progenitor of the concept of sustainable development.

But the system started malfunctioning during the British Raj when demands for raw materials for their fast-growing industrial economy had to be met through the commercial exploitation of India's natural resources. As traditional relationships between various castes started disappearing, competition and tension grew. The trend kept on accelerating in independent India, as each caste (or sub-caste) tried to discard its traditional role and seize eagerly any opportunity to land a job. When this happened, the ancient religious injunction for doing one's prescribed duty within a caste system could no longer be maintained; this caused the disappearance of 'ecological space' among Hindus. There is no doubt that the caste system also degenerated

within and became a source of oppression; nevertheless, from an ecological spacing viewpoint, the caste system played a key role in preserving India's natural riches for centuries.

Bishnois: Defenders of the Environment

The Bishnois are a small community in Rajasthan, India, who practise a religion of environmental conservation. They believe that cutting a tree or killing an animal is a blasphemy. Their religion, an offshoot of Hinduism, was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji, who was born in 1451 CE in the Marwar area. When he was young he witnessed how during severe drought people cut down trees to feed animals, but when the drought continued, nothing was left to feed the animals, so they died. Jambaji thought that if trees were protected, animal life would be sustained and his community would survive. He gave 29 injunctions and principal among them was a ban on the cutting of any green tree and on the killing of any animal or bird. About 300 years later, when the King of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace, he sent his soldiers to the Bishnois' area where trees were in abundance. Villagers protested, and when soldiers would not pay any attention to the protest, the Bishnois, led by a woman, hugged the trees to protect them with their bodies. As soldiers kept on killing the villagers, more and more of the Bishnois came forward to honour the religious injunction of their Guru Maharaj Jambaji. The massacre continued until 363 persons were killed defending trees. When the king heard about this human sacrifice, he stopped the operation, and gave the Bishnois state protection for their belief.¹¹

Today, the Bishnois community continues to protect trees and animals with the same fervour. Their community is the best example of the true Hindu-based ritual defence of the environment in India, and their sacrifices became the inspiration for the Chipko movement of 1973.

The Chipko Movement

The genesis of the Chipko movement¹² is not only to be found in the ecological or economic background, but in religious belief. Villagers have noted how industrial and commercial demands have denuded their forests, how they cannot sustain their livelihood in a deforested area, and how floods continually play havoc with their small agricultural communities. The religious basis of the movement is evident in the fact that it is inspired and guided by women. Women have not only seen how their men do not mind destroying nature in order to get money while they had to walk for miles in search of firewood, fodder and other grazing materials, but, being more religious, they also are more sensitive to injunctions such as *ahimsa*. In a sense, the Chipko movement is a kind of feminist movement to protect nature from the greed of men. In the Himalayan areas, the pivot of the family is the woman. It is the woman who worries most about nature and its conservation in order that its resources are available for her family's sustenance. On the other hand, men go away to distant places in search of jobs, leaving women and old people behind. These women also believe that each tree has a *Vriksadevata* (tree god) and that the deity *Van Devi* (the Goddess of forests) will protect their family welfare. They also believe that each green tree is an abode of the Almighty God *Hari*.

The Chipko movement has caught the attention of others in India. For example, in Karnataka state, the Appiko movement began in September 1983 when 163 men, women and children hugged the trees and forced the lumberjacks to leave. That movement swiftly spread to the adjoining districts. These people are against the kind of commercial felling of trees which clears the vegetation in its entirety. They do recognise the firewood needs of urban people (mostly poor) and therefore do not want a total ban on felling. However, they are against indiscriminate clearing and would like to see a consultative process established so that local

people are able to participate in timber management.

These three examples are illustrative of the practical impact of Hinduism on conservation and sustainable development. While the effectiveness of the caste system to act as a resource partitioning system is no longer viable, the examples of Bishnois and Chipko/Appiko are illustrative of the fact that when appeal to secular norms fails, one can draw on the cultural and religious sources for 'forest *satyagraha*'. ('*Satyagraha*' means insistence or persistence in search of truth. In this context '*forest satyagraha*' means persistence in search for truth pertaining to the rights of trees).

Loss of Respect For Nature

If such has been the tradition, philosophy, and ideology of Hindu religion, what then are the reasons behind the present state of environmental crisis? As we have seen, our ethical beliefs and religious values influence our behaviour towards others, including our relationship with all creatures and plant life. If, for some reason, these noble values become displaced by other beliefs which are either thrust upon the society or transplanted from another culture through invasion, then the faith of the masses in the earlier cultural tradition is shaken. As the foreign culture, language and system of administration slowly takes root and penetrates all levels of society, and as appropriate answers and leadership are not forthcoming from the religious leaders and Brahmans, it is only natural for the masses to become more inward-looking and self-centered. Under such circumstances, religious values which acted as sanctions against environmental destruction do not retain a high priority because people have to worry about their survival and freedom; hence respect for nature gets displaced by economic factors.

That, it seems, is what happened in India during 700 years of foreign cultural domination. The situation became more complex when, in addition to the Muslim

culture, the British introduced Christianity and western secular institutions and values. While it is too easy to blame these external forces for the change in attitudes of Hindus towards nature, nevertheless it is a fact that they greatly inhibited the religion from continuing to transmit ancient values which encourage respect and due regard for God's creation.

Hope For Our Common Future

Mahatma Gandhi warned that 'nature had enough for everybody's need but not for everybody's greed'. Gandhi was a great believer in drawing upon the rich variety of spiritual and cultural heritages of India. His *satyagraha* movements were the perfect example of how one could confront an unjust and uncaring though extremely superior power. Similarly, the Bishnois, Chipko and Appiko people are engaged in a kind of 'forest *satyagraha*' today. Their movements could easily be turned into a common front – 'satyagraha for the environment' – to be used against the forces of big government and big business. *Satyagraha* for conservation could very well be a rallying point for the awakened spirit of Hinduism.

Notes

- 1 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.1.
- 2 Lynn White, Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (March 1967): pp.1203-7.
- 3 Thomas S. Derr, 'Religions Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok', *World View* 18 (1975): p.43.
- 4 These questions have been examined in detail in O.P. Dwivedi and B.N. Tiwari, *Environmental Crisis and Hindu Religion*, New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing, 1987.
- 5 *The Yajurveda*, Devi Chand (tr.), New Delhi: Munsiram, Manoharlal Publishers, 1982.

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- 6 *The Atharvaveda*, Devi Chand (tr.), New Delhi: Munsiram, Manoharlal Publishers, 1982.
- 7 *The Bhagavad Gita*, commentator Swami Shidbhavananda, Tiruchirapalli: Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam, 1974.
- 8 *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*, C.L. Goswami and M.A. Sastri (tr.), Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1982, 2 vols.
- 9 *Caraka-Samhita*, Priyavrat Sharma (tr.), Varanasi: Chaukhamba Orientalia, 1983 1, p.315.
- 10 Centre for Science and Environment, *The State of India's Environment 1984-85*, the Second Citizens' Report New Delhi: CSE, 1985, p.162.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.164
- 12 Chandi Prasad Bhatt, 'The Chipko Andolan: Forest Conservation Based on People's Power' in: Anil Agrawal, Darryl D'Monte and Ujawala Samarth (eds.), *The Fight for Survival*, New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1987, p.51.