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 “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 (Cocus 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 Atharvaveda 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 (Atharvaveda 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 Yajurveda
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 Taittariya 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 reticulate), 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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