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Environmental Conservation in Hindu Knowledge System

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Abstract:

This paper seek to analyse the Knowledge of Environment and Environmental protection in traditional Hindu religious and cultural texts. Hinduism is also called the "cradle of spirituality" and "the mother of all religions," but the way we have started celebrating our festival goes against the very foundation of Hindu way of life. Every years Idol immersions in Durga Puja, Sarswati puja, and Ganesh Chaturthi causes much harms to our Rivers, the biological oxygen demand (BOD) levels in rivers increases dramatically. We celebrate different Festival and fairs on bank of river causing River pollution in multiple ways. Deepawali, festival of lights, becomes an ugly phantasm of noise and noxious smoke due to bursting firecrackers. The Conservation of plants and other natural resources has been an integral part of cultural, spiritual and religious ethos of Hindu way of life. Hinduism has no convergence with our polluting exercise on the name of religion. Hinduism is a very sensitive to environment and environmental problem. Perhaps, No religion lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti preaches for the preservation of environment and ecological balance.

Keywords: Hindu, Hinduism , Religious Texts, Environment, Pollution, Environmental Protection, Conservation

1. Introduction

There is a lot that we can save for the greater good of the human race; a continuous struggle on the path of dharma is required and continual engagement withholding the truth is the most efficient way to go ahead, and this invincible synthesis could lead us to the goal of sustainable development.

Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) is rightly called a dharma (right way of living) rather than a set of fundamental doctrines, it has a strong tradition of toleration and it embraces diverse thoughts and practices. Sanatana means eternal which is not 'fixed' or 'stagnant' or 'orthodox' and 'conservative'. The secret of the endurance of Hinduism is that it is not stagnant but keeps on refreshing itself every moment. Hinduism welcomes changes for adjusting to new circumstances and for incorporating existent noble values. Hinduism is lauded for its quality of combining change along with continuity but in present times this dynamic nature of Hinduism has become a threat for the true axiom of Hindu way of life. Many dignified belief and practices of Hindu Dharma lost its way and in lieu of that many ignoble practices cemented its position in the Hindu way of life. Followers of the Hinduism have forgotten the emphasis that is laid on nature, the environment and the ecology in Hindu Dharma and started following many rites, rituals and festivity on name of Dharma which causes much harm to our environment.

Hinduism believes that the exploitation and abuse of the nature for our short sighted gains and immediate pleasure is unjust and unethical. Hinduism emphasises on the just use of natural resources. Our cultural and religious texts like The Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Gita, Puranas and Smriti preaches for maintenance of environmental and ecological balance. Earth has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered but is worshipped as mother goddess. Man is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity which prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hindu way of life. The protection and preservation of the environment has been integral to the cultural and religious ethos of the Hindu way of life. One shall always give in a continuous struggle to endure and uplift the gift of nature.

The present paper explores the Knowledge of Environment and Environmental conservation in Hindu way of life. Paper will focus both on practices and beliefs which is causing harm to environment and the one which promotes Environmental conservation. Our goal in this paper is to study the significance of Environmental conservation in Hindu knowledge system and the way the association of both is indispensable.

To achieve this goal, we have organized my paper into four main sections, in the first section, we illustrate an account of the various rites, rituals, customs, and festivals of Hindu Dharma which causes harm to the environment. In the second section, we explore the cultural and religious texts of Hinduism in connection with Environmental conservation. In the third section, we analyse various practices in Hindu Religion in different parts of India which can be considered eco-friendly. We conclude with a fourth section that discusses the importance of Hindu knowledge system in promoting Environmental conservation.

2. Hinduism and Environmental Pollution- The Ambiguity that Prevails

In Hinduism earth is seen as a manifestation of the goddess and is treated with respect and reverence. Hinduism contains numerous references to the worship of the eternal nature in its Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Gita, Purana, Smriti, Sutras, and other sacred texts. The Bhagavad Gita also advises a Hindu not try to change the environment, temper it, or wrestle with it. Millions of Hindus everyday recite Sanskrit mantra to venerate the Mother earth. There is a mantra recited before putting the first step on the Earth in the morning begging pardon for touching the mother Earth with feet.

samudra-vasanedevi, parvata-stana-mandite |

vishnu-patninamastubhyam, pada-sparshamkshamasva me ||

The association of Hinduism and Nature is a known fact but today like Air and Water Hinduism is also becoming contaminated by various pollutants. These pollutants are all those rite, rituals and festivals which are harming the Environment on name of Hindu Dharma.

Hinduism can never preach its follower to desecrate our sacred rivers. Hindus believe the Ganges is the world's most sacred river and those who bathe in its waters achieve purity. According to Hindu Mythology king Bhagirath got the Ganges on Earth after the penance (tapasya) of decades standing on one leg till Ganges was released and came out of GauMukh. In the Ramayana, Lord Vishnu, says "Man becomes pure by the touch of the water, or by consuming it, or by expressing its name," while referring to the Ganges. Hinduism believes Ganga to be Divine mother, it can never allow its follower to pollute mother Ganges on the name of Dharma through mass ritual bathing, corpse disposals and cremation rituals. Our rituals teach us reverence to our rivers and not to desecrate our rivers. Every years Idol immersions in Durga Puja, Sarswati puja, and Ganesh Chaturthi causes much harm to our environment. It disturbs the ecological balance by polluting water and adversely affecting the flora and fauna. These idols are now not made of clay and natural colours but non-biodegradable materials which do not dissolve easily in water, thereby dramatically increasing the biological oxygen demand level and acidity in river water.

Rupinder Kaur (2012) Explains that "In present situations the materials used for making idols has led to use of non- biodegradable materials like Plaster of Paris, Plastic, thermacol, synthetic colours etc. which deteriorate the water quality"(p.1905). When these synthetic colours come in contact with water, it becomes poison which causes deaths of marine life.

Deepawali, the festival of lights, becomes an ugly phantasm of noise and noxious smoke due to bursting of firecrackers. Deepawali is celebrated to mark the triumph of good over evil. It is celebrated as festival of light because people of Ayodhya decided to greet their beloved Ram by lightning his path with rows of 'diyas' on his arrival in Ayodhya after killing Ravana. There is no cultural and spiritual acquiescence of this new tradition of bursting of firecrackers on Deepawali. Editors of the *Down to Earth Magazine* infer that the " Studies by the CPCB show that the levels of air pollutants like sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, suspended particulate matter and carbon monoxide rise substantially during Deepawali, further deteriorating the ambient air quality" (Defiling ,2000, Para. 18).

Hindus who are polluting the Environment on name of festivals and rituals are drifting away from spiritual and cultural tenets of Hinduism. Hinduism has always believed in striving for regeneration and reform of the Hindu way of life, in a religious, spiritual and in a societal sense. Today when the whole world is facing the menace of climate change and its ill effects, the time is ripe to revisit the traditional Hindu knowledge system to understand the significance of environmental conservation in Hinduism.

2.1. Environment in Hindu Knowledge System

Swami Vivekananda rightly said "Religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man and man unto God." Today when earth is suffering due to gross violation of nature by our greed, it is the exact threshold situation when "Hinduism" can provide reprieve. To cure this ailing planet we need to recall that all religion of the world preaches to preserve and protect our Earth.

Our traditional Hindu knowledge system believes that the human body is composed of five great elements (space, air, fire, water, and earth), same five great elements (Panch Mahabhutas) also constitute the environment. Hindu knowledge system believes that we as human are a part of the nature and not outside or above it. "Hinduism does not authorize human beings to lord over the earth and exploit it in a whimsical, selfish and anthropocentric manner. It advises human to enjoy the world and their life, but within reasonable limits that do not disrespect the earth itself". (Nadkarni, 2008, p.407-408)

Dr. Abdul Kalam endorses India's Traditional knowledge by highlighting that "Ancient India was a knowledge society that contributed a great deal to civilization. We need to recover the status and become a knowledge power. Spirituality must be integrated with education. We should ignite our dormant inner energy and let it guide our lives. The radiance of such minds embarked on constructive endeavour will bring peace, prosperity, and bliss to the nation." (Kalam, 2002). Amidst the growing concern for Environmental conservation, the Traditional Hindu knowledge system can offer much reprieve. We need to discover the gems of conservation from the very rich treasury of cultural and religious texts of Hinduism.

Hindu knowledge preaches Man to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. Hinduism lays much emphasis on environmental ethics of conservation. Our cultural and religious texts like The Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Gita, Puranas and Smriti preaches for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hindu way of life. Vedic culture is believed to be (Aranyak), a culture of nature. The Aranyakand of Ramayana and AranyakParva in Mahabharata contains much evidence of man and nature interaction. The Aranyakand of Ramcharitra Manash is dedicated to the stay of Rama, the Hero of millions of Hindu in forest for 14 years to complete his vanwas. This is the irony that the followers never assert on conserving the forest were Rama spent the important 14 years of his life. There is much of talk of Ram temple and Ram Sethu but not of Ram vana. AranyakParva in Mahabharata is also dedicated to the 12 year vanwas of Pandava after losing everything in the game of gamble.

Every Hindu knows about the viswarupa of Vishnu and believes in the omnipresence of the divinity. In chapter eleven of Bhagwad Gita Lord Krishna is beseeched by Arjuna to reveal his universal form showing all of existence. Vishvarupa is considered the supreme form of Vishnu, where the whole universe is described as contained in him and originating from him. Bhagavad Gita advises us not to try to change the environment, temper it, or wrestle with it. The protection and preservation of the environment has been integral to the cultural and religious ethos of the Hindu way of life. There are many references in Mahabharat and Bhagwad Gita which focuses on Environmental conservation. ShantiParva of Mahabharat says "It brings great sin if fire is not offered purifying material (havan); if trees are cut down on auspicious days, if human waste, spit and cough etc. are dropped in water." (ShantiParva)

VirataParva is the fourth of eighteen books of the Indian Epic Mahabharata. What is important and startling is that VirataParva supports our SAVE THE TIGER CAMPAIGN. It is mentioned in VirataParva "Don't destroy forest with Tigers and don't make forest devoid of tigers. Forests can't be saved without tigers and tigers can't live without forests because forests protect tigers and tigers protect forests." (VirataParva 5.45-46)

Entire 63 verses of Bhumi sukta of Atharvaveda is related to Earth. It does not view earth as a lifeless inanimate object but as mother. Every Hindu performs a Bhumi puja before constructing a building on land and Hindu farmers prays Bhumata before sowing the seed. There are 30 more or less prominent devas and devis mentioned in RigVedas. Many of these deva and devis appear to be personification, of a kind, of natural forces or elements. This shows the love and reverence towards nature. Indra Deva as Rain god lauded in 300 hymn, Agni deva is God of Fire invoked in 200 hymn, Vayu Deva is personification of Wind, Surya Deva is sun god, and Varuna deva is 'the one who encompasses the whole world', he is the personification of sky. Soma is another important deva of rig Veda-the whole ninth book is dedicated to him. The Soma sacrifice is a central feature of Vedic religion and derived from preparing the Soma plant by crushing out and filtering and fermenting its heady juice. (Lipner, 2010, p.34)

Nature is beautifully described in this hymn of Rig Veda as:

By the first touch of His hand rivers throb and ripple.
When He smiles the sun shines, the moon glimmers,
The stars twinkle, the - ower's bloom.
By the first rays of the rising sun, the universe is stirred;
The shining gold is sprinkled on the smiling buds of rose;
The fragrant air is filled with sweet melodies of singing birds,
The dawn is the dream of God's creative fancy." (Rig Veda 1.6.3)

BhumiSukta of the Atharvaveda emphasizes on revering and respecting Earth as mother. "Earth, in which the seas, the rivers and many waters lie, from which give us food and fields of grain, abode to all that breathes and moves, may she confer on us her finest yield." (Atharva Veda XII 1:3)

Rig Veda which is believed to be written around 1500-600 B.C contains hymn which underlines the importance of trees in removing Pradushana or Pollution. "Do not cut trees because they remove pollution."(Rig Veda 6:48:17) No one could have imagined at that time that there can be a problem like ozone depletion but Our Yajurveda highlighted the importance to save the atmosphere."Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere." (Yajur Veda 5:43) According to VarahPurana, "One who plants one Peepal, one Neem, one Bar, ten flowering plants or creepers, two Pomegranates, two Oranges and five Mangos, will never go to hell."

Hinduism is very much sensitive towards the environment and environmental problems. Hinduism teaches to preserve and protect the environment, not to pollute it. Georg Feuerstein in his book Introduction to the Bhagavad-Gita: Its Philosophy and Cultural Setting has emphasized that the rishis (sages) of the past have always had a great respect for nature. He adds that theirs was not a superstitious primitive theology but they perceived that all material manifestations are a shadow of the spiritual. For him Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hinduism. (Feuerstein, 1976)

2.1.1. Hinduism and Environmental Stewardship

Hinduism believes in omnipresence of the divine presence, the rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, flora and fauna, are all manifestations of God. Since nature is worshipped as the divine therefore there is a deep respect and gratitude felt towards nature. This respect is manifested in a vast network of sacred rivers, sacred mountains, sacred forests, trees and plants. The value and ethos of Hindu way of life is pro-environment. Environmental conservation should be the natural outcome of Hindu way of life. O.P Dwivedi had rightly said that:

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 (Dwivedi, 1993, p.23)

There are many rites and rituals in Hinduism which focuses on various aspects of Environmental conservation. Hindu way of life attached much priority to the protection of plants and animals and maintenance of the ecological balance. Rituals were developed for respecting and protecting Mother Earth. Each Deva and Devi in Hinduism has their own symbolic flowers and leaves and they are used by Hindus during their worship. Twenty one different types of leaves are suggested for Ganesha Chaturthi Puja and popularly known as Patris Puja or Patra Puja. Every Hindu deity has a particular vehicle or 'vahana' (animals or birds). Hindus respect these Animal and Birds and are prohibited from killing or harming them. These examples show the sensitiveness of Hinduism towards Biodiversity. In a dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna in Bhagwad Gita, Krishna clearly described Arjuna the ecology as a cycle of life dependent on everything from bacteria to birds. Mahatma Gandhi credited our ancestor for investing beautiful manifestation of

nature with religious significance; he illustrates "I bow my head in reverence to our ancestors for their sense of the beautiful in nature and for their foresight in investing beautiful manifestations of Nature with a religious significance." (Shah, 1989 p. 106)

Pankaj Jain in his book *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability* has described different religious practices in different parts of India which contributes in environmental conservation. A number of rural Hindu communities such as the Bishnois, Bhils, and Swadhyaya have maintained practices to protect local ecosystems such as forests and water sources as their religious duty. These communities carry out these conservation-oriented practices not as "environmental" acts but rather as expressions of dharma. When Bishnois are protecting animals and trees, when Swadhyayis are building Vrikshamandiras (tree temples) and NirmalNirs (water harvesting sites), and when Bhils are practicing their rituals in sacred groves, they are simply expressing their reverence for creation according to Hindu teachings, not "restoring the environment." (Jain, 2010)

Bishnoi faith is a religious offshoot of a Vaishnavite Hinduism sect founded on 29 tenets, including a ban on killing animals and a ban to the harming trees. Most of these 29 principles promote environmental stewardship. Bishnoism strictly forbid the harming of trees and animals. The religion was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambheshwarji in 1485 AD in a village near Jodhpur in Rajasthan. He recognized the importance of trees within local ecosystem and banned cutting down green trees and killing birds or animals. His spiritual reverence for nature led to a tradition of harmony with the local ecology. Despite the hardships in the Thar Desert, the Bishnois are famous for their vegetation, protection of Khejri trees, care for animals, and collecting drinkable water. Bishnois have been conserving the environment to the extent of sacrificing their lives. According to one of their famous saying "Sir santhe rooke rahe to bhi sasto jaan" this means that if a tree is saved from felling at the cost of one's head, it should be considered as a good deed.

The resentment of Bishnoi community on killing two blackbucks by Salman Khan while shooting for a film in 1999 is an example of their commitment to Environmental conservation. The vociferous opposition of the Bishnoi community was caught on by the national media and the issue soon became a national issue. Salman Khan was jailed in Jodhpur twice in a five-year sentence. The Bishnois community continue their endeavour to protect trees and animals with the same fervour. Their community is the best example of a true Hindu-based ritual defence of the environment in India, and their sacrifices became the inspiration for the Chipko movement of 1973. (Dwivedi, 1993, p.24)

Sacred groves are another manifestation of Hindu way of life which serves well the purpose of environmental conservation. An important tradition of nature worship is to protect patches of forest dedicated to deities or ancestral spirits. These Sacred groves are protected by the local people for centuries for their cultural and religious beliefs that their deities reside in them and protect the villagers from different calamities. These Sacred groves have survived very long without human interference, and thus are of anthropological, cultural, economic, and ecological significance. In India, these groves are concentrated in the North-East and along the Western Ghats, and are globally recognised hotspots of biodiversity. (Borthakur, 2013)

3. Conclusion

The Conservation of plants and other natural resources has been an integral part of cultural, spiritual and religious ethos of Hindu way of life. Hinduism has no convergence with our polluting exercise on the name of religion. Hinduism is a very sensitive to environment and environmental problem. Today our rituals have become restricted to festivals without a trace of the spiritual core. Ganga and Yamuna, the most revered of all the rivers is one of the most polluted rivers in India. On the name of reverence and rituals the whole polluting exercise is taking place. The decline in our value system has made us forget our stewardship towards nature, leading to exploitation and degradation of the environment. The traditions and scriptures of Hinduism have been misunderstood and misinterpreted, Hinduism teaches to protect the environment, not to pollute the environment.

Hinduism believes in the doctrine of Dharma which emphasizes on the need to act "for the sake of the greater good of the world". The highest ethical standard that Hindus ought to apply comes from the concept of SarvaBhutaHita, which means the welfare of all living beings. In Hinduism the common good takes precedence over private advantage. Hinduism can never teach its follower to violate and harm the nature for short sighted selfish gains.

The Hindu knowledge system teaches to protect and preserve the Earth because the existence of humanity is attached with the wellbeing of earth. Human progeny will exist till the balance in nature is maintained. Earth provides us nourishment; this is our utter ignorance that we are destroying this source of nourishment. All Hindu religious and cultural texts teach us to revere the Earth for its endowments. Bhagavad Gita conveys the message "Conserve ecology or perish" which is a clear and precise environmental science. Krishna explained the ecological cycle to Arjuna in verse 3.14-16 as follows:

"All living bodies subsist on food Grains, which are produced from rains. Rains are produced from performance of yajna (sacrifice), and yajna is born of prescribe duties ... One who does Not follow in human life the cycle of Sacrifice thus established by the Vedas certainly lives a life full of sin. Living only for the satisfaction of the senses, such a person lives in vain".

The nature is the integral part of the Ambit of Dharma in Hindu way of life. Hinduism does not authorize its followers to lord over earth and exploit it in anthropocentric manner. It teaches to respect and revere the earth as a mother. Hindu recite a mantra called Shanti path to conclude every Hindu ceremony, it too reflect the Hindus' connectedness with nature. We can conclude this paper with Shanti path which is a prayer for peace. The mantras pray for peace in Heaven, Peace in the Sky and peace of the Earth and water. It prays for the peace of the Herbs and Trees. The peace of the sky, earth, water, herbs and trees is reaffirmed in this mantra.

Om Dyau Shanti RantarikshaGwam
ShantiPrithvi Shanti Rapah
Shanti Roshadhayah Shanti VanasPatayah
Shanti Vishwed Devah Shanti Brahma
SarvagWam

Shanti Shanti Reva Shanti Sa Ma Shanti Redhi
Om Shanti ShantiShanti Om

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