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Religion and Nature-with Special Reference to Hinduism

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Abstract:

Religion, a deep and intimate impulse of mankind, in one way or another has been found everywhere. The historical perspective of any society shows that protection and preservation of the nature has been fundamental to the cultural and religious ethos. Almost all ancient religions had adored nature, believing that different forms of nature radiate the spirit of God.

In Hinduism, natural energies, activities and aspects are glorified and personified as deities. Different attributes are assigned to deities fit in their natural forms and activities. Hymns and prayers are eulogies to natural elements like air, water, earth, fire, sun, dawn, rain, etc. Hinduism contains numerous references to the worship of the divine in nature in the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, Sūtras, Smṛtis and other sacred texts. Sanskrit mantras (hymns) are recited to admire rivers, mountains, trees, animals, and the earth.

The strength of Hinduism is that nature is an inseparable part of our existence. Protecting the environment is an important expression of dharma. The highest ethical code of Hinduism is universal benevolence or Sarva Bhuta Hita. Hinduism can be considered as a twig of eco-spirituality or a representation of deep ecology. In present social milieu, the voice of Hinduism can be heard in such movements as 'Save the Planet', 'Conserve the Forests', 'Stop Cruelty to Animals', 'One World-One Family' and others.

This paper is a trivial attempt to explore Hinduism with a view to exemplify the relation between religion and nature and to evaluate ancient religious ethos of Hinduism in present day context. The current ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. So, the need of the hour is to renovate our life style by eco-centrism, not by ego-centrism. If we examine the ecological foundation and implications of Hinduism both in principle and practice, it would be a new field of study in religion.

Keywords: Religion, nature, Hinduism, religious ethos, environment, ecology

1. Introduction

Religion is such a deep and intimate impulse of mankind which one way or another found everywhere. The internal aspect of religion is the body of ideas, convictions and emotions concerning man's relation to God, while its external aspect is the system of prayers, ceremonies and rites through which the religious feeling is manifested. Religious experience ennoble human desires, ideals and values. Dawson and Toynbee rightly said that religion is the central element in the life of civilization. "Throughout the history of humanity the religious impulse has been always and everywhere present as one of the great permanent forces that make and alter man's destiny, and the deeper we delve in the past, the more evident it is how inseparable is the religious instinct from human life and society."¹

From the time immemorial the universe has been considered as the manifestation of the Divine in Hindu religion. Religion is defined as the reference of man's life to a world governing power which seeks to grow into a living union with it. Love for one another, love for all creations and love for oneself is religion. The importance of co-ordination between all natural powers for universal peace and harmony was highly admired in Ancient Hindu tradition.

2. Objectives of the Paper

- 2.1 To show the relation between religion and nature
- 2.2 To explore Hinduism with a view to exemplify the relation between religion and nature
- 2.3 To evaluate ancient religious ethos of Hinduism in present day context

3. Methodology

The method used in this paper is descriptive-evaluative method. The study is mainly review based. It is purely supported by secondary and tertiary source of data, i.e. books, translation of old scriptures, journals, papers and articles and internet.

4. Discussion

4.1. Religion and Nature

The eminent sociologist Durkheim defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. He also maintained that sacred things are not, however, limited to gods or spirits. On the contrary, a sacred thing can be a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred. It is evident that almost all ancient religions around the world had adored nature. These have worshipped all forms of nature believing that they radiate the spirit of God. The historical perception of any society shows that protection and conservation of the nature has been inherent in the cultural and religious ethos. Moreover, religion provides cosmological visions that help to explain how humans should relate to their environment. The great religious traditions address human-nature relations. From the perception of many world religions, it is evident that the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is considered as unjust, immoral, and unethical.

Comprehensively, religious world-views and practices have been interconnected with images of nature and life. The oldest and simplest form of Nature-worship had found expression in ancient Hindu scriptures. Being a way of living, Hinduism reveals ecological awareness and great respect for the natural world. In the same way, the Qur'an instructed to look after the environment and not to damage it. One significant *Hadith* is-If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is counted as charity on his part. Christianity has also a long historical tradition of reflection on nature and human responsibility. It declares that the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it (*Psalms* 24:1). If we pollute the environment we do not love the people that will come after us. The great emperor Ashoka promoted Buddhist view on environment through public proclamations. His Fifth Pillar Edict is one of the earliest recorded instances of a specific policy of conservation. Planting and preservation of flora and fauna were encouraged by religious convictions of Buddhism. Till today, people of different religious convictions have great faith that our relationship to the Earth is spiritually as well as physically sustaining.

4.2. Hinduism and Nature Adoration

Hinduism pronounced that Supreme Being is present in everything around. The divine force sustains all living creatures and organic things on this earth. So, people feel that to please God, they must live in harmony with His creation including earth, rivers, forests, sun, air and so on. The Hindus inherited the concept of environment protection from their ancestors. Ancient Hindu seers knew about various aspects of environment and cosmic order. Many scholars have come to the conclusion that the *Vedas* are primarily concerned with cosmology. "Environmental science and ecology are established as science in 20th century, but their origin can be seen long back in the *Vedic* and ancient Sanskrit literature."²

Living organisms are grouped into three types-living on land, in water and in air. Non-living materials are such as land, air, water, property. But Hinduism considers all these as spiritual. Divinity is attributed to them. The main part of *Rig-Vedic* hymns is Natural hymns, i.e. hymns related to natural forces. In these hymns prayers are meant for certain natural elements like air, water, earth, fire, sun, dawn, rain, etc. Natural energies, activities and aspects are glorified and personified as deities. Different attributes assigned to deities fit in their natural forms and activities; for example, greenness is to *Soma*, brightness is to *Agni* and fast moving character is to *Vāyu*. The characteristics of these forces were described in *Vedic* verses. The famous geologist S.R.N. Murthy has stated that the natural geological aspects have been described as *Indra*, *Agni*, *Vāyu*, *Varuṇa*, *Uśās* etc.³ In the *Vedas*, the order of the Universe is called '*Rta*' which reduces chaos to cosmos, and gives order and integration to matter and symmetry and harmony to the environment. The *Vedic* seers state that universe consists of three intertwined webs, *Prthivi* (earth), *Antarīkṣa* (aerial) and *Dyau* (sky). *Agni* (fire), *Vāyu* (air) and *Sūrya* (sun) are three major forms of energy; fire on earth, air in intermediate space and light in upper region. *Rig-Veda* says, "Heaven is my father, brother atmosphere is my navel, and the great earth is my mother"⁴

According to *Upaniṣadic* theory, the principles of *Vāyu* (air), *Bhūmi* (earth), *Jala* (water), *Agni* (fire), *Vyom* (ether) are important factors in regulating the lives of humans, animals and plants. The man-nature relationship has been very closely reflected in different religious texts of Hindus. For example, "Don't cut trees because they remove pollution."⁵ "Don't disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere."⁶ "Don't destroy forest with tigers and don't make forest devoid of tigers. Forests cannot be saved without tigers and tigers cannot live without forests because forests protect tigers and tigers protect forests."⁷ In *Śānti Parva* of *Mahābhārat*, we also get that 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. Many rituals that are still followed by Hindus in India; like *BhūmiPūja* before the foundation of a building, worship of certain plants, trees and rivers in festivals, etc.

The *Vedic* seers mention *Amṛt vā āpaḥ* (water is nectar), ⁸*Pavitra vā āpaḥ* (Waters are for purification) ⁹Water is considered by the Hindus as a powerful medium of purification and a source of energy. Hymn IX of Book 10 of *Rig-Veda* is dedicated to Water. Water had generated plants which in turn generated food.¹⁰ Water is greater than food. Therefore, if there is not sufficient rain, living beings fail from fear that there will be less food. But if there is sufficient rain, they become happy because there will be much food.¹¹ Rain water is glorified in Hindu texts. The rain-cloud is depicted as *Parjanya* god. According to *Rg-veda*, the water as a part of human environment occurs in five forms: rain water (*divyah*), natural spring (*sravanti*), wells and canals (*khanitrimah*), lakes (*svayamjah*) and rivers (*samudrarthah*). "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."¹² The *Purāṇa* condemns water pollution saying, 'the person who pollutes waters of ponds, wells or lakes goes to hell'.¹³ It was always kept in mind that human survival was possible only with the conservation of entire flora and fauna.

Dasha-kūpa-samā vāpī, dasha-vāpī-samo hradāḥ |

Dasha-hrada-samaḥ putro, dasha-putra-samo drumāḥ ||¹⁴

A pond equals ten wells, a reservoir equals ten ponds.

A son equals ten reservoirs, and a tree equals ten sons!

Hinduism even goes up against ripping the limb of a plant or urinating or spitting on a tree or in any water body. In *Rig-Veda, Aranyāni Sukta* (10.146) is addressed to *Aranyāni*, the queen or the deity of the forest. *Rig-Veda* regarded plants as having divine powers, with one entire hymn devoted to their praise, chiefly with reference to their healing properties (*Rig-Veda*, 10.97). Trees were considered as being animate and feeling happiness and sorrow. It is still popularly believed that every tree has a *Vṛkṣa-devatā*, or 'tree deity', who is worshipped with prayers and offerings of water, flowers, sweets, and encircled by sacred threads. The concept of *Yajña* seems to be a major principle of ancient environmental science as *Yajña* signifies the theory of give and take. *Yajña* helps in minimizing air pollution through its medicinal smoke. It also increases crop yield, protects plants from diseases and over all brings peace and happiness of mind.

Hinduism contains numerous references to the worship of the divine in nature in *Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, Sūtras, Smṛtis* and other sacred texts. Millions of Hindus recite Sanskrit *mantras* daily to admire rivers, mountains, trees, animals, and the earth. The *Upaniṣads* explained the interdependence of the elements of the world in relation to *Brahman*, the supreme reality, from which they arise- space arises from *Brahman*, air arises from space, fire arises from air, water arises from fire and from water arises earth. Hinduism recognizes that the human body is composed of and related to the five elements, and connects each of the elements to one of the five senses. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. This bond between our senses and the elements is the foundation of our human relationship with the natural world.

In ancient scriptures pollution was referred in terms of poisoning of environment. The *Yajurveda* mentions the ill effects of cutting the trees and the poisoning of the atmosphere. Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (pollution).¹⁵ The cutting of a green tree is an offence punishable in hell.¹⁶ No persons should kill animals helpful to air.¹⁷ Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants).¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ A person who is engaged in killing creatures, polluting wells, and ponds and tanks, and destroying gardens, certainly goes to hell.²⁰

Hindu theology believed that the Supreme Being was himself incarnated in the form of various species. He first incarnated Himself in the form of a fish, then a tortoise, a boar, and dwarf and even incarnation of a man-lion. In His incarnation as *Rāma* He was closely associated with monkeys, and *Kṛṣṇa* was always surrounded by cows. *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* warns of hell-fire (*Ghōra Naraka*) to those who are the killers of domesticated and protected animals. *Brāhṃhā-harita Smṛti* mentions the names of many flowers and plants used in *Vishnu* worship. In *Bṛhatparāśara Smṛti* it is also prescribed that a householder is to grow the plants bearing flowers and fruits desired by gods. In the *Smṛti* period planting is considered as a sacred duty. The grower of a fruit bearing tree is favoured by gods and dwells in heaven for years equal to the number of fruits (of the tree) eaten by the hungry.²¹ The *Carak Saṃhitā* maintains that the destruction of forests is the destruction of the state, and reforestation is an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty. In Hinduism, protecting the environment is an important expression of *dharma*. Even today a number of Hindu communities such as the *Bishnois, Bhils, and Swadhyaya* are maintaining strong communal practices to protect local eco-systems (such as forests and water sources) not as environmental acts but rather as expressions of *dharma*. *Bishnois* are protecting animals and trees, *Swadhyayas* are building *Vṛkṣamandiras* (tree temples) and *Nirmal Nirs* (water harvesting sites), and *Bhils* are practising their rituals in sacred grove. They are simply expressing their worship for creation according to Hindu teachings.

5. Observations

- i. Hinduism is accepted as a diverse religious and cultural phenomenon. The strength of Hinduism is that nature and the environment are not alien to us rather an inseparable part of our existence. But, Hinduism has its countless local and regional manifestations. It may be the main reason that present environmental studies have not put proper credence in the role of Hinduism in ecological issues.
- ii. Eco-spirituality is a new name for a set of ideas which connects the science of ecology with spirituality. It brings together religion and environmental activism. Eco-spirituality is about helping people experience 'the holy' in the natural world and to recognize their relationship as human beings to all creation. In its very spirit Hinduism can be considered as a twig of Eco-spirituality.
- iii. Hinduism can be regarded as a representation of 'deep ecology'. Deep ecology argues that the natural world is a subtle balance of complex inter-relationships in which the organisms depend on each other for their existence within eco-systems. Deep ecology considers the eco-system as a living whole of which humanity is only one part.
- iv. Hinduism declares, *Mātā Bhūmi putro ahaṃ pṛthivyāḥ* (The Earth is our mother and we are all her children)²² The earth is the keeper of creation, container of forests, trees and herbs.²³ In the *Bhagavad Gītā, Sri Kṛṣṇa* compares the world to a single banyan tree with unlimited branches under which all the species of animals, humans and demigods wander. *Oṣadhi Sukta of Rig-Veda* (10.97.2) was addressed to plants and vegetables as mother. Therefore, 'Earth-based spirituality' may be a suitable adjective for Hinduism. Earth is geothermal field as she is holding *Agni*. Same way she is geomagnetic field as she is holding *Indra*.²⁴
- v. That animals and birds are essential part of nature had been realized by *Vedic* seers long ago. Sky animals like birds, forest animals and animals in human habitation are classified. *Vedic* texts (*Rig, Yajur* and *Atharva*) advised to protect these animals so that they should remain safe and healthy. Hinduism gives us the lesson that 'nature had enough for everybody's need but not for everybody's greed'. The simple message is that the voice of Hindu religion can be heard in such movements as 'Save the Planet' 'Conserve the Forests' 'Stop Cruelty to Animals' 'One World, One Family' and others in present social context.

6. Suggestions and Conclusion

The human ecology is deeply conditioned by religious beliefs about our nature and destiny. The vital question is that, what are the reasons behind the present state of environmental crisis though the religious traditions and principles have been announcing loud in favour of environment? The instant answer may be that these noble values become displaced by other beliefs. The earlier religious and cultural tradition is shaken by the infiltration of unhealthy elements in all levels of society. Moreover, the respect for nature gets dislocated by materialistic attitudes.

In both the developed and the developing countries, the concern for environmental issues is one of the most contemporary issues. Environmental degradation is considered as one of the Ten Threats that officially cautioned by the High Level Threat Panel of the United Nations. Pope Benedict XVI has also added 'Polluting the environment' in the modified list of sins.

The environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis of values. Thomas Berry, one of the leading voices in 'eco-spirituality', said that there is a spiritual dimension in our present ecological crisis. So, religion being a primary source of values in any culture, occupies an important role in the decisions made by human regarding the environment. Very often environmental protection and development seem as two schemes that cannot operate without conflict. Scientific development seems to bring to the world technological superiority over nature. Rapid development of science and technology give rise to brutal environmental degradation. But such development is desirable only if it sustains good environment. In this regard, religion centered education may be the answer for bringing a behavioural change to maintain balance between development and environmental conservation.

Inspired by eco-friendly worldviews of different religions, a series of ten conferences on Religion and Ecology organized by Yale University professors Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim were held at the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions from 1996 to 1998. More than 800 international scholars, religious leaders, and environmentalists participated in the conference series. Papers from the conferences were published in a series of ten books (*The Religions of the World and Ecology Book Series*), one for each of the world's major religious traditions. The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology has been instrumental in the creation of scholarship, in forming environmental policy and in the greening of religion.

Ísa Upaniṣad had declared that resources are given to mankind for their living. But knowledge (*Ísa*) of using them is necessary. The ancient injunction of *Yajur Veda* (12.32) is every thought, word and action is to be guided by the highest ethical code of universal benevolence or *Sarva Bhuta Hita*. The Hindu 'One World, One Family' concept has become urgent day by day. Thousands of years have passed. But, at the Global Conference in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, the world experts addressed our planet as 'Mother Earth' for the first time at an international meeting.

The need of the hour is to renovate our life style by eco-centrism, not by ego-centrism. Governments, policy planners, social workers, environmentalists and even the conscious citizens should reflect on the role of our cultural and spiritual heritages in environmental protection. Sometimes it is debated that bringing religion into the environmental movement will threaten objectivity, scientific investigation, professionalism, or democratic values. But, religious principles, if followed properly could create a self-consciously moral society. Such a society would put conservation and respect for God's creation first, and downgrade our desire to dominate nature to an inferior place. Then only one could put stop to extreme individualism and materialism.

Religion has provisions to inculcate moral prescriptions in the minds of people. It helps make individuals aware that their arrogance and manipulative power over nature can bounce back. Religion has also scope to offer stiffer penalties to those who do not treat God's creation with respect. So, environmental education will remain incomplete until it includes cultural values and religious imperatives. If we examine the ecological foundation and implications of Hinduism both in principle and practice, it would be a new field of study in religion.

At present, all disciplines of human thought and knowledge are mutually supporting. The current ecological crisis needs an interdisciplinary perspective with deep insights from scientific studies, economics, philosophy, theology and other academic disciplines. The theological and religious educational insights can specially recommend a vision for sustainable development which would finally suggest a way to address the environmental crisis.

7. Notes

1. Dawson, C. *The Age of the Gods*, p.22. Quoted in *Fundamentals of Sociology*, p.239
2. Tiwari, S. *Origin of Environmental Science from Vedas*, p.157
3. Murthy, S.R.N. *Vedic View of the Earth*, p.12
4. *Rig-Veda* 1.164.33
5. *Rig-Veda* 6:48:17
6. *Yajur Veda* 5:43
7. *Virāt Parva, Mahābhārat* 5.45-46
8. *Śatapatha Brāhmana* 1.9.3.7
9. *Śatapatha Brāhmana* 1.1.1.1
10. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.4
11. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.10.1
12. *Rig-Veda* 7.49.2
13. *Padma Purāna*, 96.7.8
14. *Matsya Purāna* 154:512
15. *Atharva Veda* 8.2.25
16. *Padma Purāna* 56.40-41

17. *Yajur Veda* 13.37
18. *Atharva Veda* 8.7.10
19. *Varāḥ Purāṇa* 172.39
20. *Padma Purāṇa, Bhūmikhanda* 96.7-8
21. *Bṛhatparāśara Smṛti* 10.279.382
22. *Atharva Veda Bhūmi Sukta* 12.1.12
23. *Atharva Veda* 12.1.57
24. Murthy, S.R.N. *Vedic View of the Earth*, p.162

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