

Ethics of the Environment in Hinduism

Since the beginning, humanity has been nourished by the various elements that constitute nature. However, use of the diverse renewable and non-renewable resources at our disposal, such as water, soil, fossil fuels, and metals, have not until quite recently translated into the abuse of our environment (Freedman 192,194-195,267-270). Due to the reality that our earth is, for the most part, a closed system, we must come to terms with the fact that sustainability is the means to a continued survival (Freedman 192). The current issues concerning our one and only planet are attributed mainly to those of the biosphere, global warming, waste, pollution, overpopulation, and nuclear proliferation (Crawford 168). Developing countries today are center stage for big industry, and when combined with high population density, immediate and distant habitats frequently take on an increased amount of debasement (Freedman 14-15). For this reason, countries such as India and China are some of the global leaders in reference to environmental degradation (Freedman 15). Granted the prevalence of Hinduism in current day India, it could perhaps be beneficial to instigate an analysis of these religious views in order to adopt a suitable approach for assisting in sustainable development. This paper will not only attempt to cultivate awareness of how common Hindu ideologies have contributed to greater environmental stress, but will also offer insight into how various Hindu views and practices could potentially assist the developed world in its struggle to preserve this planet.

The seemingly new concerns with, and increasing proximity to the environment that tend to be arising these days are not necessarily fresh in the minds of most Hindus. Notions of interdependence and connectivity with nature are said to stem nearly 3000 years back to pre-Aryan religion in the Indus Valley Civilization. [For more information of the Indus Valley Civilization, see (Rodrigues 8-12)]. Though there is no explicit literature to evidence these

claims, archaeologists have unearthed a variety of artifacts that are substantially indicative of our assumptions. These relics include animal figurines of terracotta, “proto-Siva” models bearing horned headdresses and surrounded by plants and animals, and depictions of women surrounded and interwoven with trees (Rodrigues 11). As the Vedic age came to be, beginning at around 1500 BCE and lasting until around 600 BCE, religion in India, although undergoing some drastic changes, continued to value the relationship between humanity and nature. Animals were regarded so highly with the Dravidians that wild creatures symbolized many of their gods (Crawford 169). Deities such as Usas (god of the dawn) and Aranyi (goddess of the forest) emerged and, due to *yajna*, were perceived in terms of having a mutualistic existence with humans (Crawford 170). [For more on *yajna*, see (Rodrigues 28-33)]. In addition to this, various hymns to the goddess Prthivi (goddess of the earth) in the *Rg Veda* develop on the sophisticated ideas of environmental sustainability (Crawford 171). [For more on *Rg Veda*, see (Rodrigues 25,37,48-49,55,57,180)]. The notion of *rta* was another significant concept born of the Vedic age. This view entailed the belief that ethical order be combined with the elements of an existing physical and natural order (Crawford 170). By extension, *rta* was characterized not only by the laws of gravity and the rhythmic beat of a heart, but also by personal development, and therefore proper human agency. Although originating in a very distant past, these roots of modern Hinduism are essential to understanding the views presented and lived by nearly a billion people residing in India today.

When it comes to the problem of biodiversity, one usually does not immediately conjure thoughts of negative connotation. However, the truth is that human beings everywhere are carelessly decimating other forms of life at an unprecedented rate. According to Crawford, our race will push 100 species of plants and animals into extinction every day for the next 30 years

(184). Unlike western civilization, Hinduism does not discriminate against life on the basis of its size or attractiveness. According to Hindu philosophy, the tiniest insects have as much of an inherent right to exist as an elephant or a whale. When any type of organism disappears, so does our ability to learn from that creature, as its genome is lost forever (Crawford 184). Hinduism criticizes the lack of *ahimsa*(the avoidance of violence) due to economic greed. The common excuse that protecting the environment will result in the loss of employment is fictitious, in that *artha*(wealth/skill) and *dharma*(righteousness) can thrive interdependently (Crawford 186). With the case of overpopulated third world countries, in which poverty is rampant, many believe that the resources to worry about non-human life are not available. However, in Hindu perspective, even these countries need to be aware and acquainted with the long-term results of their current economic activity (Crawford 185). Consider the following quote from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*:

“...In so far as beasts and birds, even to the ants find a living in his houses he becomes their world. Verily, as one wishes non-injury for his own world, so all beings wish non-injury for him who has this knowledge. This, indeed, is known and well investigated.” (Nelson 52).

This philosophical view points clearly to the interdependence that humanity has always shared with nature.

People everywhere are talking about global warming. The whisper of climate change that began several years ago is quickly becoming a desperate cry for a reversal in trends. Leaders from around the world are meeting to try and figure out what can be done about the 37% increase of atmospheric carbon dioxide since the industrial revolution (Freedman 316-318). Even before

this epidemic, Hinduism went to great lengths to ensure sanctity of trees, which are one of the best means by which carbon can be reabsorbed from the atmosphere (Freedman 324). Manu(i.e. *Laws of Manu*[see (Rodrigues 57-58)]) spoke elaborately about how plants and trees can feel comfort and despair, and believed that they were beings of sentience (Crawford 189). Through this, planting trees became a *dharmic* act, and certain laws were even set in place to punish those for harming trees of various importance to nature and society (Crawford 190). Forests were seen as being appropriate places for ascetics and renouncers to practice their ways, mainly because the forest could fulfill both spiritual and bodily requirements (Crawford 189). However, although Hindus are theoretically meant to ask permission to the tree before taking its life, whether or not they do is trivial when looking at the bigger picture. Big industry across the globe is the number one producer of these destructive emissions. Many people perceive countries such as India and China to be the first in the ranks for pollution. Be that as it may, despite the fact that India consumed nearly double the energy of Canada in 2001, Canada's per capita rate was nearly 18 times that of India (Freedman 15). Has the issue become one of overpopulation, or unacceptable standards of living?

In society's linear structure model of its relationship with the environment, raw resources are brought in, and waste is pushed out. Certain elements are cyclical, such as water and forestry, however all aspects of what enters must be replaced, in order to sustain our living conditions (Freedman 204-206, 524). In New Delhi, although 3,880 tons of garbage are produced each day, 1,460 tons are left ignored on the city streets (Nelson 200). This is due to a social tendency that constitutes pushing these impurities away from oneself. Garbage follows a trail from home to street, then from the localized streets it is dumped on the periphery of the neighborhood, and it finally accumulates across the urban border (Nelson 202). According to Hindu ethics, not only is

it wrong to produce lavish amounts of waste without considering the consequences, but it is also needless to revert back to the days of subsistence living (Crawford 192). In order to maintain our current economic activities, as Crawford explains, the Hindu believes that we must embrace the ways of recycling and restraint (192). On the other hand, Nelson argues that the issue of garbage in India is caused by a religious twist that is distinguished by prevailing tradition (201). Due to the religious framework displayed in particular by the caste system, recycling is done at the cost of social status. Brahminical literature (Brahmins are the top class in Hindu social organization) elaborates on the fact that dirt, and by extension garbage, risks putting the individual in a state of impurity, which affects one's ability to worship the gods (Nelson 206). Therefore, the low status members of society such as the *sudras* (servant class) and the "untouchables" must handle this waste. It has been evidenced that loss of status has even been expressed towards those of *brahminical* descent exploiting this industry. Nelson argues that in order for India to rise above this destructive disposition, we must somehow find away to increase the status of the recycled object (207).

The problem of population in itself is not really an issue, though as population increases, it amplifies the complications of waste, global warming, and resource consumption. Studies show that the population of India will overtake that of China by 2030, simply due to current rates of increase (Crawford 194). The reason for this exponential rate of increase in India is attributed to three factors, the first of which being that it is considered *dharmic* to produce a large family unit. These perceptions undoubtedly stem from the *Vedic* years during which there was not only a great deal of agricultural activity, but a higher death rate due to warfare and infant mortality (Crawford 195). The second reason for such high birth rates relates to how women are perceived in Hindu society. Of the five elements of marriage, the wife's role has grown increasingly in the

direction of *prajati*, or parenthood. Rather than focusing on *sakhya* (companionship between two individuals), a woman's foremost purpose in marriage is to bear many children (Crawford 197). Thirdly, such high population in India is a consequence of the principle of *sraddha* (funeral ceremony), and its requirement of a male to properly worship dead ancestors (Crawford 197-198). Manu also devalues female birth in his writings, not directly, but rather by putting great emphasis on the importance of having sons (Crawford 197). Although these are ancient traditions, it seems contradictory for a religion that considers all life as equal to go to such lengths to exalt one sex over another. As Crawford states: "...yesterday's dharma is today's *adharma* (non-righteousness)" (195).

While the west is encountering problems of waste and pollution due to overconsumption and prosperity, India is facing the same troubles due to overpopulation and severe poverty. We learn from Hinduism that the concepts of *karma* (Rodrigues 50-51,57), interconnectedness, and interdependence are the basis of respecting the other forms of life that surround us (Crawford 176-183). One may also contemplate the view of *Brahman*; how the application of this premise suggests that distancing of oneself from nature is ignorant (Crawford 201). [For more on *brahman*, see (Rodrigues 36-37)]. Finally, it has been ascertained that certain traditional philosophies in Hinduism may no longer be helpful in establishing a sustainable world for humanity. These include ideals such as those that parallel value with large families (Crawford 195), as well as those that view the community's recyclers as impure or objectionable (Nelson 1980).

References and Further Recommended Reading

Crawford, S. Cromwell (1995) *Dilemmas of life and death: Hindu ethics in a North American Context*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nelson, Lance E. (1998) *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. Albany: State University of New York.

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Prthivi

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Related Websites

http://envfor.nic.in/divisions/ic/wssd/doc4/consul_book_persp.pdf

<http://www.ibef.org/india/sustainabledevelopment.aspx>

<http://www.un.org/esa/agenda21/natinfo/countr/india/>

Written by Thomas Fox (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.