

HINDUISM AND ECOLOGY: ITS RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

The sustenance of the environment is one of the cardinal teachings of the Hindus tradition and, in this regard, the Hindus tradition points out clearly that a good environment is indispensable for a healthy life. This work seeks to explore some of the fundamental teachings of Hinduism that point to the implications of the relationship between human beings and their environment. For instance, the dharma ecology explains the mechanism for creating respect for nature and the consequences of not doing so. Essentially, this relationship and its corresponding consequence functions in line with the Karmic law of nature. The essence of this paper is to create awareness on the impending disaster that may result from the abuse of the eco-system such as the extinction of the earth's plants and animal species that may result from the current destruction of forests and coral reefs, and the depletion of the earth's ozone layer, which will expose life to excessive ultra-violet radiation that is damaging to genetic materials. This work used the qualitative method of research involving secondary method of data collection such as written literature, internet materials, among others. Interestingly, education and sensitization through networking and advertising can be used in enhancing the knowledge on how to relate favourably with the eco-system.

Keywords: Environment, Eco-system, Hinduism, Karma, Dharma

Introduction

Hinduism is a religion with many philosophical, ritualistic and cultural traditions. By extension, it has pluralistic views about nature. For instance, Gale wrote that:

Many Hindu communities value nature, think of the universe as the body of God, pray for peace among all the elements of the universe and urge nonviolence to all beings on earth and personify nature and the earth as goddesses. However, others devalue nature by thinking of matter (homologized to women) as ensnaring the spirit and preventing it from achieving liberation. Yet, other Hindus think of the universe as ultimately without reality, and some Hindus think of the final goal as transcending all dualities of good and evil, spirit and matter, culture and nature. (1)

However, this work primarily limits itself to the Hindu views on the dharmic and karmic outcome of humankind interactions with the ecosystem. Here, the Hindu tradition teaches that a proper management of the ecosystem brings blessings and happiness whereas mismanagement of the ecosystem brings disaster.

The work starts with a comprehensive background of the Hindu tradition and analysis of their view on ecology. Moreover, it discusses elaborately, the benefits and consequences of mankind's interaction with the ecosystem. Moreover, the effect of rapid population growth and industrialization on the ecosystem were equally considered and the work ended with some recommendations on how human beings should relate favourably with the ecosystem.

A Brief Background of the Hindu Religion

The Hindu religion is one of the major world religions that originated from the subcontinent of India and is made up of several and various systems of philosophy, beliefs and rituals.

The name Hinduism was coined by British writers in the first decade of the 19th century. Hoiberg and Lexy explain it thus, "It refers to a rich cumulative tradition of texts and practices, some of which date to the 2nd millennium BCE or possibly earlier (7607). Moreover, explaining the nature and definition of Hinduism, Hoiberg and Lexy write that:

The English term *Hinduism* first became familiar as a designator of religious ideas and practices distinctive to India with the publication of such books as Sir Monier Monier-Williams *Hinduism* (1877). Initially, it was an outside word building on centuries – old usages of the word Hindu. Early travelers to the Indus valley, beginning with the Greeks, spoke of its inhabitants as "Hindu" (Greeks, Indoi); and in the 16th century, residents of India themselves began very slowly to employ the term to distinguish themselves from the Turks. Gradually, the distinction became primarily religious rather than ethnic, geographic or cultural (7608).

Historical and archeological facts show that the Hindu religion originated primarily from the amalgamation of the Aryans and the original inhabitants of the Indus Valley. For instance, historically, Gbenda, quoting Madu, notes that "Historians of religion agreed that the religion came into existence by the fusion of two races, namely: the Aryans from Mesopotamian religion and Abram's descendants who mixed with the original inhabitants of the Indus valley (76).

Similarly, the origin of Hinduism can equally be traced from the history of the archeological evidence of John Marshal in 1921 at Mohenjodaro and Harpa in the present-day Pakistan. Chryssides writes that:

The excavations yielded evidence of an advanced civilization around 1500 BCE with water conduits which fed into large ghats (bathing pools with steps

leading down) as well as some figurine including one a horned figure which may have been the god, Shiva. These edifices and artifacts have been attributed to the ancient Dravidians whose cities were sacked by the invading Aryans who progressively imposed their culture as they penetrated south into India (69).

The Aryans belief is polytheistic in nature as their ancient Sanskrit known as the Vedas contains this pantheon of gods.

Again, since the 19th century, there have been contentions concerning the proper nomenclature for the Hindu religion, since many Hindus rejected the name Hinduism. For instance, Hoiberg and Levy observe that some preferred the indigenous term, Veda or Vedic religion and many Sanatunu dharma [external law] to Hinduism. Perhaps, the majority have simply accepted the term Hinduism or its analogies in various Indian languages, especially Hindu dharma (7608).

One of the primary doctrines of the Hindu religion that is very significant is Ishwarah Sarvabhutanam or the Omnipresence of God and is very significant in the Hindu's view on ecology and environmental well-being.

A Brief Analysis of the Hindus view on Ecology and Environmental Well-being

Hindu religion has several important teachings on the behavioural interactions of human beings with all living things around them and how they relate to their well-being. In other words, most of the Hindu teachings reveal the implications of mankind's relationship to her environment which, by extension, is part of the scientific study of ecology.

The World Book Encyclopedia explains ecology as "the branch of science that deals with the relationships living things have to each other and to their environment" (53). These living things include the simple and complex plants and animals or, put differently, the microscopic and non-microscopic living things in the world. Explaining the interactions that exist among these legions of living things, the World Book Encyclopedia puts it thus:

For example, a moose must have certain plants for food. If the plants in its environment were destroyed, the moose would have to move to another area or starve to death. In turn, plants depend on such animals as moose for the nutrients/nourishing substances they need to live. Animal wastes and the decay of dead animals and plants provide many of the nutrients plants need (53).

Ecology resides predominantly in the field of biological science, but for a wider understanding of ecology, especially in its relationship with human beings, it could be studied using multi-disciplinary approach, of which some religious views could be very useful. Explaining the multidimensional nature of ecology, The World Book Encyclopedia suggests that:

Ecologists must employ such disciplines as chemistry, physics and computer science. They also rely on such fields as geology, meteorology and

oceanography to study air, land and water environments and their interactions. This multidisciplinary approach helps ecologists understand how physical environments affect living things. It also helps them access the impact of environmental problems, such as acid rain or the greenhouse effect (53).

Hence, from the foregoing, religion and, by extension, the Hindu religion, has several vital contributions to the relationship humankind has with their interaction with all the living things and even the non-living things around them; and as it relates to Hindu tradition, this can be explained using the concept of Ishwarah Sarvabhutanam or the Omni-presence of God. For instance, Dwivedi puts it thus:

Hindus contemplate divinity as the one in many and many in one. The concept of 'God is one and is everywhere present' is found in Vedas. For example, Rig Veda says: 'He is the one God, producing heaven and earth, wields them together with His Veins and Wings' – 10.81.3 (164).

Hence, from the foregoing, the Hindu religion is pantheistic in nature or put differently that God resides in all things including living and non-living things. Explaining it elaborately, Dwivedi, writes further that:

In Yajur Veda (32.10), he is described as "our friend, our father, our creator, who knows all positions, and all existing things." Furthermore, in Gita 13.13, the Lord Krishna says: Sarvam avritya tishthatil ("he resides in everywhere"); thus, it is not surprising that Hindus are enjoined to respect all elements of creation as stated in Srimad Bhagavala Mahapurana (11.2.241). 'Ether, air, fire, water, earth, planets, all creatures, trees and plants, rivers, and seas. They all are organs of God's body, remembering this, a devotee respects all species" (162).

From the explorations above, the Hindu religion has some fundamental teachings on the environment and some of them are briefly explained below as written by Pantheos:

- Hinduism teaches that the five great elements of space, air, fire, water and earth are all interdependent and relate to the Brahman. For example, 'from Brahman arises space, from space arises air, from air arises fire, from fire arises water and from water arises earth'. Moreover, Hinduism also believes that these five elements are equally related to the human body and 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, and that this relationship is the foundation of our human relationship with the natural world (1).
- Divinity (Ishavasyam) is omnipresent and takes infinite forms. For instance, Bhagavad Gita (7.19, 13.13) and the Bhagavad Purana (2.241, 2.2.45), contain many references to the omnipresence of the supreme deity. For example, many Hindus think of India's mighty rivers like Ganges as goddesses (2). The foregoing points to the pantheistic nature of the ultimate being. Explaining this differently, Ignacimuthu posits that "Hinduism expresses

the firm belief that the natural environment in which people are placed is a manifestation of divine nature itself (34).

- An essential aspect of the concept of Dharma is the protection of the environment (2).
- Our environmental actions affect our Karma (2).
- The earth (Devi) is a goddess and our mother and deserves our devotion and protection (2).
- Hinduism's tantric and yogic traditions affirm the sacredness of material reality and contain teaching and practices to unite people with divine energy (2).
- Belief in reincarnation supports a sense of interconnectedness of all creation. Hindus believe in the cycle of rebirth, wherein every being travels through millions of cycles of birth and rebirth in different forms depending on their Karma from previous lives (2).
- Ahimsa (nonviolence) is the greatest Dharma. Ahimsa to the earth, hurting or harming another being damages one's Karma and obstructs advancement toward Moksha-liberation (3).
- Hinduism teaches non-ownership of the things in the world. For instance, *Tain Tyakten bhunjitha* has been translated as "to take what you need for your sustenance without a sense of entitlement or ownership" (3).
- Ghandi's life and writings encourage friendliness with the ecosystem and has been an inspiration for moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, etcetera.

A concise overview of some of the aforementioned teachings of the Hindus religion on the environment, unlike the biblical account of creation, points to the fact that mankind has no dominion over the environment, although, he can make judicious use of it. In accordance to the foregoing, Ignacimuthu holds that:

Man is the trustee of the universe and he is authorized to use natural resources, but has no divine power of control and dominion over nature and its elements. Hence, from the perspective of the Hindu culture, abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust and irreligious (35).

From the foregoing, Hindus' view on ecology and environmental wellbeing can be subdivided into two sections. Hindus view on the presence of God in living things and the essence of the mother earth are explained below.

The Presence of God in Living Things

The Hindu tradition, teaches that God exists in all living things, including simple microscopic organisms and other living things like the plants. This belief has its origin from the concept of reincarnation. Hindu teachings have it that the human soul can reincarnate in any form, like in the form of lesser and simple living organisms or in the complex form and by implication the need to treat all forms and categories of life with respect and reverence. Information from "What Does Hinduism Teach Us About Ecology" shows that:

All living beings are sacred because they are parts of God and should be treated with respect and compassion. This is because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life. Hinduism is full of stories that treat animals as divine, such as how Krishna used to herd cows, or how the monkey Hanuman was a faithful servant of the Rama. Most Hindus are vegetarian because of this belief in the sanctity of life. Even trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls and should be honored and cared for (3).

Hindu tradition further teaches that God's grace and blessings can be achieved through the preservation of the doctrine of the sanctity of human life and that of other living things. Information from *All You Need to Know About Hinduism* puts it thus:

"God, Kesava, is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other non-speaking creatures or animals – Yajñupurana 3.8.15" (4). Some non-speaking living things in the Hindu tradition are very symbolic in nature as they represent one form of the Pantheon of gods. Further information from *All You Need to Know About Hinduism* explains that:

Trees are considered as being animate and feeling happiness and sorrow. It is still popularly believed that every tree has a Vriksadevata 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 (4).

In the biological cycle of life like photosynthesis, trees are very essential in sustaining lives. For instance, Ignacimuthu holds that, "without photosynthesis, animals and human beings would lack the capacity to transform non-living things into chemical energy, and this would lead to survival problems" (20). Moreover, describing trees as important necessities for sustaining lives, a BBC Reporter on the Hinduism: *Beliefs about Care of the Planet* sums it up, thus: "Trees are treated with great respect because they are the most important type of plant life, and like all living things they have atman (soul)" (6).

The Hindus view on the Essence of the Mother Earth

The Hindu tradition employs a beautiful analogy between mother and earth. Here, the mother and all the functions she performs on behalf of her children is metaphorically compared to the earth and its essence. For instance, as the mother provides food for her children, the earth similarly sustains what is planted in it for the survival of the various species of living things. Information from Religion and Environment, quoting Atharva Veda 12.1, puts it thus:

Earth in which lie the sea, the river and other waters in which food and cornfields have come to be, in which live all that breathes and that moves, may she confer on us the finest of her yield...., set me O earth, amidst what is thy centre and thy navel, and vitalizing forces that emanate from thy body. Purify

us from all sides. Earth is my mother; her son am I and heaven my father: may he fill us with plenty (Atharva Veda 12.1).

The concept of the family of Mother Earth in the Hindu culture is known as VASUDHAIV KUTUMBAKAM. Dwivedi writes that:

“Vasudha” means the earth; Katumba means extended family consisting of human beings, animals and all beings. This means that all human beings as well as other creatures living on earth are members of the same extended family of Devi Vasundhara. Only by considering the entire universe as a part of our extended family can we (individually and collectively) develop the necessary maturity and respect for all other living beings (167).

Hence, the sanctity of living things and that of the mother earth by implication show that there are some merits and demerits in preserving and violating the ecosystem, respectively as explained below using the Hindu concept of karma, and Dharma.

The interrelationship between the Hindu Concept of Karma, Dharma and Ecosystem

The concept of karma in the Hindu tradition connotes that for any action, there is a corresponding consequence. The law of karma is the law of action and effect. White begins the definition of karma from its resultant effect, thus: “...hence, human suffering is the product of choices with unavoidable ethical determinations, and karma may be defined as the moral law of cause and effect” (325). Soanes, Hawker and Elliot defined ecosystem as “a biological community of interacting animals and plants and their environment” (282).

From the foregoing, the interrelationship between the Hindu concept of karma and the ecosystem, by extension, connote the outcome or the resultant effect (either positively or negatively) of mankind’s actions as relates to the ecosystem. Here, judicious and hostile approach to the ecosystem would result to favourable and unfavourable karma, respectively. For instance, information on *What Does Hinduism Teach Us About Ecology* writes that:

Hindus revere sacred rivers, mountains, forests and animals, and love to be close to nature. For example, many Hindu villages have a sacred lake, and around it a grove of trees to catch rainfall and protect the banks from erosion. The lake and its grove store rainfall to irrigate surrounding fields and supply village wells (4).

Hindus revere sacred rivers, mountains, forests and animals, and love to be close to nature, and that in India, for instance, a proper care for a sacred lake and a grove of trees around it can protect erosion, provide irrigation system from the water stored in the grove from rainfall and equally supply drinking water to the villagers, and that these lakes and groves are places of tranquility and sanctuaries for wildlife. However, further information

on *What Does Hinduism Teach Us About Ecology* shows that, in recent times, the neglect in the maintenance of these gifts of nature has led to serious water shortages and advancing desertification in many parts of India (4).

All kinds of lives, including simple microscopic organisms, birds of all kinds, complex organisms, etcetera, have important parts to play in creating favourable or optimum balance in the eco-system. In agreement to this, Teertha observes that, “the Hindu religion gives great importance to protecting cattle, and that these cattle in turn provide milk for mankind and that earthworms and bacteria are very useful in the soil, and that any interruption in this balance like using chemical manures and insecticides that kill these organisms affect the quality of the soil output in the long run; moreover, that the destruction of plants and forests increased the emission of carbon (iv) oxide in the atmosphere” (10).

In sum, to avoid the nemesis of karma which may arise as a result of mismanagement of the ecosystem, the concept of Dharma in Hinduism should be encouraged in man’s interaction with the gifts of nature. Dharma is one of the essential terms in some eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jain. Some of the practices in these traditions include a religious code of behaviour, a divine system of morality and righteousness as it relates to one’s duty and nature, among others. Moreover, the term equally explains that mankind can express their nature in terms of service and behaving in ways that should not be harmful to other human beings and living creatures.

From the foregoing, this paper adopts the term Dharma to explain that the relationship between human beings and the environment should be symbiotic and not parasitic in nature. In this regard, mankind should avoid the exploitation of the living and non-living components of the environment, as doing so may result in some adverse consequences of Karma. Dwivedi, in his own words holds that:

It is already known that certain basic characteristics of human nature such as greed, exploitation, abuse, maltreatment and defilement of nature, have given rise to environmental destruction and other ills facing our world. Such exploitative tendencies must be disciplined and changed. Since it is devoid of institutional structures, bureaucratic impediments and rituals associated with organised religions, Dharma can be used as a mechanism to create respect for nature ..., it may also provide the necessary incentives for humanity to seek peace with nature (169).

The Effect of Industrialization and Population Increase on the Eco-system

The effect of rapid industrialization and population growth in altering the balance in the ecosystem, especially in India, an important base for the Hindu religion cannot be ignored. There is every tendency that in order to accommodate the teeming population, there

should be some alteration in the ecosystem like in deforestation and reclamation of land from water.

Moreover, although industrialization is necessary for the sustenance of mankind, it invariably constitutes a serious problem to the ecosystem. For instance, Dwivedi observes that:

The process of accelerated industrialization will also bring in its wake environmental problems such as urban congestion and squatter settlements, toxic industrial effluents and waste, air and water pollution and depletion of natural resources. In the race to industrialize and urbanize quickly, India will suffer from a high exposure to environmental diseases in the coming decades, unless a simultaneous effort is made to control pollution at the point of source” (175).

Furthermore, in other nations of the world such as in Nigeria, abusing the nature or its resources, which may result from uncontrolled rapid industrialization or population growth can be harmful to human health. For instance, in the area of water pollution in Nigeria, Fwatshak et al, quoting Adenuga, writes that water pollution in most of the industries in some cities in Nigeria in the form of coloured, hot and heavy metal-laden effluents mainly from textile, tannery and paint industries are emitted into open drains and water channels and this constitutes serious dangers to water users and biota downstream (68). Hopefully, the Hindu concept of Dharma as noted before in this paper can be used in minimizing some of the consequences emanating from the abuse of nature. Some recommendations are given below on how to manage the ecosystem.

Recommendations on how to maintain balance in the ecosystem

- **Effective planning should be enhanced:**
There is need for strict laws to be enacted to restrict building of industries only to cities or zones mapped out for them.
- **Family planning should be encouraged:**
This will help in checking rapid population increase.
- **Education and sensitization on the management of the ecosystem:**
Proper knowledge of the ecosystem and ecological awareness can be created by educating the public on how to manage all the gifts of nature and the effects of their mismanagement.
- **Networking especially on the subject of ecosystem should be encouraged:**
Here, those with the adequate knowledge on how to maintain balance in the ecosystem should be networking or transferring some of their knowledge to other people without such knowledge.
- **Intensive advertisement by the media:**
Adequate knowledge on how to preserve the ecosystem and the consequences of not doing so can be intensified by media outfits like television, radio, newspaper, etcetera.

- The government should encourage the maintenance of the natural resources and their protection; for instance, ban should be placed on hunting some species of animals like the elephant or cutting down of some species of trees.
- Afforestation and breeding of some species of animals should equally be encouraged by the government.

Conclusion

Hinduism is made up of different philosophical, ritualistic, theistic and nontheistic traditions. By extension, it consists of multidimensional views toward nature. An important aspect of Hindu approach to nature is that many Hindu adherents put an important value on nature. Hinduism is pantheistic in nature; hence, they seriously believe in the omnipresence of God in the various elements of nature, and by implication that nature with all its elements should be treated with care. From their concept of dharma and karma, the Hindu tradition teaches that proper management of nature and its elements bring good rewards and happiness and that mismanaging them, especially by altering the ecosystem, attracts bad reward and unhappiness. This is how karma can affect us and our future generations, hence human beings are encouraged to be in harmony with the nature.

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