

Environment

Declaration on Nature: The Hindu Viewpoint



In the ancient spiritual traditions, man was looked upon as a part of nature, linked by the indissoluble spiritual and psychological bonds to the elements around him. This is very much marked in the Hindu tradition, probably the oldest living religious tradition in the world. The Vedas, those collections of hymns composed by great spiritual seers and thinkers which are the repository of Hindu wisdom, enunciate an encompassing world-view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power.

Hinduism believes in the all-encompassing sovereignty of the divine, manifesting itself in a graded scale of evolution. The human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present, is not seen as something apart from the earth and its multitudinous life forms. The *Atharva-Veda* has the magnificent Hymn to the Earth (*Bhumi-Sukta*) which is redolent with ecological and environmental values. The following verses are taken from this extraordinary hymn:

Earth, in which lie the sea, the river and other waters, in which food and cornfields have come to be, in which lives all that breathes and that moves, may she confer on us the finest of her yield. Earth, in which the waters, common to all, moving on all sides, flow unflinching, day and night, may she pour on us milk in many streams, and endow us with lustre.

May those born of thee, O Earth,
be for our welfare, free from sickness and waste, wakeful through a long life, we
shall become bearers of tribute to thee.
Earth my mother, set me securely with bliss
in full accord with heaven,
O wise one,
uphold me in grace and splendour.

Not only in the Vedas, but in later scriptures, such as the Upanisads, the Puranas and subsequent texts, the Hindu viewpoint on nature has been clearly enunciated. It is permeated by a reverence for life, and an awareness that the great forces of nature – the earth, the sky, the air, the water and fire -- as well as various orders of life including plants and trees, forests and animals, are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The divine is not exterior to creation, but expresses itself through natural phenomena. Thus, in the *Mundaka Upanisad* the divine is described as follows:

Fire is his head, his eyes are the moon and the sun;
The regions of space are his ears, his voice the revealed Veda;
The wind is his breath, his heart is the entire universe;
The earth is his footstool,
Truly he is the inner soul of all.

Turning to the animal world, we find that animals have always received special care and consideration. Numerous Hindu texts preach that all species should be treated as children. In Hindu mythology and iconography, there is a close relationship between the various deities, and their animal or bird mounts. Each divinity is associated with a particular animal or bird, and this lends a special dimension to the animal kingdom.

In addition, according to the Vaisnava tradition, the evolution of life on this planet is symbolized by a series of divine incarnations beginning with the fish, moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then onto human incarnations. This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate the lesser life-forms, but rather evolved out of these forms himself, and is, therefore, integrally linked to the whole of creation.

This leads necessarily to a reverence for animal life. The *Yajur-Veda* (13.47) lays down that 'no person should kill animals helpful to all. Rather, by serving them, one should attain happiness.'

This view was later developed by the great Jain Tirthankara, Lord Mahivira, who regenerated the ancient Jain faith that lives down to the present day. For the Jains *ahimsa* or non-violence is the greatest good, and on no account should life be taken.

This philosophy was re-emphasized by Mahatma Gandhi who always spoke of the importance of *ahimsa* and looked upon the cow as a symbol of the benign element in animal life. All this strengthens the attitude of reverence for all life including animals and insects.

Apart from this, the natural environment also received the close attention of the ancient Hindu scriptures. Forests and groves were considered sacred, and flowering trees received special reverence. Just as various animals were associated with gods and goddesses, different trees and plants were also associated in the Hindu pantheon. The *Mahabharata* says that 'even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in a village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect.' Various trees, fruits and plants have special significance in Hindu rituals.

The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature and all forms of life, vegetable or animal, represents a powerful tradition which needs to be renurtured and reapplied in our contemporary context. India, the population of which is over eighty per cent Hindu, has in recent years taken a special interest in conservation.

What is needed today is to remind ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without mankind ultimately being destroyed itself. With nuclear weapons representing the ultimate pollutant, threatening to convert this beautiful planet of ours into a scorched cinder unable to support even the most primitive life-forms, mankind is finally forced to face a dilemma.

Centuries of rapacious exploitation of the environment has finally caught up with us, and a

radically changed attitude towards nature is now not a question of spiritual merit or condescension, but of sheer survival.

This earth, so touchingly looked upon in the Hindu view as the Universal Mother, has nurtured mankind up from the slime of the primeval ocean for billions of years. Let us declare our determination to halt the present slide towards destruction, to rediscover the ancient tradition of reverence for all life and, even at this late hour, to reverse the suicidal course upon which we embarked. Let us recall the ancient Hindu dictum: 'The earth is our mother, we are all her children.'

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