

# Religion as Rampart for Environmental Conservation in Hindu Methodology

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## ABSTRACT

*The role of Religion in contemporary society cannot be underestimated. Although no longer at the forefront of international debates, its influence remains vast and persuasive. Within this mix, the influence of religion, as a catalyst for environmental concern, is now becoming obvious. The ethic of Christian stewardship is an exemplar of this type of approach. However, due to the fact that this (and other) religious texts can often be interpreted in opposing ways, in as much as positive values can be advanced for environmental protection, conversely, so too can negative ones.*

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## 1. Introduction

At the global level, religion has long been recognized as having a fundamental influence on the development and practice of international law.<sup>1</sup> This overt influence only began to wane (in the West) after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and the ideal of the Holy Roman Empire was finally extinguished with a Europe made of sovereigns, independent of higher powers, claiming primacy based upon religious authority. This move was cemented into position with the Enlightenment. Outside of Western-based countries, the process waned in the twentieth century but in part has become reinvigorated in the twenty-first century. The end result is that although the right to practise religion is a recognized human right in international law, religion itself is believed to be a largely historical influence in the global context, although its influence continues to be felt.<sup>2</sup> For example, the 1994 International Conference<sup>3</sup> on Population and Development was careful to point out that its Action Plan was to be implemented 'with full respect for the various religious values' of the countries at the Conference. Similar words were reiterated in the Plan of Implementation following the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, in which the plan for health was caveated with the words that the 'strengthening of the capacity of health-care systems to deliver basic health services to all..... [would be] ..... consistent with national laws and cultural and religious values'.<sup>4</sup>

All religions and cultures have something to offer to conservation and environmental protection. From each religion, several injunctions or exhortations can be brought forth to form a code for environmentally sustainable development. No religion says that we have the right to destroy our habitat, and no religion sanctions environmental destruction.

## 2. Hinduism

In Hinduism one finds a most challenging perspective on respect for nature and environmental conservation, and the sanctity of all life on this planet and elsewhere is clearly ingrained in this religion. Only the Supreme God has absolute sovereignty over all creatures, including humans. Human beings have no dominion over their own lives or over non-human life. Consequently they cannot act as viceroys of God, nor can they assign degrees of relative worth to other species.

The sacredness of God's creation demands that no damage may be inflicted on other species without adequate justification. Therefore all lives, human and nonhuman, are of equal value, and have the same right to existence.

According to Hindu scriptures people must not demand or take dominion over other creatures. They are forbidden to exploit nature; instead they are advised to seek peace and live in harmony with nature. The Hindu religion demands veneration, respect and obedience to maintain and protect the harmonious unity of God and nature. This is demonstrated by a series of divine incarnations, as enunciated by Dr Karan Singh in the Assisi Declaration:

*"The evolution of life on this planet is symbolized by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish, moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then on into 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 itself, and is therefore integrally linked to the whole of creation."<sup>5</sup>*

All the Hindu scriptures attest to the belief that the creation, maintenance and annihilation of the cosmos is completely up to the Supreme Will. In the Gita, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna: 'Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both its origin and dissolution. And is under Me. By My will it is manifested again and again and by My will, it is annihilated at the end'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the Lord says: 'I am the origin, the end, existence, and the maintainer of all'.<sup>7</sup> Thus for Hindus, both God and *Prakriti* (nature) are one and the same.

The Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth, wherein a person may come back as an animal or a bird, means that the Hindus give other species not only respect, but also reverence. This provides a solid foundation for the doctrine of ahimsa — non-violence (or non-injury) against animals and human beings alike, and Hindus have a deep faith in this doctrine. It should be noted that ahimsa presupposes the doctrines of Karma and rebirth (*Punarjanma*). The soul is reborn in different life forms such as birds, fish, animals and humans. Because of this belief there is profound opposition in the Hindu religion as well as in

the Buddhist and Jain religions to the institutionalized killing of animals, birds and fish for human consumption. Almost all the Hindu scriptures place strong emphasis on the notion that God's grace can be received' by not killing his creatures or harming his creation: 'God, Kesava, is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other non-speaking creatures or animals'.<sup>8</sup> The pain a human being causes other living beings to suffer will eventually be suffered by that person, either in this life or in a later rebirth. It is through the transmigration of the soul that a link has been provided between the lowliest forms of life and human beings.

Many trees and plants were worshipped during the time of Rig Veda (about 1500 BC) because they symbolized the various attributes of God. Later, during the Puranic period (300 BC on ward) a popular belief emerged that each tree had its own deity; thus people offered water and circled trees with sacred threads in order to protect them. Through such exhortations and various writings, the Hindu religion provides moral guidelines for environmental preservation and conservation. From the perspective of the Hindu culture, the abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is considered unjust and sacrilegious.

### 3. Sikhism

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, assigned divine attributes to nature. According to Sikhism, people should respect God's creations and know the eternal truth regarding their place in the universe.<sup>9</sup> God has not granted any special or absolute power to humans to control and dominate nature. To the contrary, the human race is an integral part of nature and is linked to the rest of creation by indissoluble bonds.

God Himself is the source of the birth, sustenance and eventual destruction of all living organisms. It is He who created the universe through His divine will and with His word. According to the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, 'From the Divine Command occurs the creation and the dissolution of the universe.'<sup>10</sup> The basis of creation was divine will, and the universe was produced by His Hukum (command). However it should be noted that God is submerged in creation, as stated in the Adi Guru Granth Sahib (p. 19):

*From Primal truth emanated air*

*From air emanated water*

*From water emanated three worlds*

*And Himself he merged with the creation.*

The Guru Granth Sahib proclaims the glory of God in nature and the environment. Sikhs believe that the universe was created by an almighty God. He Himself is the creator and master of all forms in the universe, and He is responsible for all modes of nature and all elements of the world. As their creator, the natural beauty found in all living things, whether animals, birds or fish, belongs to Him, and He alone is their master, without His Hukum (order), nothing exists, changes or develops. A balance between all the elements of nature is necessary for the continuation of the universe. Any disruption of the balance brings distress and disaster. Thus for Sikhs, divinity lies in nature. Furthermore Sikhism teaches that the natural environment and the survival of all life forms are closely linked in the rhythm of nature. The history of the gurus contains

many stories of their love and special relationship with the natural environment — with animals, birds, vegetation, earth, rivers, mountains and the sky.

### 4. Jainism

Jainism places great emphasis on the principle that one should refrain from avoidable acts that are harmful to oneself or others.<sup>11</sup> According to Jainism violence grows out of passion, and one who has passion causes self-injury. Preventing injury to oneself and others is accomplished through control of speech, control of thought, regulation of movement, care in taking things up and putting them down, and examining food and drink, and a vow is taken by Jains to do all of these things.

Ahimsa (non-violence) which is the fundamental tenet of the Jain way of life, is a term that is clearly allied with realism, common sense, and personal worth and responsibility. It touches the deepest and noblest aspects of human nature: 'It adheres to the universal law which states that like produces like, order comes of order, and peace can only be achieved through peace. It maintains that in all situations the ends and the means are one and the same, and that truth, honesty and compassion must be the foundation of any truly civilised community.'<sup>12</sup> As enunciated by Amrit Chandra Acharya:

One should never think of hunting, victory, defeat, battle, adultery, theft etc., because they only lead to sin. Sinful advice should never be given to persons living upon art, trade, writing, agriculture, arts and crafts. service and industry. One should not without reason dig ground, uproot trees, trample lawns, sprinkle water etc., nor pluck leaves, fruit and flower. One should be careful not to give instruments of himsa (violence), such as knife, poison, fire, plough, sword, bowl, etc. One may not listen to, accept, or teach such bad stories as increase attachment etc., and are full of absurdities. Renounce gambling from a distance. It is the first of all evils, the destroyer of contentment, the home of deceit, and abode of theft and falsehood.<sup>13</sup>

For the Jains, environmental harmony through spirituality should be pursued by all. This can be done by adhering to three precepts: the right belief, the right knowledge and the right conduct. It also means believing in ahimsa, which is the basic foundation of the Jain way of life. Ahimsa relates to the deepest and noblest aspects of human nature. It is a part of that universal law which states that order comes from order in the same way as harm generates destruction, and peace flows only through peace. It also means that all things (living and non-living) have the same destiny and therefore no one should not feel superior to others. Hence everyone should be benevolent towards all living organisms, compassionate for the weak, tolerant of the insolent and joyful at the virtuous. This is the Jain way of bringing environmental harmony.

### 5. Buddhism

At the very core of the Buddhist religion are compassion, respect, tolerance and ahimsa (non-injury) towards all human beings and all the other creatures that share this planet.<sup>14</sup> This is exemplified by a Buddhist prayer:

As the mother protects her child even at the risk of her own life, so there should be mutual protection and goodwill which is limitless among all beings. Let limitless goodwill prevail in the whole world - above, below, all around, untarnished with any feeling of disharmony and discord.<sup>15</sup>

Buddha also set down rules forbidding the pollution of rivers, ponds and wells. As Buddha says in Sutta-Nipata:

Know ye the grasses and the trees.... Then know ye the worms, and the different sorts of ants.... Know ye also the four-footed animals small and great ... the serpents ... the fish which range in the water.... The birds that are borne along on wings and move through the air....<sup>16</sup>

Monks are forbidden to cut down trees, and all of them know the story of the monk who cut off a tree's main branch: the spirit of that tree complained to Buddha that by severing the branch the monk had cut off his child's arms — the monk was appropriately punished. As the above verse from Sutta-Nipata illustrates, animals must not be harmed by Buddhists. While humans are higher beings, they are still a part of nature, and disregard or abuse of the laws of nature could result in disaster.

Buddhists regard the survival of all species as an undeniable right, because as coin habitants of this planet they have the same rights as humans. Whatever individuals do their karma will follow them, because there is always a relationship between cause and effect. Consequently any human endeavour that is undertaken through ignorance or capriciousness brings suffering and misery. On the other hand positive actions bring happiness and peace. Buddhism is a religion of love, understanding and compassion, and is committed to the ideal of non-violence. As such it attaches great importance to the conservation and protection of the environment. Universal compassion, non-violence, love and service to others are attributes of Buddhism that are needed by all of us now in order to protect the environment and save our common future. In Buddhism the rivers, forests, grass, mountains and night are highly respected and regarded as bliss bestowers. Buddhist thinkers have always had great respect for the Sun, Moon and other planets, and they recognize grasses, creepers and herbs as bestowers of bliss and objects of adoration.

The teachings of Buddhism have concentrated on the theory of Karma and the theory of cause and effect. They demonstrate that unmindful neglect of these principles of right living may lead to chaos, and thus to environmental crisis. That is why there should be no exploitation of nature beyond what is needed for survival, and if we believe that all life forms are interconnected, our exploitative tendencies towards nature can be controlled. This message — that all life is interconnected and should be cared for — is the foundation of the Buddhist ethics of nature. The Dalai Lama expressed this clearly in the following way:

Have you ever wondered what a beautiful place this world would be if everyone would treat all animals and life in the same manner? And realise the fact that, whether it is more

complex groups like human beings, or simpler groups such as animals, the feeling of pain and appreciation of happiness is common. All Want to live and do not wish to die. As a Buddhist, I believe in the interdependence of all things, the interrelationship among the whole spectrum of plant and animal life, including the elements of nature which express themselves as mountains, valleys, rivers, sky, and sunshine.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Bishnois: Defenders of the Environment

The Bishnois are a small community in Rajasthan State, India, who practice environmental conservation as a part of their daily religious duty. They believe that cutting a tree or killing an animal or bird is sacrilege. Their religion, an offshoot of Hinduism, was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji, who was born in 1451 AD in the Marwar area. When he was young he witnessed how, during a severe drought, people cut down trees to feed their animals. The drought continued and eventually there was nothing left to feed the animals, so they died. Jambaji thought that if trees were protected, animal life would be sustained and his community would survive. He therefore formulated 29 injunctions, including a ban on the felling of any living tree and the killing of any animal or bird. His community accepted these injunctions and over time their land developed into lush, dense forest. About 300 years later the king of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace and he sent his soldiers to the Bishnois' forest to obtain timber. The villagers protested but the soldiers paid no heed, so some of the Bishnois, led by a woman, encircled the trees in order to protect them with their bodies. As the soldiers had been ordered to return with timber they started to kill the protesters, whereupon more and more Bishnois came forward to take their place and honour the religious injunction of their guru. When the king heard about this human sacrifice he ordered his soldiers to return and gave the Bishnois state protection for their belief.

Even today the Bishnois continue to protect trees and animals in their area with the same zeal. Their sacrifice is the best example of satyagraha for environmental protection, and their dedication became the inspiration for the Chipko movement of 1973.

In March 1973, in the town of Gopeshwar in Chamoli district, Uttar Pradesh, villagers formed a human chain and encircled earmarked trees to keep them from being felled for a nearby factory producing sports equipment. The same situation later occurred in another village, when forest contractors wanted to cut trees under license from the Government Department of Forests, and in 1974 women from the village of Reni, near Joshimath in the Himalayas, protested against logging by hugging trees, forcing the contractors to leave. Since then the ChipkoAndolan (Chipko movement) has grown from a grassroots to a full eco-development movement.

The Chipko movement sprang from religious belief as well as ecological and economic concerns: industrial and commercial demands had denuded the villagers' forests and they were unable to sustain their livelihood in a deforested area. Floods continually played havoc with their small agricultural communities, and women had to walk miles in search of firewood, fodder and patches of land for grazing. In a sense the Chipko movement is a kind of feminist movement to

protect nature from the greed of men. In the Himalayan areas, the pivot of the family is the woman. It is women who worry most about nature and its conservation so that its resources are available for their families' sustenance, while men often go away to distant places in search of jobs, leaving the women, children and elders behind.

Women have a long history of involvement in social movements in India. When Mahatma Gandhi was involved in the struggle for independence, he noted that in non-violent warfare the contribution of women was often much greater than that of men. He felt that:

## 7. Conclusion

If strength, is meant moral power, then a woman is immeasurably man's superior. She has greater intuition, is more self-sacrificing, has greater powers of endurance, and greater courage. Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women. These above examples are illustrative of the practical impact of Hinduism on environmental conservation. While the effectiveness of the caste system to act as a resource partitioning system is no longer in operation, the examples of the Bishnois and Chipko illustrate the fact that when appeal to secular norms fails, one can draw on cultural and religious sources for forest satyagraha.

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