

ENVIRONMENT AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN INDIA¹

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Abstract : “If we protect the environment, it will save us back” is not just a sentence but a reality. Life on earth was and is directly dependent on its surroundings.

Key Words : Environment, Nature, Pollution, Religion, Ecology, Future, Protection.

Introduction

All religions agree that nature is an act of divinity and should be treated as such...Almost all religions address the issue of the creation of the universe, or universes, in different forms and with varying degrees of clarity or detail. However, all religions agree that the creation is an act of God and should be treated as such.²

When we look at the religions of India, we find a different story to tell. Man-nature relationships have differently been conceived in religions of India. Right from ancient times, in India, much importance has been given to nature or environment. This we come across in ancient Indian writings, where nature has been considered as the controller of all human activities including economic development.

India is a country where all the components of environment have been considered as life support systems right from ancient times and their protection has also been accorded paramount importance. These components are air, water, land, vegetation, soil, rivers, mountains, trees and animals, etc., and these have been considered sacred in one form or the other.

Spiritual practices of different religions

In Hindu religion, Atharva veda laid down that there are three constituent elements of the environment. These are water, air and medicinal herbs. A mantra while describing the importance of pure environment says that where there is clean environment, all people, birds and animals live happily. This mantra equates the word environment (paryavarana) with circle (paridhi) and pristine purify the Brahman.³ The Vedas lay special stress on the

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² Religions and environmental protection, Available at: <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative/religions-and-environmental-protection> lastly visited on 02.06.2021.

³ Atharva Veda.8.2.25

preservation of Dyavaprithivi (the solar world) to ensure the purity of the environment. An important mantra of the Atharva veda mention that the part of the earth that dig up should be filled again. Under no circumstances should we damage the heart and sensitive areas of the earth. It means that if we extract diamonds, precious stones, coal, gas and oil, and in the process create vacuums in the bowels of the earth, we should fill them up with other materials, otherwise the equilibrium of the earth is disturbed resulting in earthquakes, depressions of land, drying up of water source and so on. The former Prime Minister, Smt. Indra Gandhi, quoted the mantra⁴ in her address to the conference on prevention of world pollution. The Yajurveda forbids polluting water, damaging vegetables, herbal plants and trees. The Rid veda enjoins tree planting on us as well as their protections. All the four Vedas attach much important to yagya and they assume that is the only method to restore the balance of nature.⁵

The Hindu religion enshrined a respect for nature, environmental harmony and conservation. Many verses in the Rigveda and Atharvaveda have been devoted to please Surya Devata (Sun), Vayu Devta (God of Air), Agni Devata (God of Fire), Varuna Devata (God of Water), Prithvi Mata (Mother Earth) and Vanya Devi (Goddess of Forests), etc.

In the days of **Buddha**, when pollution to the present extent was not thought of, rules prompted by ethical and aesthetical considerations were framed to keep the environment clean and protect it from pollution by saliva, urine and faeces etc. main stress was laid on non-violence towards plants and animals. The Buddha taught his disciples to have ‘compassion on all creatures’ and ‘never to destroy the life of any living creature, however tiny it may be.’ The Karniyamatta Sutta enjoins the practice of metta(loving kindness) towards all creatures, timid and bold, short and long, small and big, minute and greater, invisible and visible, awaiting birth and born.⁶

Jaina culture is primarily based on the principle of non-violence. Therefore killing of any kind of living beings is totally forbidden in Jaina scriptures. The vegetables, according to the Jaina culture, are also living beings endowed with inert souls. Therefore, they call them vegetable bodied beings. Hence their culture forbids cutting and pruning vegetables in order to spare inflicting pain. Viewed from this angle it can be said that environmental awareness

⁴ Atharav Veda. 12.1.35

⁵ O. P. Dwivedi, “Hindu Religion and Environmental Well-Being,” in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Pham Cong Nhat, "Ecological ethics in Buddhist philosophy". Phu Yen University Science Journal, No. 15/2017, pp.1-9.

emerged and flourished in Jaina culture right from the inception of this religion from 1500 to 800 B.C. a comprehensive analysis of these virtues explains their close relationship with many ecological principles.

In **Christianity**, the biblical foundations of the Doctrine of creation, earlier enjoins on man the ecological responsibility of caring, respecting, and protecting the universe. This responsibility comes from the many sources. It is inherent in the very teaching of the Bible, God created man in the world and commanded him to keep it. Man as a creature depends fully on the earth for his subsistence. Therefore, he has to care for it and this human care is called 'stewardship' of man. In the New Testament 'steward' stands for responsible manager. Man's grateful attitude to the creator can be manifested in his loving care for nature.

Islam literally means peace and 'peace' is a very comprehensive concept. It implies absence of all conflict and prevalence of absolute harmony. Obviously, one cannot think of a situation of absolute harmony if there is an imbalance between man and his environment. The Holy Quran refer to the twin themes of God being the Creator, Master and the Sustainer of the Universe and man is being chosen creature to take advantage of His Bounties and also being responsible for the manner in which he takes advantage of these Bounties. Interpreters of Quran laid down the principle, do not cut trees and do not kill animals except for food.⁷

Emergence of rituals to protect Environment

Rituals may be prescribed by be traditions of community, including a religious community. Rituals are characterized but not defined by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance.⁸ Rituals are the features of all known human societies.

Religious rituals – misunderstood

Nowadays, the scenario has changed a lot. It literally begins with damaging the environment as a whole. Again, for example, one of the major rituals in this regard concerns the pujas such as Ganesh and Durga puja. For these celebrations they used to make the idols of the god and later immersed it in the water bodies and polluting it with the toxic substances in it.

⁷ Tabari's Exigesis as quoted in F.KhalidndJ.O'Brien, Islam and Ecology, London, 1992, p.29.

⁸ Bell, Catherine (1997). Ritual: perspectives and dimensions. New York; Oxford University press. Pp. 138-169

Ganesh chaturthi is a widely celebrated Hindu festival in India in honour of God ganesha. While celebrating this festival people generally ignore environmental impact on Air, Water, Noise, Solid waste, etc caused by various activities performed in puja. During this festival, fireworks, crackers are used in abundance by the devotees and they causing water pollution by immersing the idol in lakes, rivers and sea. Because of this, every year government spends crores of rupees to clean and dig out tons of garbage from neutral water sources. In 2011 the Hon'ble High Court of Gujrat issued directions to study and control the use of toxic paints for idols of god.⁹

Holi, a festival celebrated throughout India and other parts of the world with significant Hindu populations. During Holi, in addition to setting air-polluting bonfires, celebrants mark the beginning of spring by throwing abundant quantities of colored powders and liquids at each other. These colors are not readily degradable under natural conditions and are typically not removed from waste water by conventional waste water treatments.

Further, in the name of tourism development, all the State Governments started allowing tourists to explore forests, lakes, dams and falls in their state. In a country like ours people not practiced self discipline to protect our environment on their own without any penal actions. In the States, where the laws and rules are liberal tourists started to damage the natural wonders for the sake of enjoyment.

Spirituality during pandemic

When the national COVID-19 positivity rate stands increasing day by day and resulting in death of numerous people by the spread of infection, is Indians are still losing their sense towards protecting themselves from the vibrant disease? Are they tied their eyes with spiritual clothes?

On May 11, 2021, 71 bodies retrieved from Ganga believed to be of COVID-19 victims at Mahadeo ghat in chausa, Bihar. That was buried by the municipal administration in Buxar district after postmortem examination. Similarly, at least two dozen bodies in a decomposed condition were found floating in the Ganga in Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh on the same day. The bodies were retrieved and disposed of on the banks of the river. In most of the cases, so far not be able to either identify the deceased or trace the sources.

⁹ Mohanbhai vs State of Gujrat, 2011 11 SCC 111

Jal Sakthi Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat termed the incident of corpses found floating in the Ganga as unfortunate, and asked the states concerned to take immediate cognizance.

All the other developed countries are able to manage the pandemic with the first wave itself, we already developed second wave and spread the disease by celebrating Kumba mela, in which millions of believers took bath in a particular place of River Ganga at a same time by polluting the River vehemently in a single day. This sixteen hundred-mile-long river that flows from the Himalayas through India and Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal is the most revered river among Hindus. Many Hindus believe that the river is the home of the goddess Ganga, a gift from the gods, or the earthly incarnation of the gods, and that bathing, drinking, or having their ashes scattered in this sacred river will wash away their sins and bring them closer to salvation. Unfortunately, the Ganges is also one of the most polluted rivers in the world. Among other things, the river is filled with garbage; dead bodies, both animal and human; hazardous chemicals like DDT and PCBs; and fecal coliforms, which are thought to be present in concentrations thousands of times higher than the safe level.

The well-known surgeon and writer Atul Gawande tells the moving story of scattering his father's ashes in the Ganges. The ritual requires Gawande to drink some of the river water, and even though he takes antibiotics as a precaution against infection, he ends up contracting giardiasis. The pollution causes all sorts of health problems, including skin rashes, infections, parasitic diseases, birth defects, and cancer, for the four hundred million or so people who live near the river.

Obligation to protect Environment for future

“If we protect the environment, it will save us back” is not just a sentence but a reality. Life on earth was and is directly dependent on its surroundings. But due to today's scientific and technical civilization, man has paid scarce attention to his surroundings. Ever increasing pollution has drastically defaced the earth and endangered the very existence of mankind.¹⁰ Thus, results in facing a tragedy of mass death by a vulnerable disease. If we carefully protected the trees and rivers in our past, it will naturally provide as with oxygen, clean water and so on. This is already delay in realising the importance of ecology and co-existence of humans with other living creatures. Still, this is an high time to correct our

¹⁰ Priya Ranjan Trivedi (ed.), *Eco-philosophy and Eco-dharma*, p-165, Indian Institute of Ecology and Environment, New Delhi, 1996.

mistakes and help our future generations at least with minimum amount of ground water, pure and clean river water and natural oxygen.

Legislations

Protection of Environment was made a common International cause for the first time in 1972. The Montreal Agreement concerning the repair of the partially depleted ozone layer followed in 1987. The UN conference on Environment and Development met at Rio-de-Janerio in 1992 to explore the collective International programme for Environmental protection while in December, 1997. In India, Water and Air (prevention and control of pollution) Act, 1974 and 1981 respectively, Noise pollution Rules, 2000 and many other Rules in 2016 were enacted to preserve the ecosystem. In 2005 the Hon'ble Supreme Court issued some directions to control the noise pollution.¹¹ This is not an exhaustive list.

Conclusions

India as a country with diversified culture and tradition, it is difficult to prevent the religious practices in entirety which is affecting the environment. Manoj Mishra, Convener is very much aware of the cultural weight that the organization seeks to change. "It is not easy to change people's mind overnight," Mishra says. The government needs to provide alternatives like creating immersion sites for religious ceremonies and etc. apart from all these it is the responsibility of each and every individual to take care of their own living Environment. No religion preaches to destroy Environment to devote the God.

One must remember that by tampering with nature he endangers the ecological order and thereby does harm to human community. The ruthless manipulation of nature at the cost of ecological balance for selfish and private motive, undermining the interest of fellowmen, could be a great crime because it defeats the very purpose of the Creator. As seen before, all the religious scriptures intention is to protect the Earth from pollution. If we are the true followers of our religion means, we must understand the original teachings of it and should follow the same.

¹¹ In Re Noise Pollution, AIR 2005 SC 3136.

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