



Exploring Religious Environmental Ethics Enshrined in Hinduism and Buddhism and its Practical Impact on Conservation and Sustainable Development

KEYWORDS

Current Environmental Crisis, Hinduism, Buddhism, Save Ganga Movement, Environmental Ethics

Md. Kaifullah

Ph.D. Scholar, Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations (CSCRC), Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India, Pin 110025

ABSTRACT *Cultural attitudes and human's interaction with nature have been influenced by religious ideas and practices in various ways. Therefore, in light of the current environmental crisis-the world is facing today, the role of religion becomes very important because it has not only economic, political and social dimensions, but has religious dimensions too. At present, the rapid modernization of Asia-especially India and China is causing extreme environmental problems. The process of modernization has caused severe environmental problems in the region. This region is dominated specially by the followers of Hinduism, Buddhism. In the region, the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism can be widely seen on the lives of the people. It would be worthwhile to highlight the environmental ethics found in Hinduism and Buddhism to address the problems that emanate from this global crisis. There are attempts to weld environmental ethics present within religious texts with the present ecological concerns and this can be discerned in a variety of movements which are trying to translate this into practice.*

Introduction

Advent of industrial revolution and the introduction of new technology have changed the man's relationship with nature that has affected the nature of the planet in various ways. Climate change, resource depletion, soil, water and air pollution are the manifestations of such changes in man's relationship with nature. Bill Mackibenn cautioned us a decade ago that global warming may well be indicating "the end of nature" as we come to know it now¹. To address its symptoms, the role of world's religion becomes very crucial. The State of the World 2000 Report identifies these changes as a grave threat to the entire humanity. It underlines that in order to solve this problem "all of society's institutions—from organized religion to corporations have a role to play"². Current environmental crisis has not only economic, political and social dimensions but it has religious dimensions also. The moral and spiritual crisis of the people is equally responsible for this problem.

In the context of current environmental crisis, many religious scholars seek the role of religions in mitigating the threat of this problem of the world which have manifested in the form of global warming and climate change. In their view religions may help to shape the attitude of the people towards nature and also suggest how one should treat other humans and how one should relate to nature. Michael McElroy observes that to tackle the consequences of such changes in the environment creates a challenge for the moral principles of the world's religions³. Donald Brown wants religion to play its role in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Keeping in mind the observations of many environmental scientists and religious scholars about the religions role in current environmental crisis, here it would be worth to explore the religious ethics found in different religions which could be applied to mitigate the threats of global warming and climate change specially two great east traditions of world—Hinduism and Buddhism because they could play a significant role in mitigating the threats of this crisis in the region. In the recent past we have many instances where attempts have been made to bring the environmental ethics found in Hindu and Buddha religious texts into practice. For example, The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand, resistance of Bishnois community to protect trees and animals, Chipko Movement in the town of Gopeshwar in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand where women believe that their family welfare will be protected by a tree devata (*Vriksadevata*) and the goddess of forests (*Van Devi*). In Karnataka, Appiko Movement is inspired by the method and objective of Chipko Movement and the *Vriksha Prasada* (tree favour) scheme started in Venkateswara temple at Tirumala-

Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh in South India.

Environmental Ethics in Hindu Religious Texts

We can find many scripture references regarding ecology in various religious texts of Hindus which clearly indicates its concerns about ecology. One of the basic tenets of *Bhagavadgita* is that God resides in all being. In chapter 13, verse 13, Lord Krishna says: "He resides in everywhere." In *Srimadbhagavadgita Mahapurana* (book 2, discourse 2, verse 14) has been explained that "ether, air, fire, water, earth, plants, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers and seas, they all are organs of God's body; remembering this, a devotee respects all species." Thus, the basic concept is, to see the presence of God in all, and treat the creation with respect without causing harm and exploiting others. The *Srimadbhagavadgita Mahapurana* (2.2.45) confirms this fundamental principle: a good devotee is the one who sees in all creation the presence of God. These revealings of *Bhagavadgita* are regarded as a guiding force for Hindus to maintain and protect the natural harmonious relationship between human beings and nature⁴.

Srivastav Goswami, a Vaishnav Scholar provides a fascinating explanation of the role of Krishna whose life he believes to be "the greatest chapter in environmental history"⁵. For Srivastav, the life of Krishna and his respect for nature could be an inspiring force for those who are the strong believer in Krishna's teaching and by adopting the same life-style which Krishna possess, one can move forward to save natural resources.

Ramayana too contains many environmental ethics. In Ramayana, the forest has got a special place where the seekers get enlightenment. It is a place full of plants of medicinal and economic value⁶. Emphasis on the protection of trees too has been given in Hindu texts. Even in the time of *Rigveda*, tree worship was very popular and universal. *Rigveda* considered that plants have divine powers. In *Rigveda*, one entire hymn has been devoted to their praise; especially their healing properties have been underlined on several occasions (*Rigveda* 10.97).

Buddhism and Ecology

Buddhism has been a source of inspirations for many who are involved in the ecology movement in different parts of the world. Many Buddhists have started drawing up ecological implications of their traditions. The Ecological paradigm that arises now seems to be based on the fundamental teachings of Buddhism around interconnectedness, non-violence and conditionality. According to Buddhist Scholar Donald Swearer, Buddhism believes in the principle of interdependence that integrates all aspects of the ecosystem. Individual entities

relational, thereby it undermines the autonomous self against the 'other', be it animal, vegetable or human⁷.

According to *Dharma*, all things are interconnected. Nothing in the world exists in isolation. Things only exist in relationship and connection with other things. Boundaries that exist between different things have been drawn only as useful convention that is provisionally true but can never be absolute. This view is also central to the ecological perspective that seems to be influenced by system theory. It recognizes that everything in this world is intricately related to each other hence interdependent⁸. Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu says, "The entire cosmos is a cooperative, the sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise.... Then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish"⁹.

Religious Environmental Ethics in Current Times:

We can witness in contemporary times, the existence of movements, which have drawn upon religion to bolster their claim for an ecologically sustainable world. We describe some of these below.

Matri Sadan and the Save Ganga Movement

Matri Sadan is a spiritual Organization situated at Kankhal, Jagjeetpur, Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India. It is struggling against environmental pollution and corruption for last 15years. Their means of struggle is non-violence, fast and *satyagraha*. Government of Uttarakhand has started mining, polluting Ganga directly by hundreds of vehicle and heavy equipments destructing the Ganga Valley environment in Kumbh Mela area. This mining was closed by Uttar Pradesh Government but the nexus of corrupt officials, mafia and politicians restarted this mining and stone crushing in Kumbh Mela Area irrespective of High Court order on pollution under the disguise of revenue collection.

Matri Sadan was recently in news because of the death of Swami Nigmanand, an ascetic died on 13th June, 2011 who was on fast unto death against illegal mining in Ganga at Haridwar. Matri Sadan is actively engaged in countering the corruption and preserving the environment. The death of Swami Nigmanand is a proof of its struggle against the corruption and environmental degradation in Ganga at Haridwar. The banners carry photographs of Swami Nigmanand, doing the fast that he started on Feb. 19th 2011 and continued with until he died on June 13th, 2011. It was the result of 13 years of continuous battle of Matri Sadan and its ascetics that both sand mafia and colluding authorities have stopped their mining activities on the river bank, but "at the cost of very big scarifies (*Balidan*): Nigmanand' s death.

The Buddhist Ecology Movement in Thailand

In Thailand, A number of Buddhist monks are engaged in ecological conservation projects. These initiatives are part of their growing awareness about the causes and consequences of country's environmental crisis. Through these movements they not only propagate and teach environmentally sound practices among Thai farmers but also criticise rapid economic development nationwide. They consider that the primary cause of environmental crisis lie in the rapid economic development. The aim of ecology movement that is based on the teachings of Buddhism either in Thailand or other parts of the world basically addresses national and local problems of ecological destruction and deforestation. Buddhists who are involved in these movements consider these teachings as moral as well as practical guidelines for ecological conservation. Though, the exact changes that these movements will bring are unknown to us but it remains to be seen how rituals specially ordaining trees promote the ecology movement.

Conclusion

Discussions on the religious environmental ethics found in Hinduism and Buddhism gives an overview that there are several teachings in religious texts of these religions that show its reverence towards nature and its various constituents. At the same time, these teachings are being translated into action through various environmental movements where religious leaders draw inspiration from these teachings and encourage the people to live in accordance with it. The Save Ganga Movement of Matri Sadan, Haridwar and Buddhist Ecology Movement of Thailand are some examples where the religious environmental ethics are getting translated into practice. These are some examples that prove the practical impact of Hinduism and Buddhism on conservation and sustainable development.

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