



ECO-BENEVOLENT VISION OF HINDUISM

ANIL KUMAR PUDOTA¹, Dr. REX ANGELO SJ²
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, ANDHRA LOYOLA COLLEGE,
VIJAYAWADA, A.P. udayanil@gmail.com

Introduction

The way humans conceive the supernatural order will have fundamental bearing on their position in the universe, the value systems they live by and, the relationships to the persons and the environment. Robert Bellah says that religion is a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his or her existence on the earth. Historically, religions have taught us to perceive and to act on non-human nature in terms of particular human interests, beliefs and social structures. Through religious myths and laws, we have socialized nature, framing it in human terms. And to a great extent, we have done so to satisfy our needs, abilities and power relations. Yet, at the same time religion has also represented the voice of nature to humanity. Spiritual teachings have celebrated and consecrated our ties to the non-human world, reminding us of our delicate and inescapable partnership with air, land, water and fellow living beings. Most often, it is our conception and attitudes towards nature that cause immense damage to ecological well-being. It is in this context that, when we interpret religion from the perspective of eco-philosophy, it comes forward with a set of positive and constructive concepts and attitudes towards nature. One such religion which has a very healthy eco-benevolent vision to avert the present ecological crisis is Hinduism. The following are some of the salient aspects of the eco-benevolent vision of Hinduism.

Salient Aspects of the Eco-benevolent Vision of Hinduism

Elemental worship is one of the significant characteristics of Hinduism. The Vēdic traditions of Hinduism offer imagery that values the power of the natural world. Scholars of the Vēdās have held forth various texts and rituals that extol the earth (*Bhū*), the atmosphere (*Bhūvah*), and sky (*Sva*), as well as the goddess associated with the earth (*Pr̥thivi*), and the gods associated with water (*Ap*), with fire and heat (*Agni*), and the wind (*Vāyu*). They have noted that the centrality of these gods and goddesses suggests an underlying ecological sensitivity within the Hindu tradition. Daily worship (*Pūja*) employs and evokes these elemental powers.



The Vēdic worldview is firmly rooted in honouring the Mother Earth, for which various forms of Earth worship or Bhūmi Pūja are prescribed. For proper meditation one must first do prayers to sanctify the ground on which one sits. Vēdic ecology reflects this Vēdic methodology for connecting with the Earth and helping unfold her many secret powers. Vēdic rituals and Hindu Pūjās are part of this process.

“The Earth is mother; I am son of earth. The rain-giver is my father, may he shower on us blessings! Whatever I dig of you, O earth, may you of that have quick replenishment! O purifying one! May my thrust never reach right unto your vital points, your heart!”

-- *Atharvavēda*, XII

“*Dhyāyatīva pṛthvi*” - The earth, as it were, is in a state of meditation”

-- *Chandogya Upanishad*, 7.6.1.

The same verse also asks to envision the atmosphere, the heavens, the waters, and the mountains as being similarly engaged.

In the Vēdic literature, yajña is presented as an Aryan pattern of interpretation of world and life. It expresses the reality as experienced by the visionary consciousness of the Aryans. A rite has its own internal message to convey. The most important element in yajña is fire. It is not just an element but a god. It builds the gulf between divine and human. The aim of spiritual sādhana is to do away with ego, the feeling of separateness. Yajña and fire help the practitioner to transcend his limited consciousness and achieve cosmic consciousness where there is no feeling of separateness and the practitioner sees himself as the component of the vast cosmos and not above or apart from it (V.Sujatha, 2001, p.29).

Hindu concept of karma provides a strong and clear environmental ethic. Its twin thrusts of human continuity with all forms of life (including the inorganic) and moral responsibility for one's impulses and actions provide a sound basis for an ethic of 'natural reverence (Harold, 1998, p.45).

Stephen R. Sterling, in his article “Towards an ecological world view,” states that the most pressing need for the environmental crisis is the emergence, clarification and adoption of a new ecological worldview that can create a sustainable culture capable of treating the Earth with



gentleness and respect. It is in this context that I would like to bring and discuss the concept 'Lōkasaṅgraha' found in the Gīta. *Lōkasaṅgraha* literally means 'cohesion of the world.' It also could mean broadly 'cosmic welfare', 'world-interrelatedness', 'unity of the cosmos' or 'maintenance of the world.' The ideal of *Lōkasaṅgraha* is one of the most and original teachings of the Gīta. It is an ideal of the highest order and value in which every being finds its respective place with specified detached duties in the welfare of the entire cosmic world.

When Arjuna was unwilling to fight against his kith and kin at Kurukshetra, thinking that by killing his own people he would commit a grave sin of destroying *svajāti* and that eventually the sin would throw him into hell. Lord Krishna criticized Arjuna for having a very narrow outlook towards life and in this context brought out the significance of *Lōkasaṅgraha*.

*“Karmanaiva hi samsiddhim asthita janakdayah
Loka-samgraham evepi sampasyan kartum arhasi.”*

-- The Gita, 3:20

“Men like Janaka verily attained to perfection by work alone. You ought to work for the good of the world (having their example in view).”

Comment: Welfare of the world and not any self-centred objective becomes the purpose of the action of the enlightened ones like Janaka. Much more important than any individual example, the Gita holds forth Isvara Himself as the most conspicuous example of such disinterested work. Man is exhorted to follow the Divine example. This is a conclusive argument in favour of karma yoga (Swami Tapasyananda, 1984, p.109).

*“Saktah karmany avidvaniso Yatha kurvanti bharata
Kuryad vidvanis tathasaktas Cikirsur loka-sangraha.”*

-- The Gita, 3:25

“O scion of the Bharata race! Just as ignorant men do action out of attachment, so let enlightened ones perform the same unattached, with the good of the world in view.”

Comment: The distinction between the work of the worldly-minded man and the enlightened karma yogi is clearly indicated. The former is self-centered, while the latter has overcome self-centeredness and still works for the good of all. The object of such work is the good of the world.



Apart from the good directly proceeding from such work, the example it sets is itself of immense good (ibid., pp.109-110).

According to the Gīta, the holistic *Dharma* has three dimensions. The *Dharma* of the Lord is to hold the cosmos in being from within. The *Dharma* of the cosmos is to allow itself to be held by the divine from within. Its *Dharma* is *Lōkasaṅgraha*, the holding together of all the worlds. The *Dharma* of man has also to do with *Lōkasaṅgraha* since man is part of the cosmos. Indeed his *Dharma* is part of the *Dharma* of the cosmos. It is this aspect of man that is called *svadharma* in the Gīta.

The opposite of *Lōkasaṅgraha* is selfishness (*ahamkāra*), the feeling of separateness. In as much as a man neglects or rejects the welfare of the world and concentrates on his own selfish desires, to that extent, he is individualistic. The relationship of man to the cosmos is determined by his openness to the welfare of the world. His total openness to be part of the cosmos constitutes his *svadharma*. A man, who follows the ideal of *Lōkasaṅgraha*, is a *nishkāma karma yogi*. *Karma Yoga* consists in acting in such a way that the welfare of the entire world-process is kept in mind. And the motive of self-interest is totally excluded. He works for the welfare of all beings. No one could be regarded as a *karma yogi* if he does not inculcate this universal or holistic vision in life. A *Karma Yogi* does those actions which promote the welfare of the world and which fit organically with the entire world. If a man is to be true to himself, he has to be true to all beings and hence concern for his own welfare has to be expressed in concern for the welfare of all beings. This attitude is well expressed in the following phrase of the Gīta (5:25) '*sarvabhūtahite ratāh*' – 'one who passionately delights in the well-being of all beings.'

Thus, a practitioner of the ideal of *Lōkasaṅgraha* is eco-centric or holistic as opposed to being anthropocentric. If the Earth needs to be sustainable, we need to inculcate this kind of attitude of *Lōkasaṅgraha* in our lives. However, it may be humanly impossible to consider the good of the whole in all the actions. It is beyond human strength. The underlying appeal of the ideal of *Lōkasaṅgraha* is that as far as possible, all humanly care must be taken to exclude the good of no factor which could directly or indirectly involve a change in the set order of the cosmos. Thus, the concept of *Lōkasaṅgraha* invites us to promote such deeds which would do no disservice to the cosmic welfare.



Another metaphor which stresses the importance of the cosmic welfare is ‘*yajñācakra*’ which literally means ‘the wheel of sacrifice.’ Sacrifice connotes in the Hindu world view, the inter-relation and inter-action. One has to work in relation with others for the smooth running and welfare of the world just as all the spokes of a wheel converge at the hub and make it strong. This metaphor highlights the element of communion with the world around us. The cosmos is rightly interpreted as the sacred field (*dharmaskhētra*) where we are called upon to make an enlightened decision. The wheel of sacrifice calls for the selfless contribution of each member in keeping wheel of sacrifice rotating.

Rta is another important eco-concept of Ṛgvēda. ‘The whole universe is founded on it and moves on it’ – Ṛgvēda, IV.23.9. It literally means cosmic order. It is also broadly defined as an established order, law, harmony, rhythm, sacred tradition, and truth. Primarily it is referred to sacrificial ritual and correct order and harmony within the sacrificial act. It is uninterrupted rhythm and flawless flow of the rituals performed in the correct manner and at auspicious time, thus making them effective. Secondly, it is fundamental and intrinsic law of nature. According to this, the powers of nature – the elements, the heavenly bodies like the sun, the moon and the stars – function in an orderly manner and the seasons of the year appear at the appointed time. Thirdly, it refers to law and order in the recurring agricultural activities in tune with the recurring seasons of the year. There is an inner law and dynamism in the Earth, in the seeds and plants, process of cultivation, growth and fruit-bearing of the plants. If there is harmonious blending of all these elements, then the harvest is abundant and gladdens people. This is an ontological extension of *ṛta* in the daily life and activities of human beings. Fourthly, it denotes harmonious interrelation between gods, men and nature. All these are equally co-responsible to safeguard and keep up the *ṛtas* in the other realms. Man protects, nourishes the animal and plant worlds; these in turn produce the sustenance for the people; people offer these things in sacrifice to gods, and Gods in turn protect the other two realities. None of the three entities is superior or inferior to the other two in the triad. Only the unified and goal-oriented involvement and activities of the three aspects guarantee the universal harmony. It also denotes moral order. *Varuna*, the god of moral order, is considered as the god of *ṛta* too. So *ṛta* means the moral order and harmony among people. Later *ṛta* is substituted by *Dharma* which emphasized the moral order, in the process, neglecting the importance of cosmic order (Augustine, 2002, pp.328-329).



The Vēdic people who were much conscious of the *ṛta* performed their agricultural activities in a spirit of reverence. To them, cultivation was an act of worship. Labour enriched both human beings and the Earth. To relate thus to nature meant adhering to the *ṛta*, the law, governing all cosmic processes. The Vēdic people knew that all labour not in harmony with *ṛta* was an act of sheer violence, done to the mother Earth.

Ṛta also represents cosmic laws and force by which all things are maintained. It is a universal truth which predates even Vēdic gods and provides them with power. It is the antecedent of *Dharma*, especially in its universal aspect and in relation to karma. So, even the gods and of course human beings obey the laws of *ṛta*. Human beings obtain *ṛta* through the performance of rituals outlined in the Vēdās. If these rituals were not carried out, then the cosmic order would collapse (Rosemary, 1995, p.441). Thus, *ṛta* in the Vēdās is an important injunction to be followed by all people for the cosmic harmony.

The Vēdic seers regarded the Earth as 'sacred space' for the consecrated endeavours and aspirations of humankind and for the practice of restraint and responsibility. "Mountains are His bones, earth is the flesh, sea is the blood, and sky is his abdomen. Air is his breath, fire is His splendour, and rivers are nerves. The sun and moon which are called Agni and Soma are the eyes of Brahman. The upper part of the sky is His head. The earth is His feet and directions are His hands" (O.P.Dwivedi et.al, 1987, p.126). This affirmative view of the inviolable sacred space in human consciousness is integral to the Vēdās and the Upanishads. On it, rests the Vēdic vision of a world filled with the purity of the spiritual environment and the sanctity of environmental spirituality and morality.

The universe as God's body is forcefully propounded by Rāmānujāchārya in his philosophical system of *Viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified non-dualism). Here he conceives the universe as an attributive body of *īśvara*. As against the notion of Saṅkarācārya that only Brahman is real and unqualified (*nirguna*) and that the world is illusory, Rāmānuja proposes that this world (*aśit*) is real and Brahman is real. Here he uses the metaphor of '*ātma-sarīra*' (soul-body) to support his worldview. He strongly argues that this world is the body of Brahman and Brahman is its soul. Just as body and soul are distinct and at the same time intimate, so also the world and God are distinct but at the same time unified. By



'*ātma-sarīra*' metaphor, Rāmānuja shows the penetrating nature of God's relationship with the universe. In fact, God's transcendence is more convincingly realized in His immanence. As the immanent part of the cosmos, God participates in the cosmic reality. The metaphor shows the essential distinction between God and the world. God is the cause and the world is the effect. It also shows the inseparable relationship between God and the world. Both exist together and the world is dependent and God is independent. One of the salient features of Vēdānta is that God is not only the efficient cause of the universe but also its material cause. This feature is well-brought out in the system of *Viśiṣṭādvaita*.

Human destiny is irreconcilably linked with the destiny of the cosmos. Every life is sustained, supported and nourished by nature, especially that of man. An old Sanskrit saying goes like this: "*dharmo rakṣati rakṣita*" which means 'if you protect *Dharma*, *Dharma* will protect you.' Similarly, only when we protect nature, can it guarantee existence on this planet. Therefore, we need to treat the Earth as a living organism, having intrinsic value. It is sacred as it is the body of God. Even if we don't believe in its divinity, at least we need to be sensitive and reverential towards it since it is the source of our life.

In Hinduism, forest at one level means the world. It includes the whole creation. All of us are also part of this forest. It is not that we are outside the forest. We can reorder it but we cannot bypass it. To keep this world as it is, we have to keep the world-forest intact. The forest is a kind of form that symbolizes the divine attribute of totality, combining all life-forms together in a single interdependent whole (Ranchore Prime, 1996, p.8).

Forests are the operators of ecological balance. Since forests are disappearing at a very rapid rate from the face of the earth due to urbanization, over-population, industrialization, over-consumption, and dam and road projects, the ecological system has lost its balance, resulting in the present frequent natural disorders. Hence, there is a greater necessity of the preservation of forests to ward off the ecological disasters. Indian traditions of forest-preservation may serve as pointers in the conservation of forests.

Conclusion

Hindu point of view to the ecological movement offers a very eco-benevolent vision. Hinduism can help spiritualize the ecology



movement and reconnect it with our ancient sense of the sacred Mother Earth. It gives us the tools to communicate with her. But this requires awakening to Hindu tradition and its importance. The Hindu traditions established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago, not because the world was perceived as heading for an imminent environmental disaster or destruction, nor because of any immediate utilitarian exigency, but through its quest for spiritual and physical symbiosis, synthesized in a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility. The philosophy of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbam' (the cosmos as one family) in Hinduism says that all the people of the world should be treated as a family. It recognizes the diversity, but at the same time, says that we have a divine tie together and not a worldly tie. This peaceful slogan does not limit to any creed, race or color and ecologically this family is to be extended to all other species living and non-living. Only then, the universal family is complete. If human beings follow these concepts and attitudes in life, then much of the ecological damage can be halted, nullified and prevented and the earth along with all of its beings can be restored to a healthy and happy atmosphere. Definitely Hinduism has a lot to contribute towards the ecological well-being of the world.

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