

## Hinduism, Plants and Environment

*'Mother Earth, may whatever I dig from you grow back again quickly, and may we not injure you by our labour.'* —*Atharva Veda*

The Hindu approach to plants and environment requires that we first understand how Hinduism views the world of nature, which is different in significant ways from other religions but also has commonalities with them. Each religion has a certain worldview which defines the way in which one finds meaning and significance in terms of how one sees the world and what one does in the world. In other words, there is a close interrelationship between the worldview and ethos. Religion provides a certain worldview and in Hinduism, this is detailed in the ancient scriptures which are considered to be more than 4000 years old.

### **Hindu Worldview and Nature:**

This Hindu worldview of nature is based upon the Vedas and the Upanishads, the ancient scriptures which not only describe the eternal principles and the unified ontology of humans, gods and nature, but give prescriptions for living, which then translate themselves in terms of the Hindu way of life, and various devotional and ritualistic practices. The most fundamental principle of this view is that according to Hindu thought, there is no separation between the Divine and the world of nature. These are two aspects of the same reality. One way to understand this is to see the cosmic reality as an ocean. Nature, or the manifest world, is like the waves on the surface of this ocean. Brahman, the ultimate reality, or the unmanifest Absolute, is like the depths of the ocean. But just as the ocean and all its manifestations of waves, ripples and foam, is nothing but one substance - water, there is an underlying oneness in all that is manifest.

Ultimately for the Hindu as the Upanishads say, "Everything is Brahman," '*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*'. This does not mean that the informed Hindu worships the forces of nature on an outer level out of superstition and fear. The Hindu perceives a Divine and sacred presence working behind the forms of nature as their inner spirit, which is the real object of their adoration.

This sacred presence of *Brahman*, or the Supreme Divine Reality, is there in God, what is called *Ishvara* or the avatar that takes a name and a form in the manifest world. Yet it is also present in the soul or reincarnating entity, what is called the *Jiva* as our higher Self. And, it is present in the world of nature, *Jagat* with all its diversity of names and forms. God, soul and the world are aspects of One Reality, but not in a limited way. Each shares the entirety of the underlying Reality. Each is sacred and holds the same deeper nature of Being, and Consciousness.

This Vedic vision of unity is the basis for an ecological approach in which the Hindus can honour the entire universe as part of their own higher Self. It goes beyond the duality of God and the creation. God does not create the world out of nothing. The world, God and the soul are inherent aspects of the same Eternal Being. Thus there is a need to protect nature as one would any other creature and for the Hindu it is possible to honour nature as their own greater life and expression.

Hinduism sees the divine manifested in every force, every process, every thing, and the Hindu cosmos is alive with deities expressing themselves through natural phenomena, through the earth, fire, rain, water and wind. Nature is thus deified and the Hindu rituals, prayers, pilgrimages, and texts honour and celebrate this diversity of manifestation and connecting humanity with it. It is seen in the five great elements or *panchmahabhuta*, which are the building blocks of the manifested reality, being formalised in rituals and daily worship and prayers entailing their awareness and serving as a reminder of their sacredness in the truthful and just earthly order.



Aconitum heterophyllum: Pippalyādi

Ayurvedic plant for treating respiratory infections

Thus there is not an object in the world or heaven, which the Hindu is not prepared to worship, sun, moon, stars, trees, shrubs and grasses, seas, lakes and rivers, birds, animals and insects, all are to be seen as manifestations of the divine. Rivers and trees are seen to be particularly sacred by Hindus. Rivers are sacred living organisms, abode of deities and considered to be tangible manifest forms of goddesses. For example, the Ganges or Mother *Ganga*, who is the consort of God *Shiva*, is said to be life giving, nurturing and having a loving, selfless character. The river is a moral purifier, cleansing impurity and giving auspiciousness. It is the source of spiritual abilities with the power to transform human lives. And corresponding to these rivers are the sacred sites situated along the banks which become centres of pilgrimage and ascetic practice, and the sacred crossing to the divine realm. One can see on the banks of the Ganges, masses of people performing the prayers and rituals from dawn to dusk.

Trees and plants are also very much revered, forests are seen as abodes of deities and sages, and the woods surrounding the villages are seen as sacred groves called saran or areas of spiritual integrity. Sacred groves are considered to be abodes of mother goddesses and abound with plants such as the *tulsi*, a type of basil, and the Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) also known as the *bodhi* tree because Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment under it, the tree that is the object of universal worship throughout India.

In the ancient scriptures, the whole of the cosmos is seen as the inverted *Pipul* tree with its roots in the absolute reality and the branches and leaves representing the manifested universe. Forests are considered to be full of spiritual purity and integrity which allows the practitioner to access the divinity by living, contemplating and meditating in the forest. In fact the third stage of life for the Hindu is to be spent in the forest in order to focus on one's spiritual life. Trees, therefore, are sacred and are compared to humble devotees, tolerant and generous and providing auspiciousness. For example, pilgrims may take cuttings from the sacred trees in the temples and plant them elsewhere to bring auspiciousness to the site.



Hindu Women worshipping the Banyan Tree

The harmony and vitality of the trees and plants in the forest is guided by the Hindu idea that the whole world is a sacred forest, symbolising the divine attribute of totality and the interconnectedness of the whole. Here are some quotations from the Hindu scriptures:

- Trees are like good people who care for the others.
- The whole life of these trees is to serve. With their leaves, flowers, fruits, branches, roots, shade, fragrance, sap, bark, wood and finally their ashes and coal, they exist for the purpose of others.
- Trees have five kinds of kindness which are their daily sacrifice: to families they give fuel, to the passerby they give shade and a resting place, to the birds they give shelter, to the animals it offers food, with their leaves, roots and bark they give medicine.
- O tree! You surrender yourself for others with such devotion, please accept my heartfelt respects.
- Destruction of forests is taken as destruction of the state, and reforestation an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty.

The goddess *Parvati* planted a sapling of the *Asoka* tree and took good care of it. She watered it, and it grew well. The divine beings and sages came and told her: "O [Goddess] . . . almost everyone wants children. When people see their children and grandchildren, they feel they have been successful. What do you achieve by creating and rearing trees like sons . . . ? *Parvati* replied: "One who digs a well where there is little water lives in heaven for as many years as there are drops of water in it. One large reservoir of water is worth ten wells. One son is like ten reservoirs and one tree is equal to ten sons (*dasa putra samo druma*). This is my standard and I will protect the universe to safeguard it. . . ."

Hinduism thus sees the world of nature based on an organic vision, seeing the world as a dynamic, living network of relations filled with spiritual consciousness. This vision is captured in the sacred hymn of the Purusha, or Vishnu or the Great Being, which describes how through his sacrifice arises all things, his body being manifested as this universe. It is written in the *Bhagavad Gita*, that 'everything rests on God as pearls are strung on a thread, He is the life of all that lives'. *Vishnu* is the god who is the sustainer, upholding the divine balance and unity in nature. It is the duty of humanity to recognise and preserve, seeing and following his example, to maintain this divine balance through sacrifice.

The earth itself is seen as a goddess and mother who is compassionate, fertile, dependable and full of sanctity. Humanity cannot survive without it and humanity needs to preserve this relationship with the mother earth for it to nourish and be nourished in return. Nature in this sense is seen as embodying the female creative principle of the cosmos. It is the conjunction of the conscious principle, called purusha, and creative material principle called prakriti, from which the cosmos arises and mother earth is the manifestation of this material and spiritual principles powerfully linking all things in this world. It says in the ancient Vedas:

'Mother (earth) with your oceans, rivers and other bodies of water, you give us land to grow grains, on which our survival depends...milk, fruits, water and cereals as we need to eat and drink... please pour like a cow who never fails, a thousand streams for treasure to enrich me. May you, our motherland on whom we grow wheat, rice, and barley be nourished by the cloud and love by the rain'.

For the *Purusha* the male principle the scriptures say: 'The air is his breath, the trees are the hairs of his body, the oceans his waist, the hills and mountains are his bones, the rivers are the veins of the Cosmic Person, His movements are the passing of ages'.

*From Hymn to Mother Earth Atharva Veda*

Hinduism then sees divinity as one-in-many and as many-in-one. God is the efficient cause and nature in all its diversity, is the material cause and both come together in a harmonious relationship.



Mother Earth who nourishes and sustains

## Sacred Places:

In Hindu thought, there are many sacred sites which become places of communion with the sacred in nature. These are defined primarily in terms of nature, not in terms of human activity. Mt. *Kailas* is sacred as a mountain in the Himalayas, for example, and as the abode of God Shiva who represents the higher consciousness. He is the teacher of all teachers and sits in deep meditation on this sacred mountain silently teaching those who attune themselves to him. Indeed all mountains are sacred because they afford us access to the higher realms of meditation.

The *Ganges* is sacred as a river. Indeed all rivers are sacred because they nourish and purify not only the body and mind but the inner being. The sacred nature of such places does not depend upon human activity, though it can be enhanced by human activity as ritual, mantra and meditation.



Forest in North India

For the Hindus the Earth is sacred as the very manifestation of the Divine Mother. She is *Bhumi Devi*, the Earth Goddess. One of the reasons that Hindus honour cows is that the cow represents the energies and qualities of the Earth, selfless caring, sharing and the providing of nourishment to all. Hindu prayers are done at the rising of the Sun, at noon and at sunset, honouring the Divine light that comes through the Sun. Nature is always included in the Hindu approach. Even the great Hindu Yogis retire into nature to pursue their practices, taking refuge in the Himalayas and other mountains and wilderness areas where there is a more direct contact with the Divine.

## Hindu Ritual worship

Hindu ritual worship works with the forces of nature to bring a higher consciousness and energy into the world. Hindu rituals are part of a comprehensive spiritual science designed to connect to higher planes of consciousness and creativity. Hindu rituals form a highly most sophisticated ritualistic approach, allowing us to link up with the inner forces of nature in a systematic manner.

Hindu *yajnas* or fire rituals offer special substances into a specially consecrated sacred fire like special wood, resins, ghee, grains and seeds for the fire to transform into higher vibrations for the benefit of all. Hindu scriptures explain these rituals in great detail including special methods of performance and special times and places to do them. These rituals offer a way of revering and adoring the forces and

manifestations of nature in all its forms. They are designed to harmonize the human being with the world of nature.

So what is the role of the human being in this Hindu cosmology, in other words, what is the human to think and do as far as the world and the environment are concerned? From what we have said, the primary role is to maintain the cosmic unity. This is called one's *dharma* or righteousness, a moral duty which is a way of acting and being in the world. Dharma maintains the matrix of the world, and equilibrium in a state of balance, harmony and peace. All species conduct themselves in accordance with dharma of their kind, supporting the whole. Humanity, being endowed with free-will, tends towards selfishness and therefore, dharma has to be practiced in order to overcome this egocentric behaviour. The goal of the Hindu is to realise the state of balance and harmony, embracing, supporting and serving the world of nature. This is achieved by centring life on the divine common good – '*sarva bhuta hita*'. A Dharmic person thus sacrifices self interest for universal welfare, observing and creating mutual co-operation and respect. Thus the worldview of dharma is ecologically friendly and the eco-person, the Dharmic individual, is one who can live in harmony with nature as a whole. The stress here is on the inner transformation of the individual to create the capacity for sharing the planet and its resources in a sense of mutuality.

One major way to observe one's *dharma* is through non-violence or *ahimsa*, which is self-restraint emphasising inflicting a minimum amount of violence in thought, word and deed, to the community of life, respecting the rights of other life forms to fulfil their own lives. The practice of *ahimsa* is seen as the route to the ultimate truth and thus the highest form of *dharma*. Many of us are of course familiar with the influential exponent of *ahimsa* (non-violence), Mahatma Gandhi, who stressed the commitment to a sustainable lifestyle based on minimum needs and minimum harm done to the world through living a life of compassion and simplicity, allowing all life forms their own space. The highest standard of life as per Gandhi's view is the simplest and the Hindu way is simple living and high thinking.

I believe the religious worldviews on the environment leads toward convergence on several overarching principles. As many of the speakers have illustrated, the common values that most of the world's religions hold in relation to the natural world might be summarized as, reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, and responsibility. While there are clearly variations of interpretation within and between religions regarding these five principles, it may be said that religions are present an expanded understanding and practice of their cosmological orientations and ethical obligations. The challenge for us is to bring the precept and practice together into a meaningful way to relate to the world of nature for the continuity of life and the ecosystems that support life on this planet.

Hindu philosophy with its deep notions of trusteeship of earth resources and its reverence for nature as a sustainer of humanity had encapsulated within it the modern notion of environmental protection. The assets of nature are there for humans to use for their sustenance and development. But the assets of nature are held in trust and have to be looked after with the deep underlying belief in the unity of all existence.

The hymns of the Veda are prayers for peace for the Earth, Heaven, Mountains, Rivers, Sun, Moon and Stars, for the entire universe. They prescribe how to access that universal peace that transcends all boundaries and limited identities through the chanting of the mantras and other practices.

Hindus say Om Shanti Shanti Shanti – peace, three times before or after every prayer. The first Shanti means peace with nature, the second means peace with society and the third Shanti means peace within oneself. Ecological peace, social peace and spiritual peace – for Hindus, the environment embraces all three.

Ramesh Pattni, BSc (Hons), MBA, MA, MSt (Oxford)  
Chair of Interfaith, Hindu Forum Britain  
Secretary General, Council of Dharmic Faiths